

90. *Breadth or depth: The perceptions of Turkish ELT academics in terms of academic specialization: A qualitative analysis of challenges and affordances*¹

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Abstract

The constant accumulation of knowledge forces academics to branch out into further sub-domains within a specific scientific area, requiring more specialization. The same is true for English Language Teaching (ELT) departments, especially in Türkiye, since some twenty years ago ELT academics were expected to know all about the process of language teaching ranging from testing to methodology. Türkiye has experienced an explosion of universities with the ‘one university in each province’ initiative. This brought about a huge number of universities and newly-opened ELT departments. Another factor that triggered the present study is the increasing competence of ELT professionals in Türkiye which is reflected in the increasing number of publications in internationally acclaimed platforms including journals or edited books. This expansion calls for an examination of how ELT professionals view specialization. Therefore, in the present study, I report on the eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with ELT professionals with varying degrees of experience in Türkiye on the topic of specialization. The ELT professionals in the study listed *publication / academic output*, *thesis supervision*, and *practical application* as merits of specialization. The ELT professionals stated that collaboration should be increased, and a meticulous needs analysis and planning process should be conducted to ensure specialization. Finally, the ELT professionals stated that we need experts in *testing and evaluation* as well as *language teaching methodology*.

Keywords: Specialization, ELT academics, thesis supervision, post-graduate education in ELT

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Nicelik mi nitelik mi?: Türkiye’de ELT bölümlerinde görev yapan öğretim üyelerinin akademik uzmanlaşma konusundaki görüşleri: Zorluk ve faydaların nitel bir analizi³

Öz

Sürekli bilgi birikimi, akademisyenleri belirli bir bilimsel alan içinde daha fazla uzmanlık gerektiren daha alt alanlara odaklanmaya zorlamaktadır. Aynı şey İngiliz Dili Eğitimi (ELT) bölümleri için de geçerlidir, özellikle Türkiye’de, çünkü yaklaşık yirmi yıl önce ELT akademisyenlerinden ölçme ve değerlendirmeden metodolojiye kadar dil öğretimi süreci hakkında her şeyi bilmeleri bekleniyordu. Türkiye, 'Her ile bir üniversite' girişimiyle üniversite patlaması yaşadı. Bu da çok sayıda üniversitenin ve yeni açılan ELT bölümünün ortaya çıkmasına neden oldu. Bu çalışmayı tetikleyen bir diğer faktör de Türkiye’deki ELT hocalarının artan yetkinliğidir ki bu dergiler veya editörlü kitaplar da dahil olmak üzere uluslararası kabul görmüş platformlarda artan yayın sayısından da bellidir. Bu genişleme, ELT hocalarının uzmanlığa nasıl baktığının incelenmesini gerektirmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmada, Türkiye’de farklı derecelerde deneyime sahip ELT hocalarının uzmanlaşma konusunda yapmış olduğu on bir yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeyi aktarmaktayım. Araştırmadaki ELT hocaları, uzmanlık göstergeleri olarak yayın/akademik üretim, tez denetimini ve teorinin pratiğe dönüştürülmesini uzmanlığın önemli bileşenleri olarak belirlemiştir. ELT hocaları, iş birliklerinin artırılması gerektiğini, uzmanlaşmanın sağlanması için titiz bir ihtiyaç analizi ve planlama sürecinin yapılması gerektiğini belirtmektedirler. Son olarak ELT hocaları, dil öğretim metodolojisinin yanı sıra ölçme ve değerlendirme konusunda da uzmanlara ihtiyacımız olduğunu belirtmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Uzmanlaşma, ELT öğretim üyeleri, tez yönetimi, ELT alanında lisansüstü eğitim

1. Introduction

The incessant accumulation of knowledge forces academics to branch out into sub-domains within a specific scientific area, requiring more specialization. In a sense, “the more science progresses, the more it fragments itself” (De Benedetto & Luchetti, 2023). Another factor that leads to specialization is the policy and mission changes in higher education institutions (Findlow, 2012). Over the last decades, higher education institutions have become more varied. The case with ELT researchers or academics poses the same situation given that, compared to some two or three decades ago, today we have a huge amount of accumulated knowledge, forcing experts to the limits of the profession. Some 20 or 30 years ago, an ELT academic was expected to know all the discipline-specific knowledge. However, this is not

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possible today upon the explosion of accumulated knowledge, which is clear from the huge number of journals and articles published each year.

Specialization assumes critical significance because ELT is a multifaceted and multidisciplinary area in which experts may work on topics like teacher education, language teaching policies, European Council’s language teaching policies, the teaching and learning of language skills, the psychology of language learning and teaching, to name a few.

