

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' BELIEFS, ASSUMPTIONS, AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this comparative case study was to explore English language teachers' beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about learner-centeredness and to see how they implement learner-centeredness in their classrooms. The study was conducted at one public and one private primary school in Istanbul. Focus group interviews were held in each school with thirteen teachers of English and then individual interviews and observations were carried out with four volunteer teachers being 2 from the public primary school during the spring semester, 2004-2005. The four participant teachers were observed in their classrooms ten times along with before- and after-class observation reflections facilitated by the researcher. These observations were accompanied by document analysis. Data from the interviews were inductively analyzed. The findings indicated that public school EFL teachers had limited knowledge to implement learner-centeredness whereas private teachers did not.

**Key words:** learner-centeredness, belief, innovation

### ÖZ

Bu karşılaştırmalı olgu incelemesinin amacı İngilizce öğretmenlerinin öğrenen-odaklılık ile ilgili inanç, düşünce ve bilgilerini araştırmak ve öğrenen odaklılığı derslerinde nasıl uyguladıklarını görmektir. Araştırma İstanbul'da bir tane devlet, bir tane özel ilköğretim okulunda yürütülmüştür. Her okulda öğretmenlerle odak kümeleri oluşturulmuş, kendileriyle teker teker görüşmeler yapılmış ve özel ilköğretimde çalışan 2 ve devlet ilköğretim okulunda görev yapmakta olan 2 öğretmen olmak üzere toplam 4 gönüllü öğretmen 2004- 2005 Bahar yarıyılı boyunca gözlemlenmiştir. Katılan dört öğretmenle yapılan 10'ar gözlemin her birinin öncesinde ve sonrasında bu öğretmenlerin görüşleri alınmıştır. Bu gözlemler belge çözümlemesiyle işlenmiş, görüşmeler tümevarımsal olarak çözümlenmiştir. Araştırma sonuçları devlet ilköğretim okulunda çalışan İngilizce öğretmenlerinin öğrenen-odaklılığı konusunda bilgi eksikliğine sahip olduklarını göstermiştir. Özel ilköğretim okulu öğretmenleri içinse bu durum söz konusu değildir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** öğrenen-odaklılığı, inanç, yenilik

### INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a new wave of effort to define effective teaching in Turkish education. This requires a reestablishment of the curriculum and the starting point is primary education. Innovations brought about by MONE reflect constructivist principles such as improvement of pedagogical skills, creating environments conducive to learning while deemphasizing transmission of theoretical knowledge and enhancing the interaction between education faculties and the schools where prospective teachers observe classrooms and practice teaching. The programs further consider the education standards of the EU countries ([www.meb.gov.tr/indexeng.htm](http://www.meb.gov.tr/indexeng.htm)).

One of the targets in the 7<sup>th</sup> five year plan of the government is rearranging and reorganizing curricular programs, teaching methods and techniques, and education-training equipment materials in accord with international standards. A major premise of the new trend in education in Turkey is that pupils should be actively involved in their own learning and in the construction and development of knowledge and ideas. It is also proposed that more attention should be paid to the individual learning needs of different students so that variations in student learning styles, speeds and abilities can be better catered to. Since improvement of basic education is one of the objectives of the ministry, the programs of certain courses have been renewed on the basis of constructivist and learner-centered principals. These courses include Turkish grades 1 to 5, Mathematics grades 1 to 5, Social Sciences for grades 4 to 5, Social Sciences for grades 1 to 3, and lastly Science and Technology including grades 4 and 5. Restructuring the curriculum will be extended to sixth, seventh and eight grades ([http://programlar.meb.gov.tr/index/giris\\_index.htm](http://programlar.meb.gov.tr/index/giris_index.htm)). Even though the English program at primary level has not been renewed yet, it is on the way. The basic principle underlying the improvement of the English program is learner-centeredness.

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usually oriented around the teacher, textbook, and individual work in class. The teachers are the source of knowledge and take all the responsibilities in the classrooms. Students are considered passive learners who wait for the teachers to take in knowledge and information.

