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Exploring pre-service English language teachers' locus of control orientations

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate pre-service English language teachers' locus of control orientations in relation to academic achievement, grade level, and gender. The study, which adopted survey methodology design, was carried out with 155 pre-service English language teachers studying in the first and fourth grades in ELT department at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University during 2016-2017 Academic Year Spring Term. Locus of Control Scale (LCS) was used in order to gather data. The data were analyzed through various statistical procedures, namely descriptive statistics, frequencies, paired samples t-test, independent samples t-test, and One-Way ANOVA. The analysis of the data indicated that the participants had greater internal locus of control orientations. However, there were no statistically significant differences in participants' locus of control with respect to investigated variables. In the light of these findings, this study offers some suggestions for further research and points to some implications for teacher educators.

Keywords: Locus of control, pre-service English language teachers, grade level differences, gender, academic achievement

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Introduction

Education undoubtedly plays a vital role in maintaining the ongoing improvement of every country in all aspects of life. For this reason, numerous attempts are made in order to enhance the educational system and to maximise learning outcomes. Teachers, as one of the key contributors of these outcomes, are of utmost importance in the learning process because they are primarily responsible parties for facilitating learning through organising the learning environment, planning learning activities, assessing learner performance, relating to learners' individual needs and so forth in the broadest sense. In this respect, training effective and competent teachers who are equipped with required level and types of teacher knowledge and teaching skills is essential. Along with the professional training of prospective teachers, it also appears to be indispensable to assist them to develop positive attitudes, values, beliefs, and motivation towards their profession, which are regarded as affective variables that influence human behaviour to a great extent (Arnold, 2009). In other words, variables related to emotions or affect are considered to be shaping individuals' actual behaviours. In relation to foreign language learning, Arnold (2009, p.148) notes that affect seems to be the most important factor that influences language learning; thus, "attention to affect can bring many positive changes to the classroom and that the foreign and second language learning and teaching processes will be more effective if they are affective". This might suggest that affective variables need to be investigated thoroughly, and the implications arising from the findings should be assessed with care for the facilitation of foreign language learning and teacher education.

In this respect, *locus of control* (hereafter, LoC), an important affective variable, which has to do with an individual's beliefs about control over life events (Williams & Burden, 2000) needs to be explored more in depth in the field of foreign language learning and teaching as it is believed to have a considerable degree of influence on individuals' various experiences such as academic achievement, job performance, health conditions, problem solving skills and so forth. The theoretical background of the concept and a review of available research on LoC will be presented in the following section.

Locus of Control

The concept of LoC which is defined as "a person's control over life events" (Williams & Burden, 2000, p. 101) has been one of the key variables of personality investigations in recent decades (Dağ, 2002). It is derived from Rotter's Social Learning Theory which includes four main concepts: behaviour potential, expectancy, reinforcement value, and the psychological situation (see Sheard, 1996). It is based on the premise that the praise or punishment that a person receives as a consequence of his/her behaviours leads him/her to develop some generalised expectancies about the consequences of his/her future behaviours. In other words, the effect of the reinforcement that follows an individual's behaviour is dependent upon whether s/he perceives a causal relationship between his/her behaviour and the reinforcement (Yeşilyaprak, 2004).

LoC is categorised into two types: *internal LoC* and *external LoC*. The former refers to the belief that people are personally responsible for every event that occurs in their lives; and the latter is the belief that events in people’s lives are caused by factors beyond their control such as fate, luck, or other people (Williams & Burden, 2000). Individuals falling into the first type of LoC are called *internalisers*, and the ones in the second type are *externalisers*. However, individuals’ beliefs about their control over life events might show variation; i.e. they tend towards either type of LoC depending on the seriousness of events. There is also the probability that the same individual tends to attribute the reasons of the events in their lives to internal or external factors depending on whether the event is a positive or negative one. All these lead the concept of LoC to be quite complicated (Williams & Burden, 2000).

