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## The impact of early language learning experiences on EFL teachers' language teaching beliefs and practices<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Based on a multiple qualitative case study design, this study investigated the impact of early language learning experiences on language teaching beliefs of Turkish in-service EFL teachers and aimed to find out how these experiences influenced their current practices. The participants included three Turkish EFL teachers working in English preparatory programs of different state universities. They were determined through purposive sampling so that they could provide rich and in-depth data for the study. The data were collected in the spring semester of 2014-2015 academic year through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recalls and reflection reports. As for the data analysis, qualitative content analysis scheme of Creswell (2012) and the constant comparison method of Strauss and Corbin (1998) were used. The results revealed that the influence of prior language learning experiences was quite noticeable on the participant teachers' language teaching beliefs and practices. It was also demonstrated that the participants had very initial conceptualizations on how languages were learnt and taught based on their language learning experiences in the past which included their teachers, language learning habits and language learning aptitude. Based on these findings, this study calls for further research that will focus on the notion of apprenticeship of observation among EFL teachers.

**Keywords:** Apprenticeship of observation, EFL teachers, Language teacher cognition

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## **Introduction**

With the seminal work of Lortie (1975) in which he argued that teachers' past experiences as learners played a significant role in their mental lives and classroom practices (apprenticeship of observation), there has been an increasing interest in examining teachers' knowledge base in the field of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE). Having a significant impact on the perspectives of scholars in the field, this term made people believe that student teachers had already developed several perspectives, attitudes and images before coming to teacher education programs unlike the previous research paradigms which viewed prospective teachers having no existing knowledge. According to Grossman (1991), "prospective teachers do not enter teacher education as blank states; they arrive with an extensive apprenticeship of observation in teaching methods and with prior knowledge and beliefs about their subject area" (p. 260). The term apprenticeship of observation also influenced the field of language teaching remarkably. It was defined by Borg (2006, p. 274) as "the phenomenon whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as school children observing and evaluating professionals in action." He also stated that "teachers' prior language learning experiences establish cognition about language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualization of L2 teaching during their teacher education and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives" (Borg, 2003, p. 88).

In the field of SLTE, a bulk of research provides ample evidence regarding the impact of prior language learning experiences on teachers' beliefs and practices. Bailey et. al. (1996) examined seven teachers' in an MA course in terms of the role of their language learning experiences on their teaching philosophies. Using autobiographical writings and reflections, the researchers identified several categories which had positive influences on participants' language learning and shaped their teaching philosophies as well: a) teachers' personality and style, b) teachers' caring and commitment, c) mutual respect between students and teachers, d) motivation to learn as students, e) the effect of a positive classroom atmosphere. They also came up with the conclusion that "the instructional memories gained through the apprenticeship of observation guide teachers in what they do in classroom" (p. 11).

Numrich (1996), in a diary study, tracked 26 ESL teachers and the study provided evidence that teachers used or avoided several instructional strategies based on their negative or positive learning experiences in the past. It was revealed that some of the teachers used the techniques or activities which they liked when they were learners. On the other hand, they refused to adopt several methods or instruments, like teaching grammar explicitly or correcting oral errors, which had negative influences on their language learning memories.

In a single case study, M. Borg (2005) examined the development of a trainee, Penny, during a pre-service CELTA course through a mixed-method approach which included interviews, observations and questionnaires. The results showed the significant effect of the notion of apprenticeship of observation:

Penny arrived on the CELTA course with a variety of beliefs about teaching and learning, despite the fact that she had never taught before. These beliefs came from a variety of sources but the major areas were her schooling and work experience..... Penny expressed a general

rejection of the kind of didactic teaching methodology which she associated with school learning. She talked about teachers who stood at the front talking whilst learners were bored, sitting at their desks copying things down (p. 16).

The author also argued that the role of previous schooling experiences equipped the trainees with beliefs about how to be a teacher before they come to initial teacher education programs. In her case, Penny had already had some beliefs on the aspects of being a good or bad teacher and she was not happy with the didactic features of her previous learning experiences. For this reason, she tried a lot not to use didactic elements during her classroom teachings, which showed the influence of her previous schooling experiences of her teaching practices.

Investigating the motivation and circumstances of EFL teachers working at state schools in Thailand, Hayes (2008) conducted unstructured life history interviews with 7 teachers having various backgrounds in their profession. The results derived from the in-depth interviews revealed that teachers' primary preferences to be English teachers stemmed from their school experiences and aptitudes for learning English. Almost all participant teachers of this study uttered similar sentences like "I think the first thing was that I was good at English language and I like it" or "I'm not that good but I love it, that's the main point for me to decide to be an English teacher" (p. 481). Besides, the teachers they had during their school years and their experiences with them had also been influential in their decisions to be an English teacher. Based on these results, the author argues that given that the influence of such previous schooling experiences of teachers, the knowledge base of TESOL can be strengthened through the encouragement of such research and identification of all these factors.

With a purpose of making the already existing beliefs of pre-service teachers explicit through metaphor analysis, Farrell (2006) examined the beliefs of three pre-service teachers in Singapore before, during and after the practicum experience. The data were collected via open-ended questions and journal entries. Revealing several meaningful metaphors regarding the existing and changing beliefs of pre-service teachers on language teachers, language classrooms and language teaching, the author suggests that "language teacher education programs should therefore provide activities for pre-service teachers that can enable them to articulate their prior beliefs about teaching and learning" (p. 245).

