

Evaluating a Graduate Program of English Language Teacher Education

İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Yüksek Lisans Programı Değerlendirmesi

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Abstract

This study evaluated the MA-TEFL Program at a foundation university. It focuses on strengths and weaknesses of the program and how much the program satisfies and meets the needs of the graduate studentstending to work as teacher trainers.The data was collected from the students, the professors, the administrators, and the graduates through a survey, interviews, and document analysis of the curriculum, course syllabi and materials. Qualitative data analysis techniques were used to identify the strengths, weaknesses of the program, and the students' needs. This study illuminated new student needs which were not taped into. To meet students' needs better, this program will be modified and proposed to the Council of Higher Education.

Keywords: *English language teaching; course evaluation; program evaluation; teacher education*

Özet

Bu çalışma bir vakıf üniversitesindeki İngilizce Öğretmenliği Yüksek Lisans programını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, programıngüçlüvezayıfyönlerine odaklanarak lisansüstü öğrencilerinin programdan memnun olup olmadıklarını bulmayı hedeflemiştir.Bu çalışmada, öğrenciler, öğretim üyelerive program koordinatörü yer almışlardır. Dönem başında öğrencilere ve öğretim üyelerine programla ilgili düşüncelerini ölçen bir anket uygulanmıştır. Akademik yılın sonunda ise öğrenciler ders değerlendirmesi yapmışlardır. Ayrıca, ders materyalleri, ders izlenceleri, ölçme ve değerlendirmede kullanılan materyaller ve program müfredatı araştırmacılar tarafından incelenmiştir. Nitel araştırma teknikleri kullanılarak veriler analiz edilmiştir. Sonuç olarak, programın güçlü yönlerive geliştirilebilecek yönleri tespit edilmiştir ve öğrencilerin ihtiyaçlarını daha iyi karşılayacak yüksek lisans programının yeniden düzenlenmiş hali YÖK' e sunulacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *İngiliz dili öğretimi; ders değerlendirmeleri; program değerlendirme; öğretmen eğitimi*

Introduction

The importance of systematic evaluation of teacher education programs has been stressed by many researchers. Language-teacher preparation supports the idea of evaluation of programs on a regular basis. Wallace (1991) suggests that teacher education programs need a clear philosophy, and the

program content should reflect that philosophy. He also claims that curriculum should be balanced in terms of received and experiential knowledge, and also suggests that programs should support and contribute to the development of reflective practices. Freeman and Johnson (1998) mention that views of the knowledge-base of foreign-language teachers should be included together with the knowledge of the social context of learning (i.e. classrooms), because learning cannot be fully comprehensible without it. They also state that some programs may place too much emphasis on theoretical and teaching skills, but there should be a balance between them.

This present study aims at evaluating already existing MA-TEFL Program in the Graduate School of Educational Sciences at a foundation university. The study focuses on strengths and weaknesses of the program and how much the program satisfies and meets the needs of the MA-TEFL graduate students who tend to work as teacher trainers either at a K-12 school or a college. In order to evaluate the program, the data was collected from MA TEFL students, and their professors, administrators, and the program graduates through a survey, interviews, and document analysis of the curriculum, course syllabi and materials. It is important to get especially the students' opinions about the program and identify their needs to be considered after the evaluation. Qualitative data analysis techniques were used to identify the strengths, weaknesses of the program, and the students' needs. Overall, this research showed very significant results. In addition to many strengths of the program, this study illuminated new student needs which were not taped into. In order to meet students' needs better and to prepare them for their future careers, a new version of the MA-TEFL program is being designed and will be proposed to the higher administration to be used in the following academic year.

Review of literature

Program design and evaluation studies have mostly focused on identifying students' language needs, feelings and attitudes towards preparatory or undergraduate programs (Baştürkmen & Al-Huneidi, 1996; Chan, 2001; Chia, Johnson, Chian & Olive, 1999; Edwards, 2000; Ekici, 2003; Erozan, 2005; Mutlu, 2004; Örs, 2006; Özkanal, 2009; Sarı, 2003). One of the major sources of problems in teaching programs is the mismatch between the properties of the given instruction and the characteristics, needs and wants of learners.