There are several motivations for the present study. First, the ELT community in Türkiye has experienced a boom over the recent years not only in the number of academics but also the academic production. The number of SSCI-indexed publications has experienced a sharp surge thanks to increased communication and interaction facilities. While the ELT community was relatively more self-enclosed in Türkiye, today we have a more international ELT community with more interaction with academics from other places. Second, the rapid production of knowledge requires academics to become more specialized. Third, no such study has focused on ELT academics in Türkiye.

A continuous process of specialization is a pre-requisite for scientific development to take place (De Benedetto & Luchetti, 2023). Similarly, Kuhn suggests that scientific development is conflated with further splitting off disciplines. To take a long quotation, Kuhn (1990) stated the following in that regard:

After a revolution there are usually (perhaps always) more cognitive specialties or fields of knowledge than there were before. Either a new branch has split off from the parent trunk, as scientific specialties have repeatedly split off in the past from philosophy and from medicine. Or else a new specialty has been born at an area of apparent overlap between two preexisting specialties, as occurred, for example, in the cases of physical chemistry and molecular biology. (...) (Kuhn, 1990, p. 98).

From a broader perspective, Kuhn likens scientific specialization to biological specialization, famously known as the speciation analogy. Using the similarity between biological speciation and scientific specialization, Kuhn (1990) suggests that more specialization implies more knowledge accumulation in disciplines.

The issue of specialization requires effective planning based on the expectations and needs of the department and the country as well. It requires a paramount re-organization of professionals to suit the expectations. It affects a wide range of issues including which courses to teach and how to supervise students at post-graduate level.

Increasing diversification of universities and increasing specialization demands could lead to excellence of research at not only personal but also national plane (Tran, Burns, & Ollerhead, 2017). To be more particular, regarding teacher educators, Van Der Klink et al. (2017, p. 163) suggested that “[t]here is a growing recognition that teacher educators can only continue to act as professionals if they are engaged in further professional development throughout their entire career”

The term ‘specialization’ could be viewed alongside ‘professionalization’. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) view professionalism as being fully capable of conducting a profession. A university teacher is to have a remarkable perspective of what it means to be teaching. Fernandez (2013, p. 348) believes that professionalization is closely related to identity development, development of teaching and testing capabilities. Dengerink et al.’s (2015) comprehensive definition is worth citing here. They define teacher educator as

Higher education academic staff with a responsibility for teacher education, research or subject studies and didactics, as well as teaching practice supervisors, school mentors, induction tutors and supporters of induction networks, and also those in charge of teachers' continuous professional development. (p.79)

Hence, in the present study, specialization, as part of professionalization, is viewed as becoming immersed in research areas in a recognizable way with sufficient expertise to conduct courses or research and provide effective supervision for post-graduate students.

Although there are studies on academics, most of them focus on aspects other than specialization including academic motivation (Van Der Klink et al., 2017), learning preferences of teacher educators (Dengerink et al., 2015), views on their professional development (Maaranen et al., 2018), identity formation of teacher educators (Hökkä et al., 2017), or the professional roles of teacher educators (Meeus et al., 2018), or competencies of teacher educators (Koster et al., 2005). Nevertheless, there is relatively little research on ELT academics' specialization preferences.

2. The structure of ELT departments in Türkiye

The number of universities in Türkiye exploded over the last fifteen years, with the policy of 'one university in each province', the number reaching 206 (129 state and 77 private) in the year 2023. The tremendous increase in the number of universities triggered debates on specialization and in 2022 Turkish Council of Higher Education decreed 23 universities as 'research-based universities' within the context of eleventh Development Plan. We are yet to see the outcomes of this initiative. The point is that increasing number of universities add to the discussion of specialization and hence the views of the professionals should be investigated. Currently, around 120 universities (64 state and 56 foundation) embody ELT departments. The background of teaching staff consists of academics who major in linguistics, English or American literature, and ELT pedagogy. This is quite normal considering the distribution of courses. The general tendency is that the number of linguistics or literature background professionals is fewer than professionals with ELT background.

Today, the composition of ELT departments is multifarious, including professors who are consciously marching towards effective specialization, professors who are always in between, and professors who have not been able to locate themselves in the profession. This is a double-edged sword. Today's veteran professors completed their Ph.D during 1980s or 1990s, when the ELT profession did not have many professionals and when the composition of ELT department mainly depended on literature-based professors. Hence, the veteran group could be said to have found their own way without much guidance. The new generation of ELT professionals are more self-conscious thanks to increasing professionalization through which they can enjoy more guidance and thanks to increased opportunities for international collaboration. Therefore, we can say that the ELT landscape is going through a transformation today. Hence, the present study aims to explore how ELT academics in Türkiye view the issue of academic specialization. The following questions were formulated to this end.