A review of mostly relational studies on LoC reveals learners with internal and external LoC have the following characteristics which are displayed in the following figure:

<i>Internalisers</i>	<i>Externalisers</i>
internal locus	external locus
open-minded	dogmatic
high success	low success
directed towards success	avoiding failure
self-confident	insecure and anxious
resilient/determined	low resistance
intellectual	reactive
risk-taker	diffident
planned, organised	not able to concentrate, disorganised
verbal	visual/kinaesthetic
analytic	general

Figure 1

Characteristics of internalisers and externalisers (Yeşilyaprak, 2004, p. 243)

As can be inferred from the personality traits of internalisers and externalisers, internal learners are likely to be more success-oriented in learning, whereas externalisers’ potential of success seems to be low. Actually, most studies on the relationship between academic achievement and LoC have reached similar results. Kishor (1983) and Dilmaç (2008), for example, found out a significant relationship between academic achievement and internal LoC. Similarly, Yeşilyaprak (2004) notes that her large scale of review of such studies point to a positive relationship between internal LoC and academic achievement, and a negative one between external LoC and academic achievement. Ghonsooly and Shirvan (2011) also found

a positive correlation between the participants' LoC and their L2 reading and writing achievement among a group of undergraduate learners ($N= 136$) studying English as their major. However, there are some inconsistencies about the relationship between two types of LoC and different independent variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, race, culture, and parents' educational background in the literature; and some of these are going to be mentioned in the findings and discussions part in relation to the research questions.

As the preceding discussions reveal, LoC appears to be a key variable affecting various aspects of learning so it seems essential to understand some of its features. First of all, although learners' LoC beliefs appear to be moderately durable, it does not necessarily mean that they are fixed or can never be changed (Williams & Burden, 2000). Actually, learners' internal beliefs about control over learning or learning to teach can be promoted as long as they are provided appropriate interventions by their teachers or trainers. The fact that internalisers and externalisers have different potentials of success in learning has several implications for teachers and teacher educators. Learners (as well as pre-service teachers) should learn to assume responsibility for their own learning so that they can attribute the reasons of both their success and failure to themselves. For example, they can be made to be involved in decision-making processes with respect to some aspects of their learning like deciding on what learning activities should be done, or help each other in realising their learning plans (Williams & Burden, 2000).

Locus of Control and Teachers

A review of learner characteristics with internal and external LoC signifies the importance of researching this construct and contributing to the improvement of learners' success in school and eventually in life. As it is known that learners with internal LoC tendencies have a greater chance of attaining more effective learning outcomes, it can be suggested that teachers have a significant role in supporting their learners to have more internal control over their learning. At this point, it could be argued whether teachers' LoC beliefs have an influence on their learners' LoC beliefs. Several studies point to the existence of such a relationship. Küçükkaragöz (1998), for instance, found out a parallel between the LoC tendencies of teachers and their students. In other words, the students of teachers with internal LoC are more internal; while the students of teachers with external LoC are more external. Another study also detected a striking relationship between teachers' LoC orientations and their students' academic achievement. A major finding in Murray and Staebler's (1974) study was that the students of teachers with internal LoC outperformed the students of external teachers in achievement tests. Although this might not be the whole reason for academic achievement, one implication that can arise from these findings is that pre-service teachers' internal LoC orientations should be fostered during their professional education. For this reason, more research studies need to be carried out to investigate both in-service teachers' and pre-service teachers' LoC and its relationship with other variables so that more concrete actions should be taken in teacher education programmes. In addition, whereas LoC has been investigated in a number of studies with a variety of teacher education programmes such as departments of music, and visual arts education (e.g. Akbulut, 2006;

Dilmaç (2008) or with in-service teachers (e.g. Kapıkıran, 2009; Küçükkaragöz, 1998), there seems to be a gap in research exploring pre-service English language teachers' LoC. Therefore, this study might contribute to bridging this gap.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed at investigating pre-service English language teachers' LoC orientations with regard to different variables like their grade levels (1st and 4th year), gender, and academic achievement (GPA). With these aims in mind, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the pre-service English teachers' locus of control orientations?
2. Is there a significant difference among pre-service English teachers' locus of control orientations with regard to their grade level?
3. Is there a significant difference among pre-service English teachers' locus of control orientations with regard to their gender?
4. Is there a significant difference among pre-service English teachers' locus of control orientations with regard to their academic achievement (GPA)?