The design of language teaching programs is concerned with the selection, grading, and presentation of the target language forms via various teaching practices or techniques. There are different approaches and models of program design by developing different frameworks (Baştürkmen & Al-Huneidi, 1996; Chan, 2001; Chia, Johnson, Chian & Olive, 1999; Edwards, 2000; Ekici, 2003; Erozan, 2005; Mutlu, 2004; Örs, 2006; Özkanal, 2009; Sarı, 2003). These models focus on the following steps to be applied during the design of the program:

1. Needs analysis
2. Specifying Goals and Objectives of the Program
3. Development of Tests on the Basis of Program's Goals and Objectives
4. Developing Materials
5. Language Teaching
6. Program Evaluation

According to Lynch (1996, p.2) program evaluation is "the systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgments or decisions." Brown (1995, p.218) describes program evaluation as "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a program and evaluate its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions involved." Henry and Roseberry (1999), for example, evaluated the teaching method and materials used in the writing

course based on the process-genre approach at the University of Brunei Darussalam. In a parallel study, Tarnopolsky (2000) evaluated the process-genre approach in the writing course at the language program in Ukraine. The past and present situations in teaching writing and the reasons for avoiding teaching communicative writing skills in English courses in that country were considered.

There are various studies conducted in Turkey, which evaluated and modified the existing language teaching programs or language courses. For example, Toker (1999) evaluated the Preparatory School Program at Gaziantep University in terms of the students' attitudes. In another study, Sari (2003) investigated the English teaching program at Gülhane Military Medical Faculty and suggested a new program based on the Monitor Model. In another study, Erozan (2005) examined the language improvement courses, Oral Communication Skills I /II, Reading Skills I/II, Writing Skills I/II, Advanced Reading Skills, Advanced Writing Skills, and English Grammar I/II in the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) at Eastern Mediterranean University.

The research conducted by Muşlu (2007) aimed to find out the teachers' view on the writing curriculum in terms of the materials, the process-genre approach, journal writing, portfolios, project work and the writing competition at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages (AUSFL). In a different study, Karataş (2007) evaluated the syllabus of the English II instruction program applied in the Modern Languages Department, Yıldız Teknik University (YTU) School of Foreign Languages by using Stufflebeam's (2001) context, input, process and product (CIPP) model.

As a different example, Yıldız (2004) aimed to investigate the Turkish Language Teaching Program for Foreigners at Minsk State Language University (MSLU) in Belarus. The purpose of the study was to identify the discrepancies between the current status and the desired outcomes of the Turkish program at MSLU. The study also tried to find out the aspects of the Turkish program that should be maintained, strengthened, added or deleted.

In terms of M.A.-TEFL or ELT M.A. program evaluations, there are a few studies conducted in Turkey. One research study done by Kırmızı and Sarıçoban (2013) found out the professional targets of M.A. ELT program students and the reasons influencing them to start with their M.A. ELT studies, and their motives that are influential in department selection. This study is one of the unique ones which specifically investigate the profile of graduate students who conduct their M.A. studies.

Similar to the present study, using Brown's (1995) theoretical framework, Mede (2012) designed and evaluated a Language Preparatory Program at an English medium university. A pre and post-needs analysis questionnaires were given to the student teachers; and semi-structured interviews with instructors regarding the perceptions of the student teachers' language needs were conducted. The findings of the study revealed that teacher education programs need to cover awareness raising training about the important steps of program design and evaluation. Mede's study emphasized there should be collaboration among the program developers, the course instructors and the student teachers in order to increase program success.

In the light of the above mentioned research studies, it could be said that all of the language programs or language teacher education programs should be evaluated on a regular basis based on the needs of the students in these programs. In this respect, the present study would be a significant step to fulfill the gap in the field of ELT program evaluation in Turkey.

Method

This study is a qualitative case study (Creswell, 1998). As the study was conducted in one university setting it is called within case study (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011). It was conducted at an English language education graduate program which started in 2008. The program aims at increasing the language teaching quality in Turkey through supporting and providing any necessary help for the English teachers who have just started teaching or who are experienced teachers. During this graduate program, graduate students study about language teaching approaches, methods and techniques, teacher education issues, practical applications of the theories into the classroom and reflective practices in their teaching and learning. In addition, the graduate students become specialist in either of these fields: teacher education, professional development, language testing, material evaluation and development, use of technology in language teaching, bilingual education, teaching English to young learners, personal development and effective communication skills, and curriculum design in language teaching.

The number of current students in the program is 43; 36 students were graduated so far. There are 3 assistant professors of English Language Teaching and Second Language Acquisition, one assistant professor of English Language Teaching and Curriculum Design, one non-departmental assistant professor of Informational Technologies, and one non-departmental assistant professor of Measurement and Evaluation.