Transferring the theory of *learner-centered* teaching into actual practice is the challenge faced by classroom teachers and educational administrators. Such transfer begins with practitioners having a clear understanding of the various underpinnings of the concept – the principles that form the prerequisite foundation. According to Prawat (1992), teachers are viewed as important agents of change in the reform effort; however teachers are also viewed as major obstacles to change because of their adherence to outmoded forms of instruction that emphasize factual and procedural knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the current beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge (BAK) of English language teachers about learner-centeredness and to see how they implement learner-centered instruction.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### ***Introduction***

Currently, there is increasing recognition that the beliefs individuals hold are the best indicators of the decisions they make during the course of everyday life (Bandura, 1986). Pajares (1992, p. 307) argues that the investigation of teachers' beliefs "should be a focus of educational research and can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot". Educational researchers trying to understand the nature of teaching and learning in classrooms have usefully exploited this focus on belief systems. The research of Jakubowski and Tobin (1991) suggests that teachers' metaphors and beliefs not only influence what teachers do in the classroom, but that changes in these same metaphors and beliefs can result in changes in their practices.

A belief can be defined as a representation of the information someone holds about an object, or a "person's understanding of himself and his environment" (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, p.131). This object can "be a person, a group of people, an institution, a behavior, a policy, an event, etc., and the associated attribute may be any object, trait, property, quality, characteristic, outcome, or event" (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, p.12).

### ***Teacher Beliefs and Educational Innovations***

There is an area where research on teacher beliefs can potentially be relevant, that is, the field of educational innovations. In many past educational innovations, the teacher was seen as the executor and implementer of innovations that were devised by others. Teachers were supposed to implement these innovations in accordance with the intentions of the developers as much as possible.

There is a growing consensus that educational innovations are doomed to fail if the emphasis remains on developing specific skills, without taking into account the teachers' cognitions, including their beliefs, intentions, and attitudes (Trigwell, Prosser, & Taylor, 1994). Many innovations are considered impractical by the teachers concerned because, for instance, they are unrelated to familiar routines (leading to strong feelings of uncertainty and insecurity), do not fit in with their own perceptions of the domain, or conflict with the existing school culture (Brown and McIntyre, 1993; Carlgren and Lindblad, 1991). This does not mean that the knowledge and beliefs of teachers should be the standard, but it certainly means that they must be the starting point for any successful intervention or innovation. To identify their authentic beliefs with respect to the basic ideas behind the innovation, a thorough investigation into the knowledge of the teachers themselves is required.

If the innovation is incompatible with teachers' existing attitudes, resistance to change is likely to occur (Waugh and Punch, 1987). There are a number of recent reviews of largely unsuccessful attempts to implement learner-centered curricula amongst teachers whose background and experience tends towards more traditional teacher-centered methods. In some form of this occurrence has been documented in South Korea (Li, 1998) and Greece (Karavas-Doukas, 1995).

### ***Learner-centeredness***

Recently, in the field of second/foreign language education there has been a shift in focus from the teacher to the learner, from exclusive focus on how to improve teaching to an inclusive concern for how individual learners go through their learning. Very briefly, there are two reasons of this shift: the goals of language learning as well as insights into language and into the process of language learning have changed (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). Learner-centeredness is not a theory about teaching, but rather a theory about learning. Each individual decides what is important and what is relevant to construct a meaningful concept.

Nunan (2000, p.11) emphasizes the importance of learner-centered classrooms and defines learner-centered classrooms as the places where “key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be accessed will be made with reference to the learner” .

In a learner-centered curriculum, information about learners from learners is used to answer when and how to teach what. Nunan (2000) elaborates several stages of negotiating a learner-centered curriculum; making instructional goals clear to learners; allowing learners to create their own goals, encouraging learners to use the second language (L2) outside the classroom; raising awareness of learning processes; helping learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies; encouraging learners to become teachers; encouraging learners to become researchers. The learner-centered curriculum also describes well how to promote learner autonomy as an educational goal at an institutional level.

One important implication of learner-centeredness for instruction is that teachers, rather than delivering already organized and interpreted subject material to students, need to guide students to create their own understandings. They accomplish this by utilizing students’ backgrounds of understanding, cooperative learning, authentic learning problems, and active student engagement in the learning process. Withall (1975, p.261) conceptualized the role of teacher as one of facilitator: “The primary role and purpose of any teacher in any classroom is to help learners learn, inquire, problem-solve, and cope with their own emotional needs and tensions, as well as with the needs of those around them”.

