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Language teachers' beliefs about research: A Qualitative analysis of English teachers at tertiary level in Turkey

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Abstract – The effectiveness of engaging in research practices on EFL teachers is an important area of study. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to investigate Turkish English teachers' beliefs regarding the significance of research engagement in their teaching practices. To this end, interviews were conducted with 3 English instructors who have been pursuing their M.A. studies in a state university in Turkey. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting the participants of the current study. Two criteria were adhered in selecting participants. The first one is that the participants must be in the third semester of his or her M.A. study so that he or she can generate satisfactory and relevant data upon their theoretical courses undertaken. Secondly, participants who are actively teaching were selected. Content analysis was conducted in order to analyze the data. The findings indicate that language instructors have clear ideas as to what research is and the value of research. Apart from this, it was also reflected in the data that EFL teachers at tertiary level believe in the effectiveness in research in benefitting their teaching practices, indicating that research engagement can be viewed as a means of professional development.

Keywords – EFL teachers, instructors, content analysis, research engagement, tertiary level

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades or so, the issue of research engagement has attracted considerable attention. Research has been going on both on the theoretical front as well as the practical side, generating a wealth of valuable data. However, further studies are needed in order to find out whether and to what extent language teachers immerse themselves in the research process and what multi-faceted benefits they value most (Bai, 2018). English is extensively taught in Turkey at all levels and therefore has a huge number of L2 learners and teachers. With such big numbers, in order to regulate the process as neatly as possible, it is essential that the link between theory and practice be provided.

The rationale behind focusing on research beliefs is that it is known that beliefs occupy a critical position in human attitudes and actions. According to Vroom (1995), people's beliefs about job motivation are closely related to *Expectancy Theory*. This means that beliefs are the underlying drivers of motivation and this accounts for our choices. To be more specific, when a person believes that the action has value the person will find the performance effective and continue the action. As such, according to Bai (2018), teachers' expected outcomes associated with engaging in research determines whether teachers will conduct the research or not. In a similar vein, Chen et al. (2006) suggested that when teachers perceive the importance of research they tend to have more motivation for research.

Another important point that merits attention is that the social context is also influential in deciding to conduct research along with individuals' cognitions (Stein & Brown, 1997). Universities may determine the desire to sustain the research process on the part of students through their missions, blue prints, and incentives. Related to social context, it can also be put forward that institutional culture may also manifest itself in the form of peer pressure and it may motivate teachers to conduct research (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). Therefore, it is of vital importance to reveal M.A. students' beliefs regarding their research process.

In the area of language teaching, there is a satisfactory level of research on the changes in the classroom or producing theories about one's practice; nevertheless, the number of studies that focus on teachers' or pre-service teachers' beliefs about research are rather scarce (Bai et al., 2012; Borg & Liu, 2013). The existing ones found that for teachers research is quantitative in nature and involves questionnaire, surveys and statistical analysis. Moreover, the participants in these studies do not seem to have firm ideas regarding the benefits of research.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Data collection tool and procedure

In order to collect data within the scope of this qualitative study, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted approximately 35-40 minutes. The consent of the participants was obtained prior to the study and thus ethical issues were eliminated. The questions were determined beforehand, but care was taken to pose as thought-provoking questions as possible. The interviews were conducted in Turkish for the purpose of clarity and recorded. Later, they were translated into English.

B. Participants

Purposeful sampling method was used to select the participants, who are conducting their M.A. in English Language and Literature (n=3), with a focus on language teaching issues. The belief is that selecting participants in accordance to this criterion will reveal background-related patterns in their beliefs.

III. RESULTS

The first question was related to whether the participants had expected to conduct research when they started your career and why. The participants had plans to pursue their postgraduate education and they seem to have linked it to some important issues, which may be taken as a justification of the expectancy theory. That is to say, the participants had some expectations in doing research. Sample answers from the participants are as follows:

1.Did you expect to conduct research when you started your career? Why?

Koray (pseudonym)

Of course, I knew that the education I got at university would not be enough to get a good teaching job and I thought that I should equip myself with the necessary theoretical background in my field. The only way to do this was to have a sound observation power. This is already the most important tool a researcher has together with effective interpretation skill. When I started my career at a high school, I started to experiment my knowledge bit by bit. At that time, when doing this, I had awareness about what I was doing and how I should do it. I must note that this experience helped me develop a lot. An individual who believes in lifelong learning should have a tendency to conduct research continuously.

Esen (pseudonym)

When I started working as an instructor, I planned to apply for an ELT graduate program to learn more about the field. Based on the experience that I had in prep school, I thought I could contribute to field at the end of graduate program with my thesis as they would give me much data in my future research.

Gülce (pseudonym)

When I started my career, I wasn't expecting to conduct research. In fact, I was expecting to be informed about research done by academicians and experts in the field. As a teacher my job would involve making use of research findings. However, I expected to conduct research as a part of my MA studies. I believe this is expected of people studying at university.

2. What were the forms of your research outputs when you started your career and what are they like now? Is there any difference, why?

The second question in the interview inquired what the forms of their research outputs when they started their career were. Is there any difference; if yes or no, why? The answers provided by the participants indicate a progression towards betterment in research skills. They stated that their initial productions were rather primitive. Sample answers are given below:

Esen (pseudonym)

When I started the graduate program, I firstly thought I could focus on the problems that any English teacher might have in the classroom and decided to make a research about it. After that, as the time passed, I realized that it would not make any significant contribution on the field as there had already been a number of studies and nothing changed in a positive way. Therefore, I decided to focus on the solutions rather than the problems in foreign language education in Turkish education system. I thought much importance had to be given to productive skills of learners rather than receptive skills. Therefore, I started to make a research about the effects of speaking skills on students' development.

