Professional development of language teachers in Turkey: building the bridge between pre-service and in-service teacher training

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Abstract

This paper analyses the results of the recent study British Council conducted on tertiary level English language education in Turkey. The report presented the problems and difficulties experienced in English language teaching in Turkish universities focusing on five different contexts. After surveying students, interviewing with teachers and observing classes, the report makes conclusions on the teachers' language proficiency, their qualifications and their methodology. This paper will focus on the results of the report from teacher training perspective, suggesting implications for pre-service and in-service teacher training programs in Turkey.

Keywords: Tertiary level English language teaching; pre-service and in-service teacher training; methodology.

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In November 2015, British Council launched a baseline study focusing on the tertiary level English language education. After visiting 38 universities in 15 cities, surveying 4300 students, and 400 teachers, observing 65 classes and interviewing with 72 teachers and administrators, the report presented the problems and difficulties experienced in English language teaching in Turkish universities. The report also identified the priorities of the universities dividing them into five contexts:

- Internalization context: globalization
- National context: medium of instruction
- Institutional context: language teaching
- Departmental context: English language teaching
- Departmental context: English as medium of instruction (British Council, 2015)

The report presents the problems and challenges faced in the teaching of English language in Turkish higher education by involving the recommendations for each context mentioned above. Being the largest study carried out on Turkish higher education, there is no doubt that the results and the implications of the report will continue to be discussed in various contexts in the country. The aim of this paper is to scrutinize results presented in the report focusing on teachers and their professional development by suggesting implications for pre- and in-service teacher training in Turkey.

When we analyze the results in terms of the profiles of English language teachers working in the higher education level we are pleased to learn that they generally perceive themselves as having a good command of the language they are teaching. Of the teachers surveyed, 92% stated that they perceived themselves as being at the "Bilingual (C2) or Advanced (C1)"level and only 3% were at the "Upper intermediate (B2)". Although we do not know the actual proficiency level of these teachers, having teachers with a perceived language proficiency which compares favorably with international standards is a very pleasant conclusion for Turkish higher education system.

Another cheerful conclusion is related to English teachers' qualifications, where they were identified as "well-qualified", two-thirds of them holding a master's degree in professions which directly related to their degree, such as English language teaching, English language literature and education.

When we review the report to find out how these well-qualified teachers with a very good command of English-as reported by themselves-teach the language, unfortunately, we do not have the same pleasant picture. The observations conclude that these proficient teachers cannot create a teaching environment in which students can interact with each other and with the language. Most of the classroom teaching was identified as including limited student talking time (53%). Students were observed to be passive and not participating in the lessons due to the teachers' dominating the classroom discourse (33%), which makes lessons uninteresting, leading to decrease in intrinsic motivation. Teachers were spotted getting answers from individual students and not creating situations for pair and group work facilities. Even worse, the group work activities included in their textbooks were skipped in most of the cases. In only 14% of observed lessons, were teachers seen to be conducting communicative

activities effectively, evident in a clearly noticeable increase in student motivation. Teachers were also observed missing opportunities to integrate speaking with other skills. The report additionally concluded that teachers heavily depend on the textbooks currently in use, and no variety in using other types of materials or activities were identified. Similarly, although most of the classes were well-equipped with technical resources, teachers were detected not going beyond using the materials supplied by the publishers.

In other words, according to the report, the results of our well-qualified, proficient English teachers' teaching methodology is not as satisfying as their personal qualifications as teachers, where they appear to "miss opportunities" for creating a good language learning environment in which students can actively use the target language, including a variety of interaction patterns and various teaching materials; translating into students just passively listening to the teacher for the majority of the time, with a low level of motivation and desire to follow the activities as offered to them in their books.

What are the implications of these results for teacher training? Are we doing something wrong in preparing our teachers for the field? What should we do to help our English teachers before they start working at their jobs and during the whole process? Can our teachers not use what they learn at school in their classes? Is there a gap between theory and practice? Can we build a bridge between pre and in-service teacher training? How can we help our teachers teach English more efficiently? These are some of the important questions teacher trainers, program developers, policy makers need to ask themselves in order to achieve a better place in terms of English language proficiency in the world rankings. As a country spending a great deal of resources and time, Turkey deserves to have better results.