Learner-centered teaching has also been called meaning-making, progressive, constructivist, students-centered, andragogy, holistic, and focused on process as opposed to content (Grubb et al., 1999; Karabell, 1998). It has also been referred to as active learning since students must participate in creating knowledge rather than being passive recipients of content. In addition, the teacher serves as a guide to students rather than the source of all authority and knowledge. In the learner-centered teaching environment, learning becomes primary with the actual content of the course becoming secondary (Cranton, 1998). The teacher is more concerned with the development of higher order intellectual and cognitive skill among students. They focus more on empowering learners and making them more autonomous and self-directed learners (Cranton, 1998).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This case study was conducted at one public and one private primary school in Istanbul. Multiple methods of data collection were used so that the researcher could determine initial stated beliefs and gain a more in depth understanding of what beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge English language teachers hold. Focus groups were held in each school with the teachers of English. The focus group served as a vehicle for holding guided discussions among the teachers working in the English Department of the selected schools. Focus groups both in state and private primary school met once at the beginning of the data collection procedure. Seven teachers at the private primary school six teachers at the public primary schools engaged in focus groups once and this was followed by individual interviews with four volunteer teachers; two teachers at the public primary and two in the private primary school . In addition, during the spring semester the four participant teachers were observed individually in their classrooms ten times along with before- and after-class reflections facilitated by the researcher. Pre- and post-observation reflections were used after the observations. All the interviews were semi-structured in nature.

Data from transcriptions of focus group interactions, teachers’ responses to the interviews, before- and after-class reflections, and field notes from classroom observations and the documents were inductively analyzed. It is a common belief that people are more likely to open up and reveal their true feelings and thoughts when using the language they are comfortable with. Therefore, all the interviews in this research were audio taped and conducted in Turkish, the national language of Turkey. All the audio-taped data were transcribed and translated into English soon after each interview. These transcriptions were first reviewed using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) and Strauss's (1987) constant comparative method to create categories in the domains that were tapped by the interviews. The interviews were first analyzed individually for each teacher.

During the final analysis, the researcher conducted a cross case analysis between the four participating teachers to find “thematic connections within and among the participants and their settings.” (Siedman, 1991, p.102). The cross-case analysis allowed the researcher to draw conclusions and find answers to research questions.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### ***Teachers’ Understanding of “Learner-centeredness”***

The salient themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and individual interviews mainly illustrated that public school teachers and private school teachers approached the concept of learner-centeredness

differently. Even though public school teachers first expressed it as learning by doing, their interpretation of learner-centeredness was simply a description of presentation practice methodology which lacked its production component. They mainly understood learner-centeredness as making the students active by engaging them in grammar focused exercises. In private school teachers focused on the importance of learners in defining their understanding of learner-centeredness. They defined it as learning by doing. The activities they implemented in the classrooms indicated what they understood by learning by doing. They basically understood a learning environment in which the students were active by producing projects, working in groups and by being given chances to speak in the lessons.

Public school teachers' definition of learner-centeredness was similar to the definition of teacher-centeredness in the literature. In the literature, teacher-centered instruction is defined as the activity in which the information is moved or transmitted to and into the learner (Duffy & Cunnigham, 1996). In the foreign language classroom, the teacher has traditionally been seen as the director of classroom exchanges, the authority and transmitter of knowledge doing most of the talking, with learner' speech being limited both in terms of quantity and quality (Long & Porter, 1985). It was obvious that there was a misunderstanding of the concept by the teachers.

The main focus in the private school teachers' definition of learner-centeredness was learners. Their definition of learner-centeredness was along similar lines with Freire (1970) who supports a libertarian form of education, where the learner is the focus and the teachers and learners are partners. The teachers in the private school engaged collaboration among students having the belief that this would facilitate students' learning (Kauchak & Eggen, 1998). They tended to favor more group work than individualized work (Robyler & Edwards, 2000). The students were considered to be active in a learner-centered environment by the teachers as put forward by Tudor (1996).

#### ***Teachers' BAK about their Role in Creating Learner-centeredness***

Teachers in the public school viewed themselves as correctors and guides in creating learner-centeredness. Besides, they believed that they had a role of "presenter" who presents the topics. The roles they assigned themselves are in harmony with their understanding of learner-centeredness. Since they believed that students were active during worksheet practice, their role as a presenter can be considered as a natural outcome of this process. The teachers in the private schools viewed themselves as guides, facilitators, and leaders. They believed that they had to help students in their learning process. According to them learning was a difficult process and their task was to facilitate this difficult process.

The teachers in the public school generally viewed themselves as guides and facilitators but they believed that their most important role was being a "teller" and "presenter" and "corrector" which simply signaled their role as deliverer of content knowledge (Duffy & Cunnigham, 1996; Prawat, 1992, 2000).

The teachers in the private school defined their roles as "facilitator", "guide" and "leader" and "problem solver". This role was supported by (Cohen, 1994). Additionally, new roles for teachers include helpers, facilitators, advisors and guides (Oxford, 1990; Wenden and Rubin, 1987).