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are ELT academics perceptions regarding disciplinary specialization in Türkiye?
2. According to ELT academics, what are the factors that hinder disciplinary ELT professionals' specialization in Türkiye?

3. According to ELT academics, in which areas do we need ELT academics?

4. Is it possible to ensure effective specialization in the Turkish ELT context?

3. Method

3.1. Participants and data collection

The participants of the present study were 10 ELT academics from different parts of Türkiye with varying degrees and years of experience. The participants were selected purposefully. One benchmark in the selection was whether the academic has completed one part of his or her post-graduate study abroad. Hence, the number of academics with post-graduate background abroad is four. The second criterion was to select associate professors and full-fledged professors so that more in-dept data could be obtained. The number of full-fledged professors is eight while the number of associate professors is two. Each interview lasted around 45 – 60 minutes. Further information regarding the participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

	Current degree	Affiliation	Years of experience	M.A.	PhD
P1	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	26 years	Türkiye	Abroad
P2	Prof. Dr.	Abroad	30 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P3	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	27 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P4	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	39 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P5	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	30 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P6	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	27 years	Türkiye	Abroad
P7	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	20 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P8	Prof. Dr.	Türkiye	38 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P9	Assoc. Prof.	Türkiye	20 years	Abroad	Abroad
P10	Assoc. Prof.	Türkiye	13 years	Türkiye	Türkiye
P11	Assoc. Prof.	Abroad	20 years	Türkiye	Abroad

3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted through content analysis. The researcher transcribed and analyzed the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Turkish. The relevant themes and excerpts were extracted. The data was listened and read several times in order to ensure consistency of the themes. Relevant quotations were identified to ensure trustworthiness and better exposition of the themes.

4. Findings

4. 1. Do ELT professionals have expertise areas?

Some professionals in the present study stated that ELT professionals in Türkiye have distinctive expertise areas while others had more fragmentary perspectives. One of the professionals, for example, stated the following:

Judging from the publications of professors, I can see that there are differences between their Ph.D. studies and their subsequent studies. In their PhD, they study writing, but their subsequent publications tend to focus on other language skills as well. (P10)

It could be said that the general tendency was to divide ELT professionals into three groups: (1) Those who could not find their way yet, (2) those in the process of specializing, and (3) those who have distinctive specializations. Not only personal but also institutional factors are at play here. Some universities in Türkiye have distinctive approaches. METU has a linguistic-based composition although it has professors to cater for literature and methodology components. Similarly, Boğaziçi University ELT department is more renowned for its distinctive focus on second language acquisition. Gazi University ELT department has a methodology-based composition. Post-graduate students to be enrolled in these institutions or professors to be recruited in these institutions are supposed to fit into this texture. In addition to this, we also have some professionals who have distinct professional areas. For example, we have experts on curriculum, the teaching of pronunciation, or second language acquisition.

One of the professionals suggested that places like Türkiye or Asian countries where ELT professionals are working hard fail to produce concepts or models. The following quotation is a good example of this: “The western world suggested the term ‘learner autonomy’ and worked hard on it and now they suggested the term ‘teacher autonomy’. This is something good. This is not common in Turkish context.” (P7). A similar observation was made by another professional who stated that:

There are differences between Western contexts and Asian contexts, except for Korea or Japan. I think the development level of countries is a critical determiner here. Developed countries put forward concepts while developing countries take this concept and try to apply it to their contexts. Developed countries tend to be more to the point in determining problems and working on them. (P10)

Retrospectively, some professors commented on the historical development of ELT departments. One of the professors stated that “we [the ELT field] became a study area after the 1980s and we can say that we are enjoying a considerable level of specialization today, albeit in infancy”. Yet, we have some institutional barriers. For example, the Council of Higher Education views ELT professionals as linguists only disregarding the role of psychology, learner-related, or contextual factors.