Participants

Among the participants, 4 of them are female instructors. Nineteen graduate students took the initial survey and 15 took the end-of-semester course and instructor evaluation surveys. Eighty percent was female and 20% was male. The graduate students were from different educational backgrounds: 8 of them had ELT B.A. degree; 5 of them had English Literature BA degree- one of them had an MBA and one of them had an M.A. in Educational Technology, 4 of the participants had a Translation BA degree, one had a Business Administration BA degree, and one had an American Culture and Literature BA degree. Average age of the graduate students was 30 (min age was 23 and max age was 46). This program has some international students as well: 2 students from Iran and 3 from Iraq, one from Russia, one from Azerbaijan, one from UK and one from the USA.

The majority of the participants were working at the time of the data collection procedure. Seven of them work at K-12 schools as an English teacher, 4 of them work at preparatory school at a university, 2 of them work at modern language department at a university, 1 of them is the director of translation department at an international government office, and 2 of them work at private English institutions.

Data collection

The researchers formulated two online surveys in order to derive data about the program. At the beginning of the academic year, a survey was developed focusing on student perceptions, aims, demographic data, and ideas about the program, evaluation of the instructors, courses, materials, and assessment techniques. The survey consisted of 15 items some of which were open-ended and 4-point Likert scale. In addition, the instructors also took an online survey to evaluate the program, which had 7 open-ended items. In this survey, the instructors put the courses into order of importance which enabled the following term course arrangements. Towards the end of the fall semester, the researchers also conducted interviews with the graduate students and the program coordinator. The interviews were semi-formal and lasted approximately 20 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. At the end of the academic year, students took course evaluation survey, consisting of 15 items: open-ended questions, 4-point Likert scale.

Results

Analysis of the program evaluation

In order to analyze the surveys and the interviews, content analysis was conducted. With the content analysis, it was aimed to explain the concepts and to come up with the categories. According to Yıldırım & Simsek (2011), via content analysis the researchers first conceptualize the data, then group these concepts into meaningful categories, and finally identify the themes to explain the data. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study data triangulation was applied. The first survey and second survey results were compared and contrasted with the interview data. The results of the initial survey were discussed below.

To begin with, students' aims to apply for the M.A. TEFL Program varied: 74% aim to pursue a Ph.D. degree and they want to study at this university; 50% aim to become more professional and learn theories; 10% want to be able to teach at college level and shift career to teaching; 5% target to become familiar with the latest information in the field and get better salary.

Overall satisfaction levels were identified as: 79% highly satisfied or satisfied with the program; 90% highly satisfied or satisfied with the courses; 87% highly satisfied or satisfied with the instructors; 69% highly satisfied or satisfied with the course materials; 78% highly satisfied or satisfied with the assessment.

The students and the instructors were asked to put the program courses in order according to the importance they attach to each of them. The list by the students is displayed in Table 1. The instructors' list was similar to the students'.

Table 1. The List of the Program Courses According to Their Importance Level

	Total	1st place	2nd place	3rd place
Approaches, Methods and Techniques in ELT I	12	7	3	2
Second Language Acquisition	10	2	4	4
Curriculum Development for ESP	9	2	5	2
Research Methods in Education	3	3		
Cross-Cultural Communication & Language Education	1	1		
Personal Dev and Effective Communication Skills for Teachers	1	1		
Approaches, Methods and Techniques in ELT II	2	1		1
Language Awareness and Analysis	2		2	
ICT in Education	1		1	
TEFL Theory into Practice	2			2
Course and Materials Evaluation and Development in ELT	1			1
TEFL and the Learner	1			1

The study explored students' feelings before they started the program and how they felt at that time. According to the results, 50% of the participants have better or the same positive feeling and 50% of them stated that the program turned out to be very demanding. Some even added that they felt overwhelmed, anxious and insufficient. A sample quotation:

“The environment and classroom atmosphere were quite welcoming and warm which surprised me a lot as before the program I was expecting to be in a colder and more serious atmosphere during my studies. Our instructors played a great role during our orientation period and they tried to keep our motivation high during our studies.”

The difficulties encountered by the students were identified. Almost all students have difficulties in terms of time management, and they think that working full-time makes it hard to manage the balance between their academic and work life. The participants also think that workload of the courses is very demanding and they have difficulties to fulfill them. Students from Iraq and Iran do not want to take course at night because they do not have a job. Four of the participants complained about the group projects. They find it hard to schedule time to study together; therefore, they did not enjoy or manage working in groups successfully. Some participants also found travelling to campus very difficult since they were working full-time till 5 p.m., and then they had to arrive at the campus latest at 7 p.m. In addition, most of the participants found the learning management system of the university insufficient. They did not like the way it works and they complained that finding the information related with the courses sometimes got very confusing. Finally, couple of participants mentioned that in one of the courses they took, 40% on final exam created enormous stress over them. They thought that for the final exam the percentage should not be that high and participation should be more important than attendance.