The general picture that all these studies show is that prior language learning experiences including school performances, teachers in the past, language aptitude as learners establish certain beliefs on language learning and teaching and influence language teachers throughout their careers. With all these elements in their minds, teachers, consciously or unconsciously, establish several beliefs, attitudes and cognition about language teaching and learning. The impact of such experiences has been validated by the studies conducted in various ESL and EFL contexts. However, as Freeman (2009) states, it is crucially important to amplify already known constructs to operationalize the findings of previous research. Besides, much effort has been paid on studying the cognition of pre-service teachers or ESL teachers and little is known regarding the practices and cognitions of EFL in-service teachers both in international contexts where languages are taught by non-native teachers (Borg, 2009) and in

the national context (Taner & Karaman, 2013). For these reasons, considering the paucity of research in Turkish context as well, this study aimed to investigate the impact of prior language learning experiences on language teaching beliefs of Turkish in-service EFL teachers and to find out how these experiences influenced their current practices. The following research question was addressed throughout the study

1. Do early language learning experiences of Turkish in-service EFL teachers have an impact on their current language teaching beliefs and practices? If so, what type of experiences they had in the past influence their beliefs and practices?

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

The study followed a multiple case study design. According to Dörnyei (2007), a number of cases are studied together in this research design to investigate a central phenomenon with the combination of variety of qualitative data collection tools such as interviews and observations. Based on this research design, the current study aimed to investigate the impact of prior language learning experiences, as the central phenomena, on language teaching beliefs and practices of three EFL teachers, as cases, with the help of several qualitative data collection instruments.

### ***Participants***

The participants included three Turkish EFL teachers; Eda, Mert and Zeynep, working in the English preparatory programs of different state universities. The participants were determined through purposive sampling in which the researcher believes that the participants are likely to provide more in-depth data for the phenomena under investigation and thinks that they are information rich (Patton, 1990). Considering several initial criteria like being a graduate of language teaching department, working full-time as an English teacher and teaching at least 15 hours weekly, these three participants were chosen since they were believed to provide the best insight and data for the current study.

Eda, working as a teacher for about 8 years, was in her sixth year in the program. She was teaching elementary level of learners for 21 hours weekly at the time of the study. She also held an MA in English language teaching. The second participant, Mert, had been teaching in the program for about 5 years. He taught intermediate students 15 hours weekly during the study and he also had duties in the testing office of the program. Finally, the last participant of the study was Zeynep who was the most experienced one as a teacher and had been teaching English for 10 years at her university. She completed her MA in educational sciences many years ago. At the time of the study, she was teaching pre-intermediate students for twenty-two hours every week.

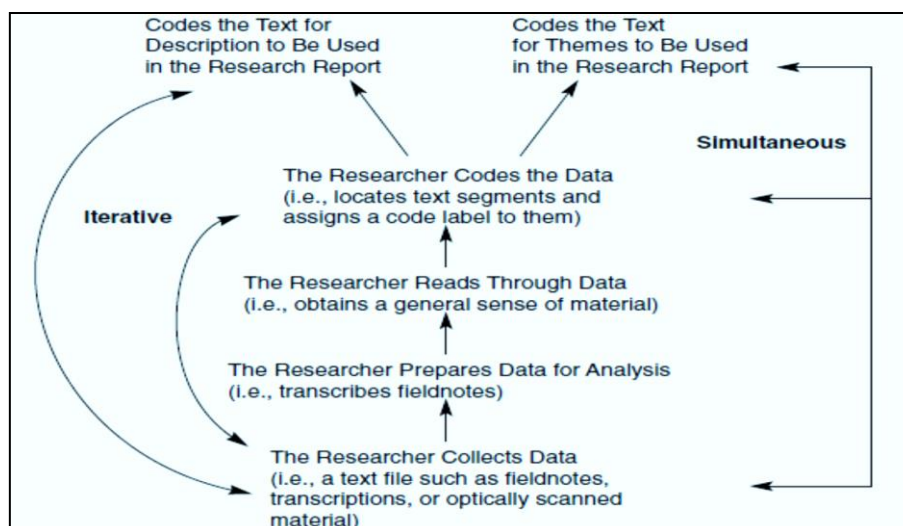
### ***Data Collection Instruments***

During the spring semester of 2015-2016 academic year, multiple forms of data collection instruments were used by the researcher to find out the impact of early language learning experiences of the participant EFL teachers on their current teaching beliefs and practices. Firstly, three semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the process. In

the first one, detailed background information regarding the learning and teaching career of the participants was obtained. The other two interviews, which were carried out in the middle and at the end of the term, mainly focused on underlying sources of the participants' teaching beliefs and classroom practices. In addition to these face-to-face interviews, 12 hours of video-recorded classroom observations and follow-up stimulated recall interviews were conducted. The reasons and sources of any classroom implementation of the teachers were examined through these stimulated-recalls, each of which was carried out right after the observed class hours. Finally, the participants were also asked to write weekly reflection reports in which they elaborated on their weekly classroom practices, why they performed these practices and the background of their preferences.