A highly valuable observation come from one of the professionals who stated that we have two identities, the *researcher identity* in addition to *teacher educator identity*. This further complicates the matter. Conducting effective research, although a pre-requisite for the teacher educator identity, may not always guarantee success in the teaching dimension. Hence, to satisfy the teacher educator identity, we should be reading extensively and be able to provide a rich experience to our students, who are prospective teachers. In that regard, one of the ELT professionals stated that “I have doubts as to sticking to only one area of study and leave out others. To cater for our teacher educator identity, we must be immersing ourselves in several sub-domains.” (P5)

4. 2. *Is specialization a must and why?*

One of the most important questions was whether specialization is a must. Even though most of the professionals agreed on the importance of specialization, their ideas varied to some extent. While some of the professionals stressed the role of specializing on only one sub-domain, others suggested that having several areas of expertise is possible, or even imperative, in ELT mostly due to the multidisciplinary nature of ELT. Of the ten professors, seven stated that specialization is a must and the remaining three professionals stated that it is a must, but a multidisciplinary perspective is also needed. One of the professors stated that scientific development is not possible without specialization and the starting point for specialization is the Ph.D. process. Stressing the role of specialization, one of the professors stated that “It is good to be expansive, but going in-depth is much more important” (P6). Other remarks from the professors are as follows:

There should definitely be specialization. Take, for example, the area of medicine. There, no expert interferes with one another’s area. (P5)

Specialization is a must. ELT professionals cannot be Swiss military knives. What counts in terms of specialization is not only the quality or quantity of publications, but also the number and the quality of citations. To ensure this, you must become specialized. Experts should not be writing syntax or pragmatics at the same time (P7).

Specialization is a must since we cannot catch up with the speed of knowledge generation. Hence, instead of doing our job superficially, it is better to specialize in one or two sub-domains (P5).

Some professors indicated that it is not always possible to stay in one area throughout one’s career. Instead, professionals should work on several sub-domains that feed each other so that he or she can grow students more efficiently and take part in projects. One of the professionals stated the following:

Owing to the nature of ELT, areas of expertise are inter-related. A professional may not be able to complete all his or her career with one area of expertise only. The learning process should continue, and professionals must be able to open new avenues for themselves (P2).

The main argument brought forward by those who suggested multi-disciplinarity is that when you are severely immersed in only one area you may not be able to see the whole picture. Another point was that as teacher educators, we have a double responsibility, the first being conducting research the second educating teachers. If you are highly immersed in one area, you may not be able to say a lot about the teacher educator identity. One of the professors stated that “Going deeper in one area may leave an ELT professional blind in some other areas. Moreover, being in only one area for over 30 or 40 years may not be productive anymore.” (P2)

Regarding whether ELT professionals should specialize, some mind-opening remarks came from the participants. For example, one of the participants stated the following:

Specialization should be a must, but with a multidisciplinary focus. A professional should be immersed in one aspect of ELT to provide the most help to students and other shareholders. However, an ELT professional should also be multidisciplinary, and this is only possible through a meticulous specialization process. Only this way a professional can see the contributions of other areas to the process. (P10)

This remark assumes critical significance as it speaks to the general structure of ELT departments and nature of ELT in general. ELT, by its very nature, could be seen as internally multidisciplinary, which means that an ELT professional may be functioning in various planes of ELT, but should be an expert in one of them.

The integration of several sub-domains was voiced by several professionals. One of the professors, for example, stated the following:

A professional can create his or her area of expertise. This could be an integrated area of expertise. Having only one area of expertise may undermine the professional. It may not be possible to spend the whole career in one area only. Temporally speaking, some professors manage this simultaneously while others finish one topic and then jump onto another one. (P2)

The term ‘specialization’ may mean different things to professors. For example, while some professors took specialization in terms of the study area, others believed that it referred to further expertise within that specific area. One of the professionals stated the following:

In our initial years, we all teach courses outside of our study area. But later, the courses a professor would like to teach naturally becomes fixed. For me, the specialization process of a professor takes around ten years. During these ten years, the professor adopts or personalizes two or three courses and becomes an expert on them. In my view, specialization should be at course level. Each course should have professionals. For example, one professor should be an expert on Teaching English to Young Learners while another could specialize in Teaching Writing. (P10)

An important view, suggested by one of the professionals, was that a specialist must be highly articulate in his/her area and publications are paramount in determining specialization. One of the professionals stated the following:

You cannot become an expert in all areas. A professional should be immersed in at least two sub-areas which you are almost fully aware of. This can be the teaching of language skills or specialization in terms of methodology. Only this way can a professional become transformative. (P11)

The themes that emerged in the coding process are given in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, *publication / academic output* (f=7) was one of the most frequently mentioned categories followed by *thesis supervision* (f=3), and *practical application* (f=3). Relatively less mentioned themes include *rapid knowledge generation* (f=2), *managing academic thinking* (f=1), *a more manageable knowledge generation process* (f=1), *to overcome your limitations* (f=1), and *self-actualization* (f=1).