Method

In this study, survey methodology design was adopted to describe pre-service English teachers' LoC orientations.

Setting and Participants

The study was carried out at the Faculty of Education at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in 2016/2017 Academic Year Spring Term. 155 pre-service English teachers from the 1st and the 4th grades enrolled in English Language Teaching Department (ELT) participated in the study. The ELT Department offers professional courses including methodological and pedagogical approaches to foreign language education and courses related to second language acquisition and language teaching methodology such as Teaching English to Young Learners, Teaching Language Skills, Linguistics, Translation and also various elective courses. The department also organizes School Experience and Teaching Practice for the senior students (4th year) in selected schools.

As for the sampling method, convenience sampling technique was adopted for the selection of participants. The details of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Distribution of the participants*

Category	Level	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Female	116	74,8
	Male	39	25,2
Grade	1 st year	90	58,1
	4 th year	65	41,9
Total		155	100

In total, 116 female (74,8 %) and 39 male (25,2 %) participants took part in the study. This uneven distribution of gender was expected since females constitute the majority of students who are enrolled in ELT departments in most universities in Turkey. As for the values concerning grade, a 1st year sample size of 90 out of 100 students and a 4th year sample size of 65 out of 96 students indicate a high degree of representativeness because of the fact that more than half of the students in each grade were reached. The reason why the 1st and 4th year students were selected as the participants of this study was to investigate whether the education they receive for four years (i.e. the different nature of the courses they take, school practice experience that the 4th years go through) in the ELT department, and their level of maturity cause a significant difference in their LoC orientations.

Another variable was participants' academic achievement (GPA) because it was intended to find out whether there is a meaningful relationship between academic achievement and LoC. Table 2 presents the information related to the participants' academic achievement (GPA).

Table 2*Information about participants' academic achievement (GPA)*

Category	GPA	Description	<i>N</i>	%
GPA	1-1,9	Failing	1	,6
	2-2,5	Passing	13	8,4
	2,6-3	Satisfactory	36	23,2
	3,1-3,5	Good	59	38,1
	3,6-4	Excellent	46	29,7
Total			155	100

The participants were mostly high achievers because their GPA (general point averages) were satisfactory (23, 2 %), good (38,1 %), and excellent (46 %), and only 1 participant had a failing grade as shown in Table 2.

Instruments

One main instrument was used in the study: Locus of Control Scale (LCS), which was developed by Dağ (2002). Its internal consistency was found to be Cronbach's $\alpha=.92$, which is considered to be highly reliable (Büyüköztürk, 2007). When the reliability analysis for this study was run, it was found to be $\alpha= .82$, which also points to a high level of reliability. It is a 5-point Likert type scale including 47 items with the options of (1) *exactly appropriate to me*, (2) *very appropriate to me*, (3) *appropriate to me*, (4) *not much appropriate to me*, and (5) *not appropriate to me at all*. The 22 of items reflect internal LoC beliefs, while 25 of them reflect external LoC. According to the developer of the scale, LCS is appropriate for the young and the adults; does not restrict the participants in responding to the items as it presents 5 options to choose from; and has a comprehensive scope including all possible LoC domains such as personal control, belief in luck, meaninglessness of striving, fatalism and belief in an unjust world that make up the generalised expectancy theory of Rotter (Dağ, 2002). The original version of LCS is in Turkish. It was also administered to the participants in Turkish as they are all native speakers of Turkish. The scale was also translated into English by the researchers in order to use it in the sections of results and discussion. The English version was checked by two experts from the ELT department to verify reliability.

Findings and Discussions

In order to analyze the data obtained through LCS, SPSS (Ver. 23.0) was used, and statistical procedures like frequencies, descriptive statistics, paired samples t-test, independent samples t-test, and One-Way ANOVA were implemented to answer the research questions. The findings of the study and discussions are presented for each research question in turn.