The way four teachers defined learner-centeredness and the way they implemented learner-centeredness was consistent, which indicated that teachers' beliefs were reflected in their actions, decisions, and classroom practices (Pajares, 1992; Richardson 1996).

#### ***Teachers' Implementation of their Understanding of Learner-centeredness***

Observation data analysis revealed that the teachers in the public school implemented learner-centeredness the way they defined it. They presented the lesson and the students did the rest in the form of answering questions given in the handouts. They acted mainly as correctors throughout the observations observed. The activities were in the classrooms were organized as whole class activities directed by the teachers. As they mentioned in the interviews they were the providers of knowledge. English was only used during the greetings and while the students were answering the question. The students did not have a chance either to talk English or listen to their teachers talk English.

The data gathered from classroom observations of two teachers in the private school revealed that teachers employed a variety of activities in the classroom to promote students participation into the lesson. Only in the lessons when the teachers had to check students' homework, there was a lack of learner-learner relationship. In these lessons teachers acted as a resource of knowledge. By bringing different language materials to the classrooms, teachers tried to make the lessons enjoyable as much as they could and thus they encouraged the students to discover concepts themselves. The materials the teachers used certainly affected the teachers' implementation of learner-centeredness.

### **Implications**

From the findings of the study, four major implications can be drawn. The first implication is that schools must provide more support to teachers in shifting their classrooms to learner-centered instruction. The second implication for practice is that in-service training programs should be designed on the basis of a needs assessment of teachers. It is important for the ministry to provide opportunities for teachers to participate in formal training and workshops where they would be presented with a framework of instruction based on a learner-centered approach to instruction. Teachers may not have the background to initiate and maintain to choose activities consistent with learner-centered practices. Therefore, there is also a need to articulate clear learner-centered principles for pre- and in-service programs for teacher education.

Fullan (2001) suggests that teachers need more time, training, and on-going support to shift their classroom for an innovation to succeed. The in-service programs and training should provide on-going practices accompanied by support, feedback, and reflection while allowing teachers to make a smooth transition from transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of learner's construction. If the goal of learning reform is to change teachers from teacher-centered to learner-centered teachers, they should have enough chances to be trained and to observe an actual learner-centered class at elementary level in real life situations.

Finally, another major implication of this study is focused on the issue of educational reform. It is clear that there is a gap between the belief systems of many of the teachers in this study and many recent instructional and assessment initiatives. Clearly, these new initiatives involve more than a shift in practices; they also involve the adoption of a fundamentally different paradigmatic belief system. Successful implementation of these new initiatives must give clearer attention to teachers' existing belief systems and understandings.

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## TÜRKÇE ÖZET

### GİRİŞ

Bugün gelişmekte olan pek çok ülkede eğitimde yeniden yapılanmaya gidilmektedir. Gelişmekte olan bir ülke olarak Türkiye'de de eğitimin her kademesinde reformların gerçekleştirilmesi kaçınılmazdır. Özellikle de Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği üyeliği adaylığına bağlı olarak son on yılda ülkede önemli eğitim reformları yapılmıştır. Hükümetin 7. ve 8. Beş Yıllık Kalkınma Planları'nda; 21. yüzyılda Türk toplumunun profili, düşünme, algılayma ve problem çözme yeteneği gelişmiş, bilgiyi yaratıcı bir şekilde kullanabilen, bilgi çağı kimliğine uygun, bilim ve teknoloji üretimine yatkın, kendini tanımaktan ve açıklamaktan korkmayan bireyler şeklinde belirtilmiştir. Ders programlarının yeniden düzenlenmesinde en önemli ilke öğrencilerin kendi öğrenmelerine etkin biçimde katılmalarıdır. Özellikle temel eğitimin iyileştirilmesi Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı'nın en önemli amaçlarından biridir. Bu nedenle öğrenen-odaklılık ilkelerine bağlı olarak ilköğretim derslerinin programları yenilenmiştir. İlköğretim düzeyinde İngilizce öğretiminde de değişiklikler yapılacaktır. İngilizce programında yapılacak yenilikler İngilizce öğretiminde öğrenen-odaklı yaklaşımın kullanılmasını içermektedir. Öğrenen-odaklı eğitim yaklaşımının temel hedefi öğrenciyi merkeze alarak; birey olarak kendisinin ve sistemin ihtiyaç duyduğu değişim sürecini başlatmaktır.