Table 2. ELT professionals’ views on the merits of specialization

Theme	f
Publication / academic output	7
Thesis supervision	3
Practical application	3
Rapid knowledge generation	2
Managing academic thought	1
A more manageable knowledge generation process	1
To overcome your limitations	1
Self-actualization	1

4. 2.1. *Publication / academic output*

With effective specialization, experts can identify research gaps more accurately, ask more relevant questions, and hence produce more accurate publications. What is more, as was agreed upon by most of the professionals, it is not possible to publish in high-quality journals without specialization. Specialization also ensures more practicality, a more manageable knowledge generation process,

conducting more efficient research, and managing academic thought. “Specialization allows you to expand your study, overcome your limitations, and identify research gaps more easily.” (P2)

Another line of thought indicated that a lack of specific expertise may lead to mediocre academic output with fragmentary study designs, unprofessional-sounding literature review, and implications. One of the professionals stated the following:

If a professional wants to conduct a study on a particular topic, he or she should work with an expert. From my experience, I can see that everyone is the expert of everything, which is not possible. One barrier in front of ELT professionals in Türkiye is lack of effective teamwork. (P10)

4.2.2. Practical application

If we do not go in-depth, we may not also be able to solve problems in the practice. For example, without an in-depth specialization, an ELT professional cannot catch up with the issue of local testing, which has been favored more over the last years. Only this way can we balance the top-down and bottom-up approaches in language teaching process. (P6). Hence, it can be said that, depending on the remarks from the professionals, through in-depth specialization we can become more bottom-up and approach the methods borrowed from other contexts more critically.

Specialization and problem solving through it assumes significance for practice as well. This has a double aspect. First, when teacher candidates are educated by professors outside their expertise area, they may not be able to get sufficient instruction, and this will be reflected in their future practice. The second aspect is that ELT professors may be more lenient in courses outside their expertise area. Hence, teacher candidates may pass such courses more easily.

4.2.3. Thesis supervision

Most of the professionals indicated the critical role of specialization in thesis supervision. One of the professors stated that “An ELT professional who has something to say in all areas may not be beneficial for post-graduate students” (P7). The ELT professionals also suggested that in cases where post-graduate students want to work on areas outside of the professor’s expertise, he or she should be able to direct the student to another professor. Or, as an alternative, co-advisors could be assigned. But this is not that common in Türkiye. Supervisors frown upon the idea of having co-advisors.

Professors who support the idea of having several areas of expertise stressed the idea that having expertise in several fields enables professionals to integrate all these expertise fields more effectively and accurately. It could be said that multi-disciplinarity could be ensured through expertise in several sub-domains of ELT. Learning is a life-long process and sticking in only one sub-domain may not be enough.

4. 3. Barriers for specialization and suggestions from the professionals

In terms of the barriers for specialization, *heavy workload*, *lack of support*, *the research culture*, or *lack of academic atmosphere* emerged from the interviews (Figure 1). Some answers that stand out include *lack of a research-based culture*, and *socio-cultural composition of ELT departments*. In some departments, ELT professionals suffer from an oppressive atmosphere. Our ELT departments also mostly fail to have a science-based culture. Another factor is that most of the time ELT academics tend to direct their publication efforts or specialization efforts amid meeting the requirements of academic

promotion, which may be a hindering factor. Another macro factor is how the Council of Higher Education (CHE) views ELT academics. One of the professionals in the study stressed the assumption that in ELT field there were not associate professors for a long time and CHE subsumed us under educational sciences and viewed experts in educational sciences superior to use. Finally, the government does not view the teaching profession as a profession *per se*. In most places, pedagogy courses in ELT are given by professors from educational sciences. Another important factor is that some of the well-established ELT researchers have left the country.