Thereafter, let us have a look at how we prepare our teachers to teach English in the teacher training programs delivered at Education Faculties throughout Turkey to understand if we are not adequately assisting our future teachers to be competent in engaging their students. When we examine the pre-service English teacher training programs, as followed consistently by all the faculties according to the rules of the Turkish Counsel of Higher Education, we see four main types of courses aiming to prepare future teachers; the first two years of four-year undergraduate programs mostly include courses designed to help pre-service teachers to improve their language proficiency. Learners are accepted into the program with a multiple-choice proficiency exam, yet as learners educated in a system which suffers from communicative language teaching, it is the first time that most of these future teachers are undertaking a speaking or a writing course in English. Therefore, the first year of the four-year undergraduate program focuses mainly on language improvement of the prospective teachers which holds the significance of being the models for their own learners in the near future. Then, during the rest of their three year training, pre-service teachers are predominantly provided with courses that aim to improve their skills and knowledge in the areas of methodology, literature and linguistics. By taking various methodology courses, prospective teachers are introduced with the approaches, theories and techniques and the latest trends and developments in teaching each skill in English. Teaching practice during the last year help spre-service teachers build the bridge between theory and practice by putting what they have learned to the test in a real classroom environment at primary or secondary school. A comprehensive synopsis of pre-service teacher education programs shows that these

English teachers are prepared for the job with necessary pedagogical and theoretical knowledge. However, according to the results of the report presented by the British Council, these teachers do not necessarily reflect the pedagogical knowledge and skills they learn at pre- service into their current teaching context. There seems to be a gap between theory and practice. What can we do then? How can we close this gap?

The results presented in this report are actually similar to the results of many studies conducted in countries with eastern culture. Most of them conclude that language classes are still teacher-oriented (Shu, 2014), that teachers miss opportunities to involve students in lessons, and have difficulties in helping them elaborate their contributions (Kecik & Aydın, 2005) and teacher talk still dominates the classroom discourse (Zhang, 2012). On the other hand, in their study Xiaoshiand Xueru (2006) found out that if teachers can create a supportive classroom environment where students feel relaxed, East Asian students are motivated to participate actively in the classroom activities. If teachers can choose topics appealing to students' needs and interests and present them properly with appropriate eye-contact, students are eager to play an active role in class activities. So, as Rebecca Belchamber (2007) claims, "before we can rate our students' communicative competency, we need to judge our own competency in our ability to engage them" (p. 63). Both of these studies conclude that with effective techniques teachers can involve language learners with opportunities to participate more. All these techniques are naturally included in the teacher training curricula, however, teachers seem to fail to use them effectively in their teaching.

Considering the results of research on the effects of seeing good models of teaching (Department of Education & Training, 2005), the first implication of the British Council research can be given to teacher trainers. If we assume that most of the pre-service teachers have not had the experience of learning the foreign language in a communicative approach in their previous learning experience -which seems to be the case according to the analysis done on the collected data from the state schools in Turkey (British Council, 2014)-it is the teacher trainers' job to create the learning environment which candidate teachers can re-create in their own classrooms. For example, if we do not teach speaking by using info-gap activities, role plays or games during the course of our own classes as teacher trainers, how can we expect candidate teachers to go out and use these activities to engage their own students? If we organize our discussions only in "teacher-individual student" format and talk more than our students do, how can we encourage them to be able to involve their own learners in lessons? Or, if we do not guide our pre-service teachers to become autonomous learners, how can they help their own students to be autonomous, how can they lead them tin learning how to learn? Given the present situation, pre-service teachers have a right to believe that all such ideas take place only in the books, not in "reality". If teacher trainers teach as they preach, their trainees are more likely to believe in what they are teaching.

Another implication for more efficient learner involvement can be on the program level. Pre-service teacher education does not distinguish pedagogy for different age groups. While common teaching methodology might apply to all in general, different groups of learners have different characteristics and so more specific training for each group of learners would better address the needs of the learners. By way of an example, in the curriculum, there is a course titled "How to Teach Speaking", but teaching speaking to different age groups obviously

requires different approaches. Pre-service teacher education curriculum has a separate course only for "Teaching English to Young learners", but teachers who are going to teach university level students will require additional preparation focusing on the characteristics of young adults, such as what motivates them, what distracts their attention, etc. Considering the fact that most of these teachers are young adults themselves, it is likely to expect novice teachers to experience problems in managing a group of people with a very close age range to their own in any classroom situation.