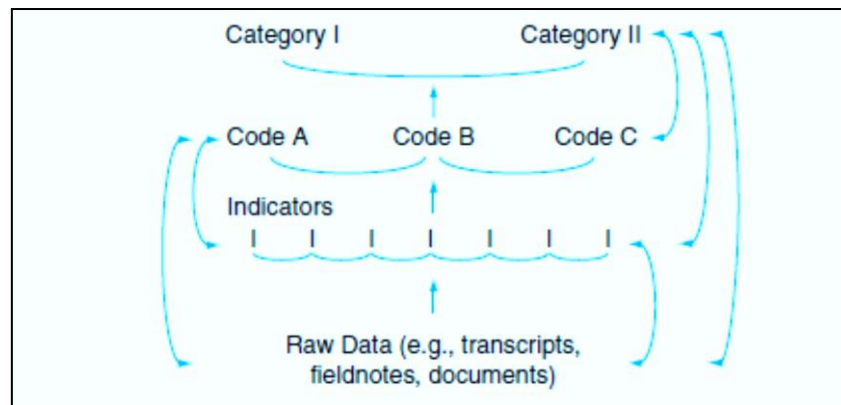
### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data obtained through the data collection process was analyzed based on two data analysis scheme. Firstly, the qualitative content analysis scheme of Creswell (2012), Figure 1, was followed. All the data was transcribed and read to have a general sense of it, and then, related text segments were assigned a code label.



**Figure 1.** The qualitative content analysis scheme (Creswell, 2012, p.237)

After the initial coding process in which preliminary codes were identified and before coding the text for themes, the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to develop categories. In this process, the researcher constantly compared codes to codes and themes to themes both within cases and cross-cases to reduce redundancy and reach categories to be reported as findings.



**Figure 2.** The constant comparison design (Creswell, 2012, p. 434)

This data analysis process was assisted by a colleague, a PhD candidate in educational sciences, through cross-checking to promote inter-coding. Besides, the narrations that were planned to be used in the chapter of results to present and support the findings of the study were translated literally into English and all these translations were checked by the participants themselves in order to prevent any missing words or ideas in them.

#### Trustworthiness:

Validity and reliability issues in qualitative research studies were referred to as trustworthiness by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and in order to increase the trustworthiness of the current study, several procedures were followed as suggested by these scholars. First of all, the data were triangulated through multiple forms of data collection tools including interviews, classroom observations and reflection reports. Besides, almost %25 percent of the transcriptions were checked by a colleague, who also assisted the cross-checking process, to detect any missing points and ensure external auditing. Finally, the researcher also asked the participants of the study to comment on the several parts of the transcriptions belonged to their cases. The feedback they provided through this member-checking process also contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

#### **Findings**

The findings derived from the analysis revealed that teachers they had in the past, language learning habits they formed when they were learners and language aptitude were the main factors that were influential on the participant teachers' language teaching beliefs and practices. The data obtained from the narrations of the participants related with their early language learning experiences were presented below in separate sections to provide a smoother understanding of each case.

#### ***The Case of Eda***

##### ***Teachers in the past***

During the data collection process, it was clearly understood that Eda had various language learning contexts until high school years and none of them was systematic and continuous. In these contexts, she had several teachers who influenced her attitudes towards language learning negatively. Though Eda had initially positive feelings for learning English, she got frustrated due to their negative attitudes and she became a passive student who never

wanted to come to English classes and participate in the lessons. She had a memory with one of those teachers in which she was quite embarrassed:

“One day, I never forget it, this teacher, who was in fact a midwife, asked us how to pronounce the word ‘child’. In previous years, I was taught that it was pronounced as ‘tjild’ and I thought I would know the answer. With a childish enthusiasm, I raised my finger and said ‘tjild’. ‘What?’ ‘What did you say?’ said my teacher and started to laugh. ‘Look at her and let’s laugh all together” she added. I was exposed to similar attitudes in previous years, but this was the most embarrassing one for me. I never talked again in this lesson and wanted to finish that year as soon as possible” (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 20.03.2015).

The teaching styles of her English teachers in the past also had negative influences on her ideas and feelings. The way teachers performed their lessons made students passive and they did not have any opportunity to participate:

“Especially the one in eight grade was terrible. We had a book and she strictly followed it. The lessons were monotonous; we were just doing the exercises one by one and writing down the things on the board. Everything was Turkish and we had no speaking activities. Just like learning Maths or Geography” (3<sup>rd</sup> interview, 12.06.2015).

Eda reported that the time she started the teacher training high school with a one-year intensive English preparatory program led to significantly positive changes on her feelings, ideas and attitudes towards learning English and she thought that the most important reason for this change was the attitudes of her teachers in these years. That was the first time she had teachers whose major was English language teaching and she said their attitudes towards students were quite inspiring for her. They were always cheerful, they approached students in a very friendly manner and they were always so kind in correcting students’ mistakes (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 20.03.2015). Eda said she opened a new page in her life for learning English with these teachers and forgot all her negative experiences she had had in English classes so far.

The way teachers performed their lessons in this year also influenced Eda positively. She expressed that the teachers were incredibly encouraging during the lessons, prepared speaking and listening activities all the time, played games with them during class hours and helped them be active in the classrooms. According to Eda, the classroom atmospheres they created were quite relaxing and fruitful for the students and for this reason they always looked forward to these lessons each and every day. She thought that they were the most enjoyable moments of her high school life as a student (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 20.03.2015). Eda also expressed that she was so positively affected by the attitudes and teaching styles of the teachers in preparatory year that she began to criticize the ones in the following 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, and thought that their way of teaching was not satisfactory enough to attract students’ attention (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 20.03.2015). These expressions showed that the teachers Eda had during the preparatory year were quite admirable for her, created the idea of being an English teacher in her mind and served as a model for her on how to be a good English teacher.