1. What are the pre-service English teachers' LoC orientations?

The results of the descriptive statistics reveal that participants' average LoC appears to be moderate as the mean value is $M= 3,1$ ($SD= ,29$). However, when some further analysis is done, it is noticed that 10 of the highest scoring items reflect participants' internal LoC beliefs (pointed with an asterisk * in Table 3), while 20 of the low scoring items reflect external LoC beliefs. Consequently, it can be stated that the participants' tendency towards internal LoC is greater. The item with the highest score ($M= 4,22$; $SD= ,69$), for example, reveals that majority of the participants do not believe in existence of luck. This reveals that they have internal beliefs of control over important events rather than external factors in their lives. Similarly, the item 43 ($M= 4,20$; $SD= ,77$) draws attention to the importance of determination in achieving something in life, which also reveals an internal disposition. The third highest scoring item ($M= 4,20$; $SD= ,80$) also shows that participants value the importance of striving in achieving one's goals.

In terms of the interpretation of low scoring items, the results signify that the participants have low external LoC orientations. For example, items 11 ($M= 1,48$; $SD= ,75$) and 20 ($M= 1,67$; $SD= ,91$) with the lowest mean values point to a disbelief in the importance of the role that luck plays in important situations or life. Another item which reflects a low

level of external LoC is item 8 ($M= 1,80$; $SD= 1$) points out that participants actually attach a great deal of importance to striving in achieving goals.

Table 3

Pre-service English language teachers' LoC orientations (N= 155)

Items of LCS	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
*16. In fact, there is no such a thing like luck.	4,22	,69
*43. Determination is the biggest factor in what a person achieves.	4,20	,77
*47. Great ideals can be achieved as long as one strives for them.	4,20	,80
*21. It is better for a person to be determined about what s/he is going to do rather than to rely on fate.	4,11	,83
*36. One can change what may happen in the future by what s/he does today.	4,05	,80
*45. A person can control his/her weight by regulating his/her foods.	4,02	,80
*30. Luck or fate does not play an important role in life.	3,99	,63
*29. If the people make sufficient effort, political corruption can be eliminated.	3,98	,78
*27. A person can make right decisions about many issues concerning himself/herself.	3,97	,77
*32. A person basically shapes his/her own life.	3,94	,78
14. If a person's day starts well, it ends well; if it starts badly, it also ends badly.	2,21	1,05
22. Whether a person makes enough effort or not, the problems s/he faces are solved automatically.	2,16	,90
10. The fact that a person has not caught an illness yet is just a matter of luck.	1,97	,92
12. A person's zodiac sign determines which illnesses s/he is prone to.	1,87	1
8. Whatever a person does, nothing results in the way s/he wants.	1,80	1
20. One can make right decisions by tossing a coin in most situations.	1,67	,91
11. Finding a four-leaf clover brings a person luck.	1,48	,75
Total mean value of LoC	3,18	,29

Although descriptive statistics indicate that the participants have a greater tendency towards internal LoC, paired samples t-test was conducted to understand whether there is a statistically significant difference between the participants' internal and external LoC beliefs.

Table 4*Differences between the participants' internal and external LoC*

Dimension	N	M	SD	T	Df	p
Internal LoC	155	3,91	,32	28,53	154	,000
External LoC	155	2,54	,49			

Table 4 points to a statistically significant difference between participants' internal and external LoC ($p < ,001$). This finding indicates that the participants of this study appear to have greater internal LoC beliefs than external LoC. In other words, they assume more responsibility for the results of events in their lives. This is a satisfactory result as it is assumed that internalisers are more likely to achieve academically as discussed before.

2. Is there a significant difference among pre-service English teachers' LoC orientations with regard to their grade levels?

To answer this question, independent samples t-test was conducted. Thus, it was intended to find out whether there was a significant difference between the 1st and 4th year pre-service English teachers' LoC tendencies. The results of the analysis revealed that although 4th graders have a slightly higher level of LoC, it is not a statistically significant difference ($p > ,05$). This result is in line with two other studies that also found out no significant differences between grade variable and LoC among pre-service music (Dilmaç, 2008) and visual arts teachers (Akbulut, 2006). Actually, it is usually expected that the more experience a person has, the greater internal LoC orientations s/he will develop (see Sheard, 1996). However, the case in this study and the two other studies mentioned above do not support this assumption. The explanation to be made for each case might undoubtedly be different due to the type of the programme, experiences of participants, specificities of the setting and so on.