What is common for all learners with any given level of proficiency is that at any age, the iris the need for fun. If they do not feel interested in the learning process, if there is no variety, no surprise, no curiosity, and no relevance, students will inevitably feel bored and frustrated, and eventually lose all their motivation. During a recent visit to a middle school Obama argued that "current education policies have taken the joy out of teaching and learning" (2015). Obama also admitted that "unnecessary testing" is "consuming too much instructional time" and creating "undue stress for educators and students." Language learning is a very enjoyable journey. But for the sake of "teaching learners", we bombard students with a huge amount of information. We want our English learners to be able to "fill-in all the blanks", but in doing so, we miss the most important element of education. Therefore, teachers teaching at all levels should be reminded that if there is no joy, there is no learning. The teachers we remember always, and those who influence our lives the most, are not the ones who prepare us for exams, our best teachers are the ones who teach us in an enjoyable way, who encourage us to feel achievement, who value us as an individual and who love us. Unfortunately, in our education system we seem to be forgetting to emphasize this very important message for the future teachers by focusing on the details.

In a study we conducted with English teachers working at high schools we asked if Turkish teachers perceive the importance of affective domain as a factor of consideration in their language classes (Aydın, Bayram, Canıdar, Çetin, Ergünay, Özdem, & Tunç, 2009). They said "YES, students' emotions are important and should be dealt with". The second question was if they could address students' emotional needs, or not, and why. The majority stated that they did NOT know how to do it. During their education they were not trained in helping students when they felt anxious, when they had low self-esteem or when they lost their motivation. Most of them stated experiencing problems in addressing their students' emotional states due to various reasons, most notably due to the number of students in the classrooms, and/or the requirement to follow a pre-determined, heavy loaded curriculum, and/or the structure of the current education. But the main reason they stated was that they DID NOT know how to facilitate it.

Pre-service teacher trainers have an important role in the preparation of the teachers of the nation, what is taught and how it is taught shape the approach of future teachers. They have a very challenging job in following discussions, keeping abreast with recent improvements in the world of language teaching and maintaining their knowledge and skill in an up-to-date fashion, all the while providing a good role model to future teachers through the successful relaying of their own teaching methodology.

According to the results of the British Council's report, heavy dependence on textbooks,

and a lack of variety added to the insufficient or incorrect usage of technology, were other problems that were observed in the classes. Technology integration into language teaching is an essential issue which should take a place in teacher training programs. While the variety technology can bring into our teaching both in the classroom and out of the classroom is undeniable, knowing how to use it most efficiently is what is important. Having more professionals with Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) seems necessary in English language teacher training. In English language teaching, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge means having the knowledge of the language, and the knowledge of teaching it using technology in the most efficient way(Koehler & Mishra, 2008).In our country we do not have many experts in the field. We have experts with knowledge of technology, but who simultaneously lack the knowledge of teaching and the knowledge of pedagogy in teaching a language. According to a study conducted by the Turkish Education Association (Türk Eğitim Derneği –TED), TPACK was suggested as one of the qualifications a successful teacher should have in their profession (TED, 2009, pp. xix-xx). Equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills in integrating technology before they start doing their jobs would increase the efficacy of language teaching for all levels of education. As Reinders (2009) states, teachers have a very challenging job of preparing their learners to develop independent skills required for using technology; and as teacher trainers, we need to prepare our teachers for this tough role.

To have better equipped teachers, pre-service teacher education programs might have to undergo a self-evaluation process, asking the questions: "What are they doing?", and, "How are they doing it?". They should also help future teachers adopt the view that learning is a life-long process and that teachers are the learners throughout their lives; the process being a never-ending one, requiring their continued development throughout their professional lives as an indispensable component of their vocation. Then then prompts the questions; "How can we help teachers to continue learning throughout the process?", and,"What is the best way of doing this?", and,"What kind of professional development models should we use?".