As for the strengths of the program, participants selected the instructors as the most significant strength of the program. They describe instructors as knowledgeable, humane, welcoming, always ambitious and really willing. Next, the assignments were found to be noteworthy. Other strengths included syllabi, materials, and variety in course subjects. Moreover, participants also mentioned these weaknesses of the program: insufficient resources to guide the students with their tasks and assignments, too many assignments, unnecessary theoretical courses, issues with one non-departmental instructor, photocopied course materials, and the program website.

Although the majority of the students find the course variety sufficient, individual students suggested these courses: introduction to special needs students, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), American Sign Language (ASL), basic counseling techniques, managing expectations of parents, schools, and administration.

Course evaluation survey analysis

The return rate to the course evaluation survey was almost 50% with 15 students voluntarily taking the online survey. Because of the limited number of students per course, the findings displayed here represent the overall answers of the participants rather than concerning a particular instructor or course. On the course evaluation survey item, 60% claimed that they did more work than just what was assigned in the syllabi. 73.3% of the students rated the level of their involvement in the activities of the courses they took as “Enthusiastically”; whereas, 20% were “Somewhat” and 6.6% was “Very involved.” As it is similar with the first survey data, 80% of the students expressed that they gained “A great deal” of practical knowledge and 20% expressed they gained “Some practical knowledge”. The majority of the participants selected “Strongly Agree” while evaluating the course components. The items and percentages of each component are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Course Evaluation

	Agree	Strongly Agree
The course description in the syllabus accurately reflected the content of the course.	20%	80%
Expectations and course objectives were clearly outlined in the syllabus.	26%	73%
Reading assignments were of reasonable length and level.	13%	80%
Exams/Assignments covered important course materials and content.	33%	66%
Assignments were meaningful and useful.	33%	66%
Readings and activities were appropriate to meet the course objectives.	26%	73%
Overall, this course has stimulated my interest in this subject.	20%	80%

Table 3. Evaluation of the Instructors

	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instructor demonstrated knowledge of course materials.	13%	86%
The instructor was prepared for class.	13%	86%
The instructor was available outside of class.	20%	80%
The instructor stimulated interest in the course.	20%	80%
The instructor treated students fairly and impartially.	26%	73%
The instructor was approachable.	20%	80%

Instructor evaluations were highly positive. The overall ratings of the instructors were 66.6% "Excellent" and 33.3% "Good". Ninety three percent indicated that they would like to take another course with their instructor. Instructors' knowledge, preparedness for each class, and other characteristics were rated as in Table 3.

Discussion and Conclusion

Results indicate that the program strengths outweigh the weaknesses. The instructors' being highly qualified and welcoming, practical and research oriented assignments, application of theory into practice are among the mostly mentioned strengths of the program. The students' first impressions of the program and their current views of the program remain positive and the same. Only for few students, the program turned out to be more demanding than they expected. The basic difficulty of the students is related with the external factors: working full-time, not having enough time for class readings and assignments.

Based on the implications of the study, the institution assigned each student a mentor, and they guide the students according to their B.A. degree about which courses to be taken. In addition, ordering of course books will be done in advance because the students want to have original course books. The institution plans to improve the web site of the program especially to clarify the required and elective courses and for Graduation Project course: APA style guidelines, steps to complete the projects will be

added; and the program will have 2 tracks: for ELT graduates and for non-ELT graduates; orientation for the new students at the beginning of each term will be held; at the end of each term, course evaluations will be done, and yearly program evaluation will also be carried out. Moreover, the institution will apply to start an M.A. program with thesis version.

As a conclusion, it has been stated that teacher education programs need to be evaluated on a regular basis in order to increase the quality of the education. The findings of this study show similarities with the other studies conducted in Turkey; for example, Kirmızı and Sarıçoban (2013) came up with a conclusion that the majority of M.A. students are willing to continue their further academic studies – Ph.D., and also those students want to improve their knowledge and skills in the field of language teaching. Another similarity lies in the fact that students' choice of the program highly depends on the quality of the instructors.

As Brown (1995) explicates that the M.A.TEFL or ELT programs need to be evaluated according to the needs of the participants, goals and objectives of these programs specified in the light of these needs, testing and evaluation methods, materials used in the programs and teaching methodologies. The findings of this study can be transferred to similar settings with careful attention. The study is limited in that only voluntary students participated in the study, the same study should be conducted with new coming students to the program in the following years. Therefore, it could be stated that there is a need to conduct more research studies related to the program evaluation of graduate studies in Turkey, especially in the field of ELT, so that the quality of English Language teachers and teaching will improve.

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