Gülce (pseudonym)

At the start of my career my research outputs were mostly observation reports and presentations to my colleagues. Towards the end of my MA studies, one article I wrote in collaboration with my instructor was published and another one was presented at a conference and published as well. Now, my research is more thorough and original I think. It also has a wider recognition.

Koray (pseudonym)

In my first years, I mostly focused on observations and case studies. I continuously tried to collect data in all the classes I taught and attempted to arrive at generalizations out of these observations. However, as time passed, the results of my observations tended to produce the same results. It was like a vicious circle. At that moment, I thought that I should start my M.A. studies. I needed something that would enlarge my horizon and provide new insights to me. Having

started my M.A. studies and conducted a number of small-scale studies, I started to conduct more systematic studies.

3. What counts as research according to you?

Another focus of the questions in the semi-structured interview was related to understanding how the participants conceptualize research. This is important because the way you conceptualize something determines how you approach it and how you perform it.

Esen (pseudonym)

I think any kind of qualitative or qualitative analysis of data is counted as a research.

Gülce (pseudonym)

In my opinion, anything handled with a critical view and a new perspective counts as research. It can be an article based on an experiment, a literature review, an observation report and so on.

Koray (pseudonym)

Research, in my opinion, is an endeavor that measures the interaction and development of all individual in the field and provides objective projections regarding the future directions that these phenomena will take.

In this excerpt, the participant accentuates the role of scientific knowledge as providing projections, which is the predictive value of scientific knowledge. Another view provided by Gülce, namely that anything dealt with a critical view and a new perspective in research is important in terms of placing emphasis on critical aspect of scientific knowledge.

4. What value and significance does conducting research have for you?

Esen (pseudonym)

My purpose is to contribute to the ELT field more or less. Maybe my research may shed light on the following studies. Authorities may take the necessary steps to cover the deficiencies that my research will detect and in the end learners can benefit from the results.

Gülce (pseudonym)

My purpose for doing research is to improve the practice of teaching English in my country. As a teacher I occasionally come up against problems and feel frustrated. I aim to contribute to the development of ELT in Turkey.

Koray (pseudonym)

My biggest purpose in conducting research is to make my country more visible on the international arena. As Turkish people, we have knowledge in many areas; nevertheless, we cannot make it public on an international basis. My fundamental purpose is to conduct studies that will provide answers to the problems that have become perennial in my field. I hope to do this by combining my expertise and the accumulated literature on my area of study. I also hope that I will be able to combine my experiences to come up with permanent solutions to the problems pertaining to our language teaching practices in our country.

5. What value and significance does conducting research have for you?

Esen (pseudonym)

I think conducting research shows how idealistic you are as an academician. It is something valuable and important for me as I take a responsibility and my aim is to use the results of my research in a productive way.

Gülce (pseudonym)

In the field of ELT research, it is essential to test methods and hypothesis. This way we gain insights into the process of language acquisition. Research is valuable as it leads to innovation and development.

Koray (pseudonym)

There is no doubt that any study conducted has a value to some extent. However, some studies are conducted without making reference to the already existing literature and are conducted without taking into consideration the stakeholders. In short, by the value of research I understand the extent to which it can reach stakeholders and related practitioners and the extent to which it can provide permanent solutions.

6. Should research be part of English teachers' job or is it an extra pressure? Why?

Esen (pseudonym)

I think research shouldn't be a part of English teachers' job. Conducting a research and being able to teach something is really different. For sure, teachers can be good researchers as they are good observers of their students, but it has to be on voluntary basis. Teachers, especially instructors have already loads of work including paperwork. Therefore, most of them would see it as a burden and their reluctance will affect the research as well.

Gülce (pseudonym)

Research should be a part of English teachers' job as they can observe and interpret the dynamics of a language learning environment better than anyone else. It is not an extra pressure because they are constantly involved in decision-making, evaluating and assessing during classes. They know what works and what doesn't work better than an outsider. It is just not often revealed. Through formal research they can let others learn about their insights.

Koray (pseudonym)

It should definitely be part of teachers' jobs. Teachers must be provided with monetary help in this regard. I don't believe that it is a burden on the shoulders of teachers like most teachers think. Teachers who are not engaged in research are already likely to suffer from burnout in ten years' time. Governmental support must be ensured.

IV. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The present study was undertaken in order to unearth M.A. students' beliefs regarding the definition of research, the value of research, their self-evaluation as to their development, and whether research should be a part of teachers' jobs. Within this context, the first question in the interview focused on whether the participants had expected to conduct research when they started their career and why. The answers provided by the participants indicated that they had plans to pursue their postgraduate education and they seem to have linked it to some important issues.

The second focus of the interview was the self-evaluation of the participants. They were asked to compare their previous studies or output with the current output. The answers provided by the participants indicated a progression towards betterment in research skills. Another focus of the questions in the interview was related to understanding how the participants conceptualize research. This is important because the way you conceptualize something determines how you approach it and how you perform it. The role of scientific knowledge as providing projections is important; that is, the predictive value of scientific knowledge was emphasized by the participants. Another view voiced by the participants was that science and research should provide a critical view and a new perspective.

At this vein, it can be recommended that language teachers who are not graduates of ELT should be provided with the necessary *methodological knowledge* and *language teaching programs (curriculum)* in which they should focus on *what to teach, in what order to teach*, and *how to teach*. They should be given the *opportunity to present papers at conferences* and *publish* these papers as well. To do so, they should be encouraged to *start with small scale research* that will *improve their research abilities* in the field by time. In this way they can only be helped to find solutions to the problems they encounter in their teaching profession (Solution Oriented Approach).

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