The results of her narratives demonstrated that such instances in Eda’s language learning experiences with her teachers in the past were quite influential on her teaching philosophy. For example, she uttered that she always had a kind attitude while correcting learners’ mistakes because she knew well that the opposite would make them feel frightened

and anxious (referring to the moment she had with her secondary school teacher on the pronunciation of 'child') (1<sup>st</sup> SR interview - 03.04.2015). It was also understood that she used several activities that she remembered from her high school years. For instance, she played a card game with her students to revise previously taught vocabulary items in the third classroom observation and when she was asked about it in the follow up interview; she told that "we played this game when I was at prep year. Our main course teacher used to play it. It was my favourite because it was both enjoyable and helped me refresh my vocabulary knowledge. Now, I am using it for my own students" (3<sup>rd</sup> SR interview - 15.05.2015). Her explanations on such instances showed that Eda had the traces of her experiences with the teachers in the past and these experiences had an impact on her current way of teaching.

### ***Language learning habits***

As it was mentioned before, Eda did not have systematic language learning experiences till she started high school and she admitted that her language learning experience began with the prep year at high school. During the first interview, she expressed that she spent a big effort and studied a lot not to miss any subjects being taught and towards the end of the first term, she became one of the best students in her class. Her teachers began to value her very much and she was also respected among her friends for her success. During this period, she developed several language learning habits and she used to believe that she learnt best in those ways (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 20.03.2015). The results of her narrations revealed that these habits through which she learnt English had significant effects on her teaching philosophy.

During the first classroom observation, Eda continued to teach the grammar structure (quantifiers) which she started in the previous lesson. Towards the end of the lesson, she wanted her students to do the exercises in the workbook. After having finished them, the students began to give the answers one by one. Even if they gave the correct answer, Eda explained each and every sentence one by one with a higher tone of voice emphasizing the use of the target structure. In the follow-up SR interview, she was asked if she always did the same while doing such exercises:

"Yes, I always do it and according to me the reason is so simple (smiling). If I were, I would take notes if somebody was explaining a very important structure. For example, if my teacher say chocolate is uncountable, I immediately write it next to the word "chocolate". In a way, I am used to teach the way how I learnt (smiling). I am overemphasising to create awareness so that they can take notes and revise them later. I am used to do it exactly in this way and I hope it works for them" (1<sup>st</sup> SR interview - 03.04.2015)

In the first and second classroom observations, it was also seen that Eda had written the grammar rules on the board towards the end of the sessions after explaining the grammatical structures either explicitly or implicitly. Then in the second interview, she was asked to elaborate why she had done this:

"I always write the rule on the board whatever the structure is because they are the only things students write down and then study. And also that is what I used to do when I was a student. I always took notes about the rules and studied them later. I also had a small notebook just for writing the rules. And I believe this also works for my students now. They take notes and study them later" (2<sup>nd</sup> interview - 01.05.2015).



The documents Eda used for her classroom teachings also had traces from her language learning habits in the past. In the reflection reports of the third and fourth weeks in which she focused on grammatical structures, she stated that she used a number of worksheets and she usually used them towards the end of the lesson. In these reports, she stated that she had done even more exercises in the lessons and she believed that doing a lot of exercises was quite beneficial for her students. In the final interview, this topic was opened while she was talking about the effect of her language learning experiences on her teaching style, and she explained why she did so much worksheet during class hours.

“First of all I want them to do exercises over and over, like drilling and I sometimes give more for homework. In this way, they cover the structure better and it gets more stable in their mind. I am sorry that I am telling the same thing (smiling), but I used to do it as a learner. For example, let it be present perfect, if I had been taught it, I would have opened all my books at home and have done all the exercise over and over, over and over. After a while, I could guess the answer without reading it completely. It worked for me, I believe it will work for my students as well.” (3<sup>rd</sup> interview - 12.06.2015).

As a result, it was found that Eda was a successful language learner when she was at high school and language learning habits she developed during this period were so strong and relatively effective in her eyes that she kept doing the same things for her students. As a teacher, she believed that some of her learning habits that had made her a successful language learner would also make her students successful during their language learning processes.

### ***The Case of Mert***

#### ***Language learning aptitude***

During the data collection process, Mert constantly stated that he had a good command of English, and during the interviews, it was revealed that the roots of his perception went back to years when he was a language learner. His first experience with English was when he started secondary school with the English preparatory program, and he slowly began to discover his potential to learn English. Even on those days, he believed that he had a high level of language learning aptitude and that was the main reason of his success in English classes. While talking about those days, he believed that the reasons he stated had an important place in his development.

“I was really talented to learn English because I had serious problems in learning the other courses but when I started the prep year, everything was different for me. I quickly understood almost everything what our teachers taught and began to be the best student in the class..... I think it was the ability I had from birth” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015).