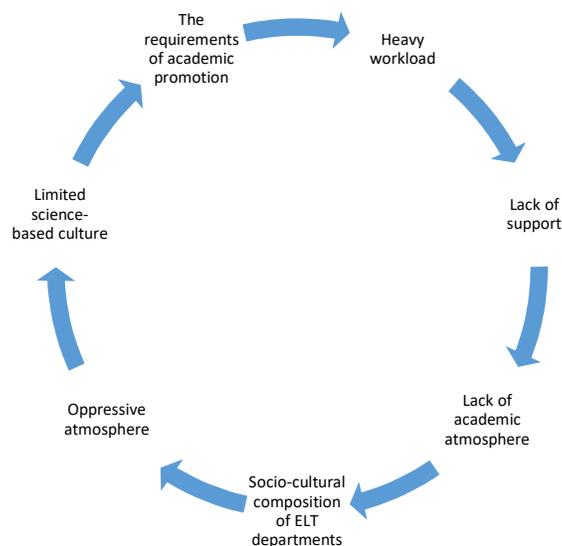


Figure 1. Barriers in specialization of ELT academics

Below (Table 3), I outline the suggestions provided by the participants in the study. The most frequently mentioned suggestion was *institutional support* (f=9), which involves less workload, academic resources, sufficient number of professionals. The following suggestions include *collaboration and joint projects* (f=6), or *needs analysis and planning* (f=6). Regarding institutional supports, one of the professors stated that “Owing to lack of institutional support, specialization from the post-graduate level may not be that possible” (P5). The following suggestions included *research and teaching division* (f=2), *providing a sufficient number of professionals* (f=2), *academic projects* (f=1), *overseas experiences* (f=1), *establishing student networks* (f=1) and *special interest groups* (f=1). In addition, the ELT professionals in the present study also suggested that setting *realistic goals* (f=1), *more methodological guidance* (f=1), *exchange programs both within and outside Türkiye* (f=1), *establishing a research-based culture* (f=1), and *finally including philosophy courses* (f=1). Some of the suggestions provided by the participants stand out. For example, one of the professors suggested that philosophy courses including philosophy of science should be included in post-graduate programs.

Table 3. Professionals’ suggestion on how to ensure specialization

Themes	f
Institutional support	9
Collaboration and joint projects	6
Needs analysis and planning	6

Research and teaching division	2
Academic projects	1
Overseas experience	1
Student networks at post-graduate education	1
Special interest groups	1
Setting realistic goals	1
More methodological guidance	1
Exchange programs	1
Research-intensive periods	1
Philosophy courses	1
University-specific approach	1

4.3.1. Needs analysis and planning

Regarding needs analysis and planning, one of the professors drew attention to recruitment process where professors should be selected based on the needs and expectations of departments. Without this, professors have to lecture or teach courses on which they do not have any expertise, which may have unwanted consequences. First, professors cannot exhibit their full performance. Second, their wellbeing declines due to the assumption that they cannot perform well for the students. Overall productivity declines. A better planning process for students who go abroad for post-graduate education could be conducted and the selection could be more systematic (P4). Another significant remark was that ELT professionals should be able to spare long research-intensive periods, like one year, for effective specialization. One of the professors suggested that exchange programs both within Turkish universities and abroad should be supported.

4.3.2. Better post-graduate education

The role of post-graduate education was also mentioned by professionals in ensuring specialization and giving novice researchers a researcher identity. One of the participants, for example, stated that “the Ph.D. process should be viewed as an occupation. It should be conceptualized as a full-time profession” (P11). Ideally, the whole process of specialization should be based on the doctoral process. The ‘research assistant’ post makes specialization difficult owing to considerable workload. Macro policies are also important. More guidance should be provided on methodology in post-graduate programs.

4.4. In which domains do we need specialization?

The participants were inquired on in which areas ELT researchers are needed (Table 4). As can be understood from Table 4, the professionals in the present study suggested that we need experts on *testing and evaluation* (f=4), *language teaching methodology* (f=4), experts on *language policies* (f=3), followed by *material development* (f=2) and *teacher education* (f=2). These suggesting were followed by *teaching English to young learners* (f=2), *second language acquisition* (f=2), and *linguistics in general* (2). The ELT professionals stated that we need experts in *literature* (f=1), *research techniques* (f=1), and *classroom discourse* (f=1).

Table 4. In which areas are ELT professionals needed?

Themes	f
Testing and evaluation	4
Language teaching methodology	4
Expert on language policies	3
Material development	2
Teacher educator	2
Teaching English to young learners	2
Second language acquisition	2
Linguistics	2
Literature	1
Research techniques	1
Classroom discourse	1

The ELT professionals believed language teachers have hard times preparing tests in addition to not having sufficient competence in that regard. One of the ELT professionals stated that we barely have experts in testing pragmatics or the spoken production. Moreover, we do not have experts in summative and formative assessment. Regarding methodology, the ELT professionals observed that we do not have experts to enlighten us in terms of task-based language teaching or experts that will allow us to branch off ELT programs into language teaching at primary level, language teaching at elementary level, language teaching at high school level, etc. Some of the most striking findings concerned language policy. One of the ELT professionals observed that we do not have professionals who can enlighten us in terms of not only local language policies but also language policies issued by the European Council. It was also observed that our vernacular language teaching policy does not seem very powerful.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate ELT professionals' views on specialization in Turkish context. The main starting point was the university boom experienced in Türkiye over the last 15 years, starting in 2008, and the subsequent explosion of universities. This boom called for a reconsideration of the specialization profiles of professionals given that most departments, including ELT, need professionals from a wide variety of background including linguistics, language teaching methodology, the use of technology in language teaching, literature, or testing and assessment. Viewed from this dimension, the perspectives of professionals assume critical importance. Macro factors embody policy issues as well as institutional issues while micro factors are related to more personal issues. The analysis in the present study provided critical insights into micro and macro factors. Lack of effective planning in recruiting professionals was one of the fundamental problems as observed by the participants, especially in newly-founded universities.