3. Is there a significant difference among pre-service English teachers' LoC orientations with regard to their gender?

To find an answer to this question, independent samples t-test was carried out, and the results indicated that the difference between the female and male participants' LoC orientations is not statistically significant ($p > ,05$). The review of studies investigating the relationship between gender and LoC reveals conflicting results. While some studies found that females have a higher internal LoC than males (e.g. Akbulut, 2006; Dilmaç, 2008), some others pointed that males have a greater internal LoC than females (e.g. Çakır, 2017; Küçükkaragöz, 1996; Oğuz & Sarıçam, 2016). The finding of this study, on the other hand, is in line with the studies which did not find a relationship between LoC and the gender variable

(e.g. Dağ, 2002; Höl, 2016; Kapıkıran, 2007; Yeşilyaprak, 1988). This might imply that the gender variable does not have a consistent effect on learners' or pre-service teachers' LoC beliefs. In effect, a range of factors such as personality traits, the educational background of the individuals, parents' education, the nature of the educational programme, even the sociocultural values attached to gender might account for the inconsistency in research findings with regard to the relationship between gender and LoC. In addition, the females outnumber the males in this study (females: 74,8 %, males (25,2 %)). It might have been possible to get different results with a more balanced distribution of gender.

4. Is there a significant difference among pre-service English teachers' LoC orientations with regard to their academic achievement (GPA)?

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was carried out in order to answer the fourth research question. The results showed that there are no statistically significant differences among pre-service English teachers' LoC orientations with respect to their academic achievement ($p > .05$). However, when the proportion of the participants' academic achievement is taken into consideration, it can be seen that only ,6 % of the participants have a failing grade (between 1-1,9), and 8,4 % have a passing grade (between 2-2,5), which shows that only a small percentage of the participants (9%) have a really low level of academic achievement. On the other hand, a considerably bigger proportion of the participants (91%) have a high level of academic achievement. This finding might mean that high achievers in this study mostly had internal LoC tendencies to a sizeable degree. A similar result was also found in Nodoushan's study (2012) which revealed that the students with internal LoC had higher achievement than the ones with external LoC in spite of a lack of statistical significance. Although the results of this study or of Nodoushan's did not produce a statistically significant relationship between internal LoC and academic achievement, in the relevant literature, it is common to find results that support the relationship between the two (e.g. Kishor, 1983 and Dilmaç, 2008). Another study also indicated that there is a positive correlation between the participants' LoC and their L2 reading and writing achievement among a group of undergraduate learners ($N = 136$) studying English as their major (Ghonsooly & Shirvan, 2011).

Conclusions

This study investigated the pre-service English language teachers' main LoC orientations and possible significant differences in their LoC tendencies with regard to their grade levels, gender, and academic achievement.

As for the main tendencies in pre-service English teachers' LoC, it was found that the majority of the participants had significantly high internal LoC orientations. This result might be attributed to the demanding study schedules that the student teachers are supposed to meet from the very beginning to the last year of their educational programme, which might have made them realise the importance of effort and determination in order to be successful.

Hence, they might have developed more internal LoC beliefs. This result can be considered satisfactory since there is a growing body of research pointing to a positive significant relationship between learners' internal LoC and academic achievement (e.g. Dilmaç, 2008; Ghonsooly & Shirvan, 2011, Kishor, 1983; Yeşilyaprak, 2004).