During the years he spent at secondary school, his enthusiasm and success in English were the same and he was always the most brilliant student in English classes. Mert emphasized that the more he discovered his potential and became successful, the more his teachers began to value him and they had a very good relationship. He also stated that his self-confidence, emerged as a result of success in English, influenced his success in other courses positively as well. In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, he enjoyed studying English and doing exercises in his free time, and for this reason he almost knew everything taught by his teachers whereas

his friends struggled a lot to learn those subjects. He told an interesting memory while he was referring to this situation in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

“Every lesson was the same. The teachers were asking questions and my hand was always up. One day, I never forget, I went towards one of my teachers and said ‘Teacher, I really know the answer of any question you ask and raise my hand. My arm gets tired, and I can’t do it towards the end of the lesson. Please keep in mind that I want to answer all the questions and think as if I was raising my hand.’ Really. I am not exaggerating but that was the situation” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015).

Mert reported that his perceived efficacy and potential in learning English went on when he was at high school. He was always ahead of his friends and he never had to work hard to learn new structures and linguistic items. When he was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, he even felt ready for the university entrance exam which he was supposed to take at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. When mentioning those days, he uttered that “most of my teachers told me that I was the best student they had ever had and everybody believed that I would have an excellent degree in the university entrance exam, most probably in the top hundred” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015). At the end, he became the 108<sup>th</sup> among more than fifty thousand students thanks to his aptitude (on his own words) and he was placed in one of the best pre-service programs in Turkey.

It was clearly understood from his narrations that Mert believed his perceived language learning aptitude was one of the main factors of his success in his language-related career. In fact, a more important point in his perception was how his language learning aptitude influenced his initial conceptualizations in language teaching. During the first and third interviews, Mert was asked to elaborate on this issue and his narrations showed that his aptitude planted the seeds of his career as a teacher:

“...because even in those years I used to think that ‘I must be in the best place regarding my career with English. In fact, in secondary school, I didn’t think about being a teacher but I decided to improve my English as much as I could” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015).

“Towards the end of high school, I eventually began to think that “a person should do the job which he can do best” and my area of expertise was English in those years (smiling)” (3<sup>rd</sup> interview - 10.06.2015).

“.....To be a good English teacher, first you must be good at English, and if you are good at English, you can teach your students how to be good at it. I can say that is the foundation of my career as a teacher because being good at English eventually forced me to be a good English teacher who can easily grow up students with a good command of English” (3<sup>rd</sup> interview - 10.06.2015).

As it is seen, Mert’s perceived language learning aptitude played an important role in the early years of his language-related career. All kinds of success in his language learning process made him feel that he should improve himself as much as he could do and made a career with his good English. Although, it was not found to have a very direct influence on his cognition as a language teacher, it was seen that his aptitude and positive attitude in learning English laid the foundations of his career as an EFL teacher.

### ***Teachers in the past***

When Mert's narrations on his language learning experiences were examined, it was understood that he had pretty good relationships with his teachers during his first experience with English in the preparatory program and his later years as a successful language learner. As in the case of Eda, Mert's teachers were also quite influential on his early knowledge formation on how to teach English effectively and treat students. Besides, it was also observed that Mert's classroom behaviours carried the traces of his teachers in the past.

Mert had his first experiences with EFL teachers during the English preparatory year he studied in just before secondary school and these first experiences were extremely positive. He was so amazed with the styles, activities and attitudes of his teachers that he referred to those days as "a revolution" during the interviews:

"Everything they did was amazing. I mean their activities, games, books, material were very different and interesting for us because we were taught very traditionally in primary school and after that, it was like a revolution. We were singing songs and playing games during class hours. I remember such lessons made those teachers very valuable for us" (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015).

Emphasizing the fact that no other teacher had been that much influential in his life, Mert reported that he even criticized other teachers in the following years of his secondary and high school years not being as good as the ones in prep class. Mert also believed that his teachers in this prep year made him love English classes and affected the start of this long-lasting process positively. He also loved his teachers so much that he never got offended even if they were angry with him, and he used to think that there were some points he needed to improve whenever these teachers criticized him. He admired these teachers because of their attitudes towards students and this was quite clear in an unforgettable memory which he had with one of these teachers:

"I never forget, one day I was standing in front of a window so depressed and extremely exhausted because of doing my homework. Canan teacher came to me and asked why I looked so bad. I told her the situation. She said 'Ok, no problem. I will also talk to Muammer teacher and don't do your homework today, go and rest at home.' That evening, I didn't do homework but it was such a wonderful behaviour for me that I did a lot more for the following weeks. That behaviour was very important and critical for my success during this year" (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015).

Mert's narrations also showed that the teaching styles of his teachers in this program were influential on his style as a teacher. He reported that Muammer teacher was a bit traditional, explaining topics and doing exercises, whereas Canan teacher's classes were quite interactive, full of activities and communicative. During the interviews, he admitted that he felt as if he had had a teaching style which was a combination of two and thought that his teachers had an important role on it (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 18.03.2015).