The multidisciplinary nature of ELT poses several challenges as well as affordances, as was manifested through the interviews. The general tendency indicates that ELT professionals should become specialized. Nevertheless, some professionals stated that this should be to cater for the internal multidisciplinary structure of ELT. For example, one of the professors stated that ELT professionals should be immersed in one aspect of ELT to make better meaning of other aspects. Another view was that too much specialization may lead to blindness on the part of the professional.

Do professionals have expertise areas?

The study found that in well-established universities the issue of specialization occurs automatically. Such universities, as was pointed out by most participants, also have peculiar schools of thought or approaches. For example, the case at METU is a good example. METU includes more than 20 professionals in the ELT department and there is almost a reasonable distribution of professionals in terms of linguistics, literature, teaching methodology, or testing components. Hence, they can provide enough specialized professionals for all the courses, and they can distribute post-graduate students based on the expertise area of the professionals. Therefore, METU could be considered as a microcosm including the pre-requisites in terms of the distribution of professionals based on their specialization. Another institution, Boğaziçi University, for example, is renowned for its focus on Second Language Acquisition. Gazi University stands out with its emphasis on methodology of teaching. Overall, these universities could be considered as institutions with a remarkable and distinctive approach.

Is specialization a must and why? Breadth or depth?

Regarding the *breadth vs depth argument*, most professionals believe that specialization is a must. However, their views on it are various and thought-provoking. One line of thought suggests that an academic should be blindly specialize in a specific area while others suggested that specialization should be considered in relation to the multidisciplinary nature of ELT.

Having a well-established specialized professional profile enables a smooth specialization process and offers several benefits. Each professor is allocated courses depending on his or her area of expertise. However, the university boom in Türkiye led to a lack of professionals which forced university administrations to employ professionals without caring for their area of expertise. In Turkish Higher Education system, to open a department you need three professionals and to open post-graduate programs there are some specific requirements. To meet these demands, university administrations, especially in newly-opened universities, care for quantity rather than quality. This is an important macro-factor. This calls for effective planning and policing. Most professionals agreed that specialization is a must, but it should not hinder the professionals from seeing the whole picture. Diversification may contribute to more accurate and more voluminous academic output (Abramo et al., 2017). This point was voiced by some of the participants in the present study. The study also found that when ELT professors decide on their area of expertise early in their careers, they have a more productive academic process. Several ELT professionals stated that they had already decided their study areas early on their careers. Several participants underscored the importance of the Ph.D. process in becoming an expert alongside post-doc. This calls for more guidance for Ph.D. students, which seems relatively fragmentary in Turkish context. Overall, the present study demonstrated that the specialization of ELT professionals involves both macro and micro factors (i.e., Czerniawski 2013; Kosnik et al. 2015).

Thesis supervision is an important concern in the discussion regarding specialization of ELT academics. Ideally speaking, each professor would like to supervise in his or her area of expertise; however, not all ELT departments have enough professors to deal with this. Add to this the multidisciplinary nature of ELT, which may allow post-graduate students to work on a wide range of areas including language learning and teaching psychology, psycholinguistics, teacher education, language development, among many others. Hence, one suggestion could be to assign co-advisors. However, the co-advising mechanism does not seem to be well-developed in Turkish context.

Some professionals commented on the practicum practice. Most of the professionals stated that practicum requires expertise and not all professors should be held responsible for it. They stated that literature-based or linguistic-based professors should not be forced to give practicum courses unless they want otherwise. The practicum component requires a special kind of expertise.

The study found that when professionals lecture outside their area of expertise, they have several undesirable consequences. First, he or she cannot exhibit all his or her academic performance. Second, students may not be able to benefit from the process. Third, this case undermines the professional's well-being, leading to burnout or lack of motivation. The common perspective was that the courses to be taught should fit the professor's educational background as well as the professor's personality and expectations. Professors may not be able to provide the necessary instruction for teacher candidates. Scholars agree that specialization of teacher educators assume significance for teacher candidates professional learning (i.e., McGee and Lawrence, 2009).

