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TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS: SOME CHALLENGES FACED BY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract: Teaching and learning a foreign language at a young age is becoming more and more common in the world, which creates a great demand for specialized language teachers, since teaching to young learners requires special skill, competence and motivation. Each country and institution is taking precautions in terms of training teachers who will be able to efficiently serve young learners. As part of their training in faculties of education, all pre-service teachers of English in Turkey are provided with one, sometimes two courses on Teaching English to Young Learners, yet do not always have the opportunity to observe real young learner classrooms until their final year or graduation. The general aim of this study was to explore the extent to which pre-service EFL teachers in their third year were influenced by observations in young learner classrooms. The following research questions were asked: (1) to what extent is pre-service teachers' willingness to teach English to young learners influenced by their experiences in schools? and (2) how is their perceived readiness and competence shaped by this experience? Data was collected from 110 junior level students enrolled in the ELT Department of a state university in Turkey. Open-ended questionnaire items administered both at the beginning and at the end of the semester, and reflective essays were the primary sources of data. The quantitative data was analyzed by applying descriptive statistics while the qualitative data was analyzed by using a coding procedure, in order to discover patterns and establish themes. Findings reflect the pre-service teachers' perceived strengths and weaknesses in relation to teaching English to young learners, and how they were affected by the course that they took and the young learner classes that they participated in. Implications and recommendations for teacher-education programs as well as further research is shared.

Keywords: ELT, young learners, teacher education

Introduction

Teaching English to Young Learners

Teaching and learning a foreign language at a young age is becoming more and more common in the world (Nikolov & Curtain, 2000; Haznedar & Uysal, 2010; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Enever, 2011). As is the case with many countries, students start foreign language education at a young age in Turkey. With a law that was passed in 1997, English became obligatory in primary state school grades 4 and up. The law was renewed in 2005 to cover grades 2 and up (Kırkgöz, 2010).

Based on these changes, students in Turkish state primary schools receive 2 to 4 hours of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction per week with more hours in private schools. A great demand for specialized language teachers trained in teaching children thus arose, since teaching English to young learners requires special skill, a combination of multiple competences and a high level of motivation on the side of teachers (Schulman, 1987; Richards, 1998; Cameron, 2003; Rokita-Jaskow, 2008). To put it more specifically, a young learners' EFL teacher needs to encompass not only the knowledge of the foreign language, but also social, musical and reflective skills, besides general pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of primary education (Cameron, 2003).

Shortly after the first implementation of the law, the 'Teaching English to Young Learners' course was introduced to English language teacher (ELT) training programs, yet ... A major problem that is faced from the

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planning of the law until this day is the lack of appropriate training and lack of qualified teachers (Kırkgöz, 2010; Haznedar & Uysal, 2010; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Enever, 2014; Şad, 2015).

In ELT departments throughout Turkey, teacher candidates take over 60 courses and receive a great amount of content, pedagogic and linguistic information. Most of these courses are geared towards teaching EFL to adult learners, except one, 'Teaching English to Young Learners I' and in rare cases the additional 'Teaching English to Young Learners II'. Besides this limitation, prospective EFL teachers do not always have the opportunity to observe real young learner classrooms until their final year or graduation, which creates a big gap between theoretical considerations and the realities of the teaching practice. This problem was also realized and mentioned by my former students in the relevant course, leading to an addition of more practical aspects into the course, such as school visits and young learner classroom observations.

The research purpose of the current study was guided by this need of prospective teachers to go to young learners classes and engage with young learners and their teachers. More specifically, the aim was to investigate the extent to which third-year pre-service EFL teachers' decisions in terms of teaching at the primary level were influenced by observations in young learner classrooms. The following research questions were asked: (1) to what extent is pre-service teachers' willingness to teach English to young learners influenced by their experiences in schools? and (2) how is their perceived readiness and competence shaped by this experience?

Methods

Context

This descriptive study was conducted in the ELT Department of a state university in Turkey. In order to be accepted into a teacher training program in Turkey, one has to take a competitive nation-wide centrally administered placement exam. Upon graduation from the 4-year ELT department of a Faculty of Education, teachers can be employed in primary, secondary and high schools.

As it was stated above, during their training, pre-service teachers receive a course on 'Teaching English to Young Learners I', which typically covers major theories related with children and their classroom implications (e.g., Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives), young learner characteristics, what children know, what they can do, what they need, their attitudes and beliefs, young learners as language learners, how to teach young learners, classroom management, material evaluation, and classroom language use and interaction.

Participants

Participants were 110 junior level (3rd year) students in the ELT Department of a state university in Turkey, being trained as prospective teachers of EFL. Their ages ranged between 20 and 24 years, and 77% were females and 23% were males.