In addition to Mert's general perspective regarding his teachers' impact on him, there were significant elements observed in his classroom practices which were reported to be influenced by the styles of his teachers in the past. For example, during the first two sessions, it was observed that Mert loved monitoring in class whenever he told his students to do a task or an exercise on their own, and his monitoring behaviour was consistent. When he was asked

why he gave such an importance to monitoring during class sessions, he expressed that that was the technique of Canan teacher (one of his teachers in the prep year), she never sit in her desk while they were doing something on their own and they would ask anything in a very sincere atmosphere created by that behaviour (2<sup>nd</sup> interview - 29.04.2015). In addition to this, he played a game with his students in the fourth observed session to revise some previously thought vocabulary items. During the game, a student voluntarily came to the board and sat on his chair looking at her friends but couldn't see the board. Mert wrote a new vocabulary item on the board in each case and other students tried to explain the word in English to the student sitting on the chair. During the fourth SR, it was seen that the origins of the activity were based on his school years:

“Canan teacher was doing this activity and I always looked forward to it because it was very funny. I adapted it a little bit; I do not form groups to save time and give some extra performance grades to the students coming to the board. I think it is very useful to revise the words I taught in previous weeks and I can use it with any group of learners” (4<sup>th</sup> SR interview - 27.05.2015).

First two observations also showed that Mert always awarded his students' participation with a motivating word like “perfect, well-done or good job” or with his gestures. He stated in the second interview on this issue that “Canan teacher did it when I was a student and I loved hearing those words from her.” In one of the sessions, it was also observed that his understanding on how to teach grammar had the traces of his experiences with the teachers in the past. For example, while teaching relative clauses in the second observed lesson, it was seen he gave very specific details, which even made the researcher question the necessity of teaching those points (2<sup>nd</sup> observation). While explaining the reason why he paid attention to even very small details, he again referred to his past experiences with teachers:

“Well, in fact, it is like a habit, I teach every small detail to my students and I believe in its effectiveness..... Muammer teacher, you remember when I was at secondary school, might be the reason because he was teaching like this, every and every detail. I learnt a lot thanks to his style. Maybe that is the reason why I teach like that” (2<sup>nd</sup> SR interview - 15.04.2015).

Based on Mert's ideas and memories in the past, it was concluded that his teachers, especially the ones he had in English preparatory year at secondary school, had an important place in his career as a teacher. They were such good models for him on how to be a good teacher that he did not like other teachers in his educational career. Classroom implications of these teachers and their attitudes towards students had been so admirable for Mert that their traces were observable in both general and specific perspectives while he was talking about his pedagogical thoughts and implications.

### ***The Case of Zeynep***

#### ***Enjoying language learning and forming habits***

Zeynep first started learning English when she started secondary school and her first experiences with English as a learner were quite positive. Besides her success in other school subjects, she was a very successful and hardworking student in English as well. As it was stated in her utterances, there was an important difference between her success in English and in other courses; she extremely enjoyed studying and learning it.

“I remember those days clearly. It was like a new world for me. I was learning everything from the beginning and it was extremely enjoyable for me. Some evenings, I was just studying English and nothing else because it was a different pleasure for me; maybe because speaking another language and feeling like someone else” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 19.03.2015).

The joy of learning a new language was so dominant in her educational life that Zeynep was sometimes just studying English and nothing else for days and she remembered her mother getting angry with her because she was not doing anything about other important courses such as Maths, Turkish and Science. In those days, doing something related to English was so enjoyable for her that she spent almost all her free time doing different activities related to English like reading stories, drawing cartoons in English, sticking vocabulary items on the wall of her room etc. (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 19.03.2015). As her English improved through the years, the pleasure she got from the activity of language learning got bigger. During her high school years, when she became the student of the language class, she subscribed to an international news magazine (*The Newsweek*), which she called as “a quite marginal act on those days”. Moreover, she had two pen-friends from France and Germany and she frequently corresponded with them.

Zeynep admitted that since she had great pleasure and joy for learning English and her activities were so frequent that she naturally formed certain habits which both helped her in this learning process and made her a successful language learner. During the interviews, she gave some examples regarding her habits while studying English.

“For example, I was keeping a separate vocabulary notebook and I was writing the phonetics, parts of speech, English and Turkish definitions and an example sentence. That was my favourite and improved my English a lot.....Then, I used to beg my dad to buy cassettes of English singers; you know internet was not that much popular in those years, and I loved listening to their songs..... and more importantly, I loved to be in English classes and did my best to benefit from my teachers, exercises, homework etc. I never regarded them as compulsory things but they were enjoyable tools for me to learn a new language” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 19.03.2015).

The data regarding Zeynep’s knowledge base showed that her habits which she formed while she was a language learner had some influences on her current practices as well. For example, in the first observed session, it was seen that there were many cartoons (they looked a bit sloppy) stuck on the wall of the classroom referring to some vocabulary items or phrases. When she was asked why she preferred them, she reported that she also liked sticking cartoons when she was a student and believed in its benefits (but she complained about the quality of her students’ works). During her third observed session, before she made students listen to a song (*You’re beautiful*, James Blunt) in their course book, she distributed worksheet including the lyrics of the song and students listened to it by following its lyrics. When the researcher asked the reason of distributing the lyrics of the song in the follow-up SR interview, she replied that it was one of her favourite activities to find the lyrics of the song and listen to it by following the lyrics. She also stated that it was very useful for her listening skill on those days (3<sup>rd</sup> SR interview - 14.05.2015). In addition to these examples in the observed sessions, there were two important points in her reflections reports which had the traces of her language learning habits in the past. In all her reports, it was clear that she

wanted her students to keep vocabulary notebooks, controlled them every week and graded the quality and tidiness of them. As it was mentioned before, she believed in the effectiveness of this activity because she did the same thing when she was a learner and benefited a lot. For this reason, she had the idea that it might also improve her students' vocabulary knowledge and embraced this activity (but she again complained in her reflections that her students were not aware of the value of this activity and were very careless in keeping it – Zeynep, reflection 1). Secondly, it was understood from the statements in her third reflection that, in that week, she wanted her students to bring all the writings they had written in this term and she would make a revision on those writings. The researcher asked this issue to Zeynep in an informal interview whether she wanted her students to keep all their writings and if so what the reason was for it. She replied that it was not compulsory but she strongly advised them to keep the writings because when she was a learner, she used to keep all her writings and compositions and she benefited from this habit a lot. For that reason, she believed that keeping the writings they had written would also be useful for her students.