A critical point advanced by one of the professors was related to lack of model and concept development on the part of ELT academics in Türkiye. This point could be seen in one of the most important findings of the present study given that model or concept development does not seem to be part of our intentions in the Turkish context. ELT academics should be prompted and work in that direction. This idea could be injected at post-graduate level, especially during the Ph.D. process.

Barriers for specialization and suggestions from the professionals

The barriers mentioned by the ELT professionals include heavy workload *lack of support, lack of academic atmosphere or a research-based culture, socio-cultural composition of ELT departments, oppressive atmosphere, or the requirements of academic promotion*. Academic support is highly relevant for post-graduate students because most of the ELT professionals underlined the role of the doctoral process in specialization. Lack of a research-based culture represents a huge barrier. To overcome this, most postgraduate students should be encouraged to go abroad for postgraduate study. Moreover, postdoctoral study should also be encouraged. It is believed that with more research-based atmosphere, conflicts within the departments will smoothen. Finally, more fine-tuned requirements should be determined for promotional purposes.

One drawback of Turkish post-graduate education, as was observed by the participants, is that it fails to establish researcher identity early on the process. Several reasons could be cited for this. First, post-graduate students cannot obtain effective guidance. Second, professionals are severely pre-occupied with satisfying the academic requirements, which may hinder or delay the development of researcher identity. Third, the desire to find and publish on interesting topics could also be a hindering factor in the slow or ambivalent identity development of professionals. Yet another reason could be limited collaboration, not only with professionals in Türkiye, but with ones abroad. The participants in the present study commonly suggested that these problems could be overcome through effective planning.

Diachronically speaking, one of the ELT professionals observed that the lack of specialization could be attributed to the structure of ELT departments some thirty years ago. Back then, the structure was different, and most ELT professors had literature background. Some of today's professors completed their Ph.Ds at that time. Those were also some tumultuous times due to the 1980 *coup d'état* which Türkiye experienced. Hence, it was not possible to talk about any kind of specialization during the 1980s and 1990s. However, over the last 10-15 years, the ELT landscape has changed gradually giving way to

a more nuanced and self-conscious profile in terms of post-graduate students. The ELT landscape is going through a transformation nowadays, marching towards effective specialization.

Another important barrier to fragmentary specialization in the Turkish context is lack of cooperation and the desire to do everything. Some twenty or thirty years ago, scientific insights regarding the language learning process were limited and focused only on a narrow scope of things. We mostly focused on structural analysis of language learning process. We did not have much talk on psychology, curriculum development; nor did we have the methodological variety we enjoy today. Mainly, we were under the influence of positivistic approaches to ELT research, and there was not much to know. However, today, even methodological sub-domains could be areas of specialization. A professional can specialize in qualitative research. A lot of ELT researchers, within their areas of expertise, conduct research only in the qualitative domain. This was not possible thirty years ago.

One of the critical suggestions was that the ELT professionals should have a long research-intensive period without teaching. Another suggestion underscored by the professionals is the role of collaboration in ensuring specialization. Abramo, D’Angelo and Di Costa (2018) suggest that there is a close relationship between specialization and academic collaboration.

Regarding in which domains or sub-domains we need specialized experts, the ELT professional brought forward testing and evaluation, language teaching methodology, and language teaching policies. The main reasoning in terms of testing was that our teachers fail to prepare tests. Regarding language teaching methodology, the ELT professionals stated that we have some issues with task-based teaching or content integrated language teaching. One striking finding was that we do not have experts in terms of language policies. Some of the reasons offered by the ELT professionals include having been closed to the international community. This, however, has been overcome recently thanks to the facilities offered by technological developments. Another point is that the term *sustainability* is not one of our pursuits. Finally, our teachers do not follow language teaching literature. Such problems could be surmounted through effective interaction and joint projects.

Implications of the study

Depending on the findings of the study, several implications could be drawn. First, the study underscored the role of collaboration. Hence, more collaborative joint projects could be planned to increase the interaction between post-graduate students as well as the ELT academics. Second, a careful planning should be conducted to identify the needs in micro and macro level in the Turkish context. This because in some ELT departments there are professionals with the same expertise area. Third, the study found that specialization is critical for academic output. Therefore, ELT academics should be aware of this, and post-graduate students should be provided sufficient guidance in that regard. Fourth, the study underlined the role of specialization in thesis supervision. Hence, post-graduate students should be able to study with professors who have expertise in their thesis topics.

Limitations

Several limitations could be mentioned in the present study. First, the present study mainly collected the data from full-fledged professors or associate professors. Future research could also check on early career researchers for their views on specialization. The second limitation is that the present study relied

on semi-structured interviews for data collection. Future studies could consider more data collection methods to get richer data.

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