However, despite the general expectation that senior pre-service teachers will have greater internal LoC, this study revealed that grade level does not create a difference in pre-service English teachers' LoC. A similar result was also obtained by Akbulut (2006) who did not find a significant difference between 1st and 4th year pre-service music teachers' LoC. The findings emerged from this study can be attributed to the fact that all pre-service English teachers in this setting appear to get involved in a very intense and challenging learning/study programme including a great number of assignments, projects, presentations, exams and so forth throughout their four-year education. Therefore, it is assumed that they might have learnt to attribute the reasons of their success or failure to more internal factors such as effort or determination. Another reason to account for this finding might be the fact that the fourth year students go through a number of quite different experiences from the first years such as going to schools for School Experience and Teaching Practice (whereby some students have the chance of working with effective and competent mentors and some not), taking KPSS (Public Personnel Selection Examination), which teacher candidates need to take in order to be appointed to state schools, and the irregularity of teacher appointments. Such kind of unstable external factors based on luck, ÖSYM (Student Selection and Placement Centre), or MEB (Ministry of National Education) might have caused the fourth years not to develop significantly higher internal LoC beliefs.

As for the relationship between the variables of gender and LoC, no statistically significant differences were found in this study. Actually, no consistent results have been obtained in the relevant literature in terms of the relationship between gender and LoC. This can be explained as the unique characteristics of every educational setting or cultural context might cause such complexities. Another reason for this finding might be attributed to the natural uneven distribution of gender in this specific setting. As mentioned in the setting and participants part, the majority of the participants were females. If there was a chance of a more equal distribution of gender, the results could be different. This fact might call for further research.

The findings also show that there are no statistically significant differences among pre-service English teachers' LoC beliefs with respect to their academic achievement. This finding might also be interpreted in terms of the uneven distribution of achievement levels like in the case of gender. This finding could also have been different if there had been a more balanced proportion of academic achievement among the participants. Yet, the fact that high achievers outnumber low achievers in this study might also count for why the participants' internal LoC appeared to be significantly greater than their external LoC, which points to the positive relationship between internal LoC and academic achievement as reviewed in the literature review.

The results of this study carry some essential implications for researchers. First of all, more research needs to be carried out investigating the construct of LoC with respect to various variables such as academic achievement, years of experience, age, level of English, or parents' educational background which might have an influence on it. Secondly, most of the available research has been conducted with in-service teachers or candidate teachers from the programmes other than the ELT programme. In order to contribute to the improvement of ELT programmes, more research studies should be conducted with pre-service English teachers investigating LoC which is assumed to affect learning outcomes. Moreover, the relationship between LoC and variables such as pre-service English teachers' attitudes towards teaching profession, democratic beliefs, personal and professional self-efficacy beliefs, and motivation might be sought by future researchers. Furthermore, all grade levels could be included in further research as well in order to investigate the differences in LoC among all the grades because especially investigation of LoC in 3rd year students might reveal significant results as this year is very important and challenging in the programme because students take practice courses such as Teaching English to Young Learners, Teaching Specific Skills, Evaluation and Assessment, and Literature and Language Teaching while in the previous years they take more structural and theoretical courses such as Contextual Grammar, Advanced Reading and Writing, Vocabulary, Linguistics, Approaches to ELT and Second Language Acquisition. In addition, further research might investigate LoC using qualitative research methods as well like open-ended questionnaires or interviews to gain a deeper understanding of student teachers' LoC beliefs. Last but not least, teacher educators could also be involved in future studies as essential stakeholders of teacher education programmes to shed light on the investigation of LoC from a different angle.

As for the implications for teacher educators in ELT departments and in the other areas, a number of suggestions might be offered. Having become aware of the importance of internal LoC in different areas, interventions could be provided by teacher educators in order to foster pre-service teachers' internal LoC orientations (Williams & Burden, 2000). The main aim of these attempts should be to encourage them to take more control of their learning. One way to achieve this could be to give them appropriate feedback as a result of their performance (Kapıkıran, 2007) so that they can learn to attribute the reasons of their success or failure to internal factors such as effort. Another way can be to inform especially external learners about the expectancies or the performances required by each course (Yeşilyaprak, 2004). They can also be made to be involved in selection of learning activities (Williams & Burden, 2000). Moreover, student teachers can be encouraged to develop higher internal LoC beliefs by being involved in guidance and counselling, and strategy training (Höl, 2016).

In conclusion, teacher educators should be aware of the differences among their learners in terms of LoC orientations, and seek ways to foster their internal LoC beliefs so that pre-service teachers could encourage their own learners to move towards internal LoC continuum when they start to practise their profession.

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