As her narrations revealed, Zeynep enjoyed studying and learning English a lot when she was a student and this pleasure made her form certain habits which she benefited from a lot during her language learning process. It was also demonstrated that these habits which she gained years and years ago had traces on her language teacher cognition and classroom practices since she thought that they could be beneficial for her students as well.

### ***Teachers in the past***

During the years she spent as a learner, Zeynep had many English teachers, some of which were quite influential in her career as a teacher. Based on her narrations, it was seen that attitudes and personality of her teachers, some of her memories with them and several language teaching techniques of these teachers were very important factors, the effect of which were still visible in her pedagogical perspectives.

In terms of their language teaching styles, Zeynep reported that she had had different types of teachers having traditional or contemporary methods for teaching English. However, she thought that such differences had not been a problem for her because she had enjoyed both types of classes and learnt many things from different teachers.

“Engin teacher was a more traditional one. I mean his lessons were more grammatical and he was teaching more structure based. But I can say that I had the basics of my grammar knowledge in his lessons.....On the other hand, Emine teacher was a livelier and more energetic one, maybe because she was younger, but her lessons were quite different and I remember we looked forward to them. She taught us other skills through dancing, storytelling, role plays, songs etc. We used to speak a lot in her classes and that was wonderful for us.....I remember on those days, I was dreaming to be a teacher like Emine” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 19.03.2015).

During the interviews, Zeynep also reported that attitudes of English teachers towards students were really different from others. She remembered that her English teachers' behaviours towards her and other students were so friendly and encouraging that they used to spend time with these teachers even after school. To explain the situation clearly, Zeynep said

that “they were so popular among students that everybody dreamt to be an English teacher on those days” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 19.03.2015).

Among the English teachers in Zeynep’s educational life as a learner, one had a very important and different place in her life. When she started high school and chose the language department in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she had a new teacher called Öznur and she became so influential in her life that Zeynep began to make her decision to be an English teacher after meeting her. According to Zeynep, Öznur teacher was a perfect model for her both as an individual and as a teacher, she had many memories with her during the years at high school and these memories were perfect lessons for her as a growing teacher candidate. One of those memories she told below was very influential on her and she said she would never forget it:

“I never forget; one day Öznur teacher wanted us to buy a textbook. All my friends bought it on the next day but I couldn’t buy it because my family had some financial problems on those days. In the lesson she asked if we had bought it and everybody said yes but I said no. In the break time, I spoke to her and told my situation. She understood me and said no problem because she knew how hardworking and successful I was. Two days later, she called me to teachers’ room and I was a little bit afraid. She opened her bag, gave me the book and said ‘you must study more to be a good English teacher and I strongly believe you will do it.’ I could not believe how generous and kind she was and I cried. Then, I kissed her hands and gave the promise that I would be a teacher like her” (1<sup>st</sup> interview - 19.03.2015).

Observations and reflections on Zeynep’s classroom practices also provided significant data on how the experiences she had with her teachers in the past had still an impact on her current perspective and language teaching practices. It was found out that Zeynep especially embraced the practices of her past teacher whom she called as traditional. For instance, in her second, third and fifth reflection reports, she wrote that she prepared achievement vocabulary tests for her students during that week and gave performance grades to them based on their grades on these tests. She reported that one of her teachers in the past (Öznur teacher) implemented such quizzes when she was a student and now she believed that these tests make students study and refresh their vocabulary retention (Zeynep, reflection 2, p. 2). In her second observed session, as another example, there was a short five-sentence paragraph before the grammar topic. After she read this paragraph loudly, she wanted her students to form pairs and translate it into Turkish in five minutes. After the session, she was asked whether she used such translation activities in her classroom teaching and the reason for this. Her statements again referred to her past experiences

“Well, in fact I use it frequently. Yes, when we were at university, we learnt that translation should not be preferred while teaching English but I don’t think it is harmful or dangerous for students. I mean, we also learnt English with such techniques; for example we had a teacher in secondary school called Engin, I guess I mentioned him, and he was always doing this activity and we enjoyed translating texts into Turkish” (2<sup>nd</sup> SR interview - 16.04.2015).

During the years she spent as a learner, Zeynep always had a positive relationship with her teachers and her narrations on them revealed that they were both as individuals and as teachers, had important places on Zeynep’s development as a student and her decisions regarding her future. It was also found out Zeynep currently had several classroom practices and language teaching techniques which were once the practices of her teachers in the past.

Since she believed in their effectiveness on her in these years, she currently implemented them in her class hours.