There are various forms of professional development models; with seminars, workshops, certificate programs such as CELTA, mentoring, coaching, observations, reflections, teacher study groups, narrative inquiry, team teaching, critical friend groups can be counted among the most common(Johnston, 2009). Research results based on participants' opinions of these professional programs reveal that if the program is not situation-oriented and if the teacher trainers are not familiar with the contexts which the teachers are working at, these programs are not appreciated by teachers (Alan, 2015; Department of Education & Training, 2005). If teachers find nothing of any relevance to their own classrooms and to their own students, they do not take any differentiae as to their Monday classes. Given this, the first item to consider when designing any kind of a training program would involve determining the needs of teachers and designing a curriculum side-by-side with the teachers. Only then can we stop fielding responses such as, "Yes, what you are saying is right in theory, but it does not work in my classes".

Borg (2015) believes that forcing teachers to participate in in-service workshops which are not relevant to their needs is just a waste of time. Some of the characteristics of an

effective professional development program are given as being:

- It should be relevant to the needs of the teachers and their students and should focus on the specific context,
- Teachers should be involved in designing the content and the process of the program,
- Teachers should be given the opportunity of collaborating with internal (their colleagues) and external (mentors) sources,
- Their experience and knowledge should have a value (p. 6).

Among all these professional development forms, one of the most valuable one is "self study" which aims to help teachers to become more aware of themselves; their practices, their own beliefs and attitudes towards teaching, their identity, their strengths and weaknesses (Costa & Kallick, 1993).By working with a critical friend, and by questioning their practices, teachers can learn to see the events from another perspective with a critical eye. Teacher trainers can, under recommendation, act as role models for future teachers by conducting self studies on their own practices and by sharing the process of conducting a self study with their trainees. Collaborative teacher development where teachers help the professional development of each other by investigating their own work in a non-judgmental format and sharing examples of good practice (Johnson, 2009) is strongly suggested as an essential component of any educational setting.

As a conclusion, whatever the form of the program may be, if we want it to be effective, it is essential that the curriculum should be collaboratively designed with the teachers, based on their individual needs, and moreover, should offer plenty of variety. If teachers are not motivated to work on themselves, and if what is taught in their training program does not fit in with their own reality, no amount of training will make a difference (Pham & Renshaw, 2013).As Yıldırım (2011) explains, if the teachers cannot internalize what they learn during their formal education, and cannot perceive professional development as an indispensable component of their jobs, they cannot be expected to teach effectively. He argues that teacher training programs should consider the individual needs, experiences and concerns, supporting future teachers to reach a psychological maturity. In a recent study conducted to find out the Intensive English Program administrators' perceptions about the qualities and qualifications of ELT teachers (Akcan, Aydın, Karaman, Korkmazgil, Özbilgin, Seferoğlu, Selvi, 2015), most administrators agreed that personality characteristics of a candidate is the most important factor they were seeking when choosing a team member. Having self-confidence, being enthusiastic and creative, tolerant, patient, kind, sincere, having sense of humor, empathy, problem solving skills, and openness for professional development were stated as more valuable than having pedagogical knowledge. If we trust the approved fact that teacher quality is the biggest factor affecting academic growth of students (Darling-Hammond, 2000), we need to be more considerate in designing effective training programs which will serve generations of students.

The quality of the teaching and the teachers at the preparatory schools is one of the best things we have in the Turkish education system; we have a very qualified, enthusiastic, dynamic and professional group of people trying to teach English in a very well-organized and well-coordinated way. However, due to the obvious fact that the majority of preparatory

learners are beginner levels and are expected to learn a quite high level of English in a very limited amount of time, this presents a major obstacle during the implementation of these programs have. The report presented by the British Council might be perceived as a starting point in improving our;

-pre-service teacher education programs, considering all the stakeholders' needs and views- learners, in-service teachers and school administrators;

-in-service professional development programs, in developing more situation-specific, collaborative programs which address the needs of the teachers;

-trainers' training- by way of assisting their own professional development.

If improvement in English language education is desired, the learner should be seen as a whole person and his foreign language education program should be constructed starting from very beginning, when they are first introduced to the target language during the second grade. Each part should be designed to build upon the previous one, otherwise, equipping of our students to adequately tackle 21st century skills and knowledge in a foreign language does not appear to be much of a possibility for Turkey.

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