Bu karşılaştırmalı olgu çözümlemesi çalışması İngilizce öğretmenlerinin öğrenen odaklılığı ile ilgili inanç, görüş ve bilgilerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Öğretmen inançları ve yeniliklerle ilgili yapılan araştırmalar öğretmenlerin inançları ve sınıf içi uygulamalarının yeniliklerle uyumlu olduğu takdirde, yeniliklerin başarıyla gerçekleştirileceğini göstermiştir.

### ARAŞTIRMA DESENİ

Bu araştırma nitel veri toplama yöntemlerini ve çözümlemelerini içermektedir. Araştırma 2004-2005 öğretim yılının bahar döneminde İstanbul ilinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışmanın örneklemini bir devlet ilköğretim okulu

ve bir özel ilköğretim okulunda görev yapan İngilizce öğretmenleri oluşturmuştur. Devlet ilköğretim okulunda çalışan 5, özel ilköğretim okulunda çalışan 8 öğretmenle odak kümeleri oluşturulmuş, kendileriyle ortalama bir buçuk saat süren görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bu görüşmeler ses kayıt cihazına kaydedilmiş ve daha sonra çeviri yazıları araştırmacı tarafından yapılmıştır. Bu odak kümelerini 4 gönüllü öğretmenle yapılan kapsamlı görüşmeler ve sınıf içi gözlemleri izlemiştir. Bu gözlemler belge çözümlemesiyle işlenmiş, görüşmeler ve ders-öncesi ve ders-sonrası görüş alımlarından elde edilen veriler tümevarımsal olarak çözümlenmiştir. Görüşmeler sırasında toplanan nitel veriler içerik analizi kullanılarak çözümlenmiştir.

### **SONUÇLAR VE TARTIŞMA**

Odak kümeleri görüşmeleri ve bireysel görüşmelerden elde edilen bulgular devlet ilköğretim okulunda çalışan öğretmenlerle, özel ilköğretim okulunda çalışan öğretmenlerin öğrenen-odaklılığına farklı biçimde yaklaşıtlarını göstermiştir. Her ne kadar hem devlet ve özel okul öğretmenleri öğrenen-odaklılığı yaparak öğrenme olarak tanımlamış olsalar da çalışma ilerledikçe, devlet okulu öğretmenlerinin yaparak öğrenmeden anladıklarının öğrencilerin tümce düzeyinde dilbilgisi-odaklı alıştırmaları yapmaları olduğu anlaşılmıştır. Öğrencilerin ders içi etkinlikleri öğretmenler tarafından hazırlanan çalışma yapıtlarındaki alıştırmalara doğru yanıtlar vermelerini içermektedir. Devlet okulundaki öğretmenlerin öğrenen-odaklı eğitim tanımları öğretmen-odaklı yaklaşım tanımına uymaktadır. Devlet okulunda çalışan her iki öğretmen de öğrenen odaklılığını öğretmenin dersi sunması ve öğrencilerin alıştırmaları yapması biçiminde anlamakta ve uygulamaktadır.

Özel okul öğretmenleri ise öğrenen-odaklı eğitimin tanımında öğrenen üzerinde durmuşlardır. Öğrenen-odaklılığını yaparak, yaşayarak öğrenme olarak tanımlamışlar ve sınıf içi etkinlikleri olarak da proje çalışmaları ve grup çalışmaları gösterilmiştir. Özellikle bir öğretmen öğrencilerin daha çok söz aldıkları ve kendilerini sözlü olarak ifade ettikleri bir sınıf ortamının öğrenen-odaklı olduğunu vurgulamıştır. Bu öğretmene göre öğrenciler sınıf içinde ne kadar çok söz alırsa ders o kadar öğrenen-odaklı olacaktır. Devlet ilköğretim okulunda çalışan öğretmenler öğrenen-odaklılığını yaratmadaki rollerini düzeltici ve rehber olarak tanımlamışlardır. Aynı zamanda konuyu sunan kişidirler. Kendileri için biçtikleri roller yine kendi öğrenen-odaklı eğitim anlayışlarıyla uyumludur. Devlet okulu öğretmenlerinden biri kendini öğrencilerin hatalarını düzelten kişi olarak tanımlamaktadır. Bu öğretmene göre öğrencilerin sürekli olarak hatalarının düzeltilmesi gerekmektedir.

Özel okul öğretmenleri kendilerini rehber, kolaylaştırıcı ve lider olarak görmektedirler. Öğrencilere öğrenme süreci sırasında yardımcı olmaları gerektiğinin üzerinde durmuşlardır. Öğrenme zaten yeterince zor bir süreçtir ve öğretmenin rolü bu süreci öğrenciler açısından mümkün olduğunca kolaylaştırmaktır.