## **Discussion**

In the literature, there are numerous scholars who put forward that teachers' prior experiences as language learners help them construct very initial conceptualizations on how languages should be taught. According to Grossman (1991), pre-service teachers start their programs with already existing knowledge and concepts on teaching methods and certain beliefs on their subject areas. Parallel to this view, the current study yields significant results regarding the impact of EFL teachers' language learning experiences on their language teacher cognition and demonstrates that they are the causal conditions of the process of language teacher cognition development based on the grounded theory paradigm.

The main point regarding prior language learning experiences is about the teachers in the past. Introduced to the literature with the famous work of Lortie (1975), the term apprenticeship of observation refers to the phenomenon which put forward that learners spend a considerable time observing and evaluating professionals and this might have significant influence on their beliefs and knowledge about teaching. This study also demonstrates that the apprenticeship observation is valid for EFL teachers and its impact is so noticeable that the roots of some of their current practices go back to the years when they were learners. This impact is both visible as a positive transfer of their past teaching experiences or an avoidance of disliked ones. Eda, for instance, has decided to be an affectionate teacher who is always very careful to be kind when she gives feedback to her students or warns them about something due to the negative experience she had with her primary school teacher. On the other hand, she prepares a game, which she remembers from high school years, for her students to help them revise their vocabulary knowledge, and this situation stands for a positive transfer of previous experiences. Mert, the second case of the study, also reported similar experiences. He had quite positive experiences and memories with two of his teachers, Canan and Muammer, who were influential on his interest and enjoy in the language learning process. It is observed that Mert has embraced some of these teachers' attitudes and techniques and still uses them in his classroom practices. Zeynep, another case of this study, admirably mentioned one of her teachers in the past and admitted that she wished to be like her in those years. She also expressed how she was influential on her to choose this profession. It was also found that she embraced some of the classroom practices of another teacher though she called him as traditional. These findings of the study show parallelism with many studies in the literature. Erkmén (2014), investigating the language teaching beliefs of in-service Turkish EFL teachers, found out that language learning experiences in the past had an important role on teachers' teaching beliefs. Bailey et. al. (1996) revealed that past teachers' personality, caring and commitment had influential roles on pre-service students' language learning philosophies. In addition to this, parallel to Zeynep's preferences for traditional techniques in grammar teaching, Woods (1996) demonstrated that teachers might prioritize certain skill-based implementations which they were exposed to in the past. As for the transfer of learning and teaching experiences which were both reported by Mert and Eda, Golombek (1998) and Numrich (1996) put forward that teachers might embrace or avoid certain practices based on their experiences in the past. For these reasons, parallel to many



studies in the past, it is concluded that apprenticeship of observation also plays an important role on language teachers' cognition and this phenomenon has a noticeable impact on their classroom practices.

Another important factor which is found to be influential on the participant teachers' cognition and is related to their prior language learning experiences is their language learning habits. It is revealed that teachers enjoyed language learning when they were students and during this process, they constructed certain principles on how language skills are learnt based on their habits they benefited in their own language learning process. For instance, Eda writes the grammar structures on the board so that her students can take notes, or she gives lots of drilling exercises to students since she used to do the same when she was a learner. Zeynep, as another example, used to keep a separate vocabulary notebook or learnt a lot through sticking vocabulary cartoons on the wall of her room when she was a learner. Now, she wants her students to do the same things since she believes that they are quite effective for learning and revising vocabulary items. Similar to these findings, some of the participants in Hayes' (2008) study also reported that they loved language learning very much in the past and this positive attitude guided them to be language teachers. Besides, Bailey et. al. (1996) also concluded that their motivation in the past to learn the language was one of the factors influencing teachers' language teaching philosophies. In addition to these findings in the literature, this study also concludes that language teachers' cognition is also influenced by their language learning habits in the past since they think that these habits are effective language learning techniques and they currently use them in their language teaching profession.

The last factor regarding language learning experiences in the past was strongly emphasized by one of the participants of the study, Mert. He definitely believes that his language learning aptitude is very high and he has a special ability in language learning. According to him, his language learning aptitude always made him a successful learner, which, in the end, played a very important role in his decision to be an EFL teacher. Thanks to his aptitude, he developed certain habits which helped him improve his English and become more successful. The existence of such a special ability is also supported by Hayes (2008). Reporting the significant utterances of his participants on this issue throughout the study, Hayes put forward that some of the primary preferences of language teachers might stem from their aptitudes on this particular subject, which is language. The results in the case of Mert show parallelism with Hayes (2008) and reveal the fact that language learning aptitude might play an important role on EFL teachers' cognition as well.

## **Conclusion**

These findings of the current study demonstrate that the participant EFL teachers have very initial conceptualizations on how languages are learnt and taught based on their language learning experiences in the past which include their teachers, language learning habits and aptitudes. It is also seen that these experiences are so influential that they have their places in teachers' current language teaching philosophies and classroom implementations. Based on these findings, it can be concluded the term apprenticeship of observation which is strongly believed to be valid for pre-service teachers might also have significant impact on in-service language teachers. For this reason, it is worthwhile to carry out research studies investigating

the influence of apprentice of observation on in-service teachers to have a better understanding of the phenomena. Such investigations and their findings will also help scholars understand teaching beliefs and practices of language teachers and they might also be useful tools for more effective in-service teacher trainings.

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