Data Collection

A questionnaire with open-ended items and reflective essays were the primary sources of data for the study. The questionnaire gathered information on pre-service teachers' willingness to teach English at the primary level upon graduation. The reflective essays were assigned to provide data on their experiences during 3-hour observations in young learners' classrooms. Information in relation to participants' decisions to teach young learners were collected from 110 participants at the beginning of the semester and then again at the end of the semester, while the reflective essays, to which 65 participants responded, were written by the prospective teachers at the end of the semester after having done classroom observations. Trainee teachers used symbols or pseudonyms for both versions of the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the questionnaire data, descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages were employed. For the qualitative analysis of reflection papers, a data-driven process of coding was used. The codes were then categorized into themes.

Results and Findings

Results for whether pre-service teachers wanted to teach young learners or not showed that more prospective teachers were willing to teach to young learners (60 pre and 56 post) compared to those who were negative about it (41 pre and 35 post) and a small number of participants were undecided about it (9 pre and post). The participants responded similarly at the beginning and at the end of the semester (see Table 1). In other words, pre-service teachers' willingness to become a young learners' teacher did not change after taking the course and more specifically, after being involved in young learners classrooms.

Table 1. Pre-service teachers' willingness to become a young learners teacher

	Beginning of the semester (Pre)		End of the semester (Post)	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Yes	60	55 %	56	56 %
No	41	37 %	35	35 %
Not sure	9	8 %	9	9 %
Total	110	100 %	100	100 %

However, comparisons of pre- and post-questionnaires revealed changes in the nature and quality of the participants' ideas and reasons for wanting or not wanting to teach at the primary level, if not quantity. The changes suggest that pre-service teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and self-efficacies were influenced by their experiences in the course during the semester. Since it is not the focus of the present paper, a detailed analysis of the participants' reasons and conclusions are reported and discussed elsewhere (Camlibel, 2016).

The reflections of prospective teachers about the observation process were analyzed with the aim of detecting links to 'Teaching English to Young Learners I' course. The analyses revealed 18 different codes (see Table 2), grouped under three major themes, ideas about the observation task/assignment, analyzing teachers and ideas about teaching English to young learners.

Table 2. Pre-service teachers' opinions about young learner classroom observations

Comments (n=65)	%
It was a useful and fruitful experience	60
Critical evaluation of observed teacher's instruction	51
Happy or excited to do the observation assignment	31
It was an eye-opening experience	29
Disliked observed teacher's classroom management	28
Not pleased with the observed class or teacher	28
Lessons gained for future teaching	26
Wants to become a teacher like the one observed	25
Observation and interaction with students changed negative views into positive	22
Realized the importance of the teacher's role in primary education	17
Had prejudices but things went well	15
Appreciated teaching English to young learners	14
Learned about schools	14
Does not want to become a teacher like the one observed	11
Made connections between issues discussed at university and encountered during observation	11
Disappointed by observed teacher's dominant use of L1 and lack of L2 in class	9
Realized the importance of gestures and body language in primary education	8
Realized that patience, good management skills and effort are needed with young learners	6

Theme 1: Ideas about the Observation Task

Most of the comments in the prospective teachers' reflections (40%) were about the observation assignment itself. Participants were happy and excited about it and learned a lot about schools in terms of formalities, T types, class times, locations, and youth groups. Some stated that although they initially had prejudices, things went well.

They also stated that it was a useful and fruitful experience ("*opportunity to see Ss' and T' perspectives*", "*better understood the teaching profession*", "*gained confidence*") even an eye-opening experience ("*mixed emotions*", "*questioned own readiness to teach YLs*", "*realized there's a lot to be learned*").

Comments in relation to this theme also showed that pre-service teachers made connections between issues discussed at university and encountered during observation (*"I saw that everything we learn at the university has a reason."*)

Theme 2: Analyzing Teachers

In their reflective essays, 37% of the participants mentioned the observed teacher and topics related with the teacher, based on and using their Pedagogical Content Knowledge. They most frequently evaluated the teacher's teaching or lesson presentation critically. Some said that they disliked the teacher's classroom management and were not pleased with, even shocked by his/her instructional behaviors. Some of the prospective teachers noted that they were going to use that teacher's strategies or wanted to become a teacher like that in the future, while others said that they did not want to become a teacher like that. Disappointment by the teacher's use of L1 and lack of L2 was another point in the comments.

Theme 3: Ideas about Teaching English to Young Learners

The third theme that arose in the pre-service teachers' reflections was concerned with general ideas about teaching English to young learners (23%). There were points that participants decided to be more careful about in their future teaching, such as student talk time, teacher enthusiasm, teacher self-criticism, humor, positive atmosphere and feedback. For some, observations and interaction with students changed negative views into positive (*"I recognized that I like children"*). Many participants noted an appreciation for teaching English to young learners (*"business-like"*, *"rewards & challenges"*, *"requires responsibility and passion"*). Comments in this category also revealed important realizations about the importance of teacher's role, gestures and body language, patience, and good management.

Conclusion

The study was concerned with the influence of young learner classroom observations on pre-service teachers' willingness and perceived readiness to teach at the primary level. Results show that almost all of the prospective teachers highlighted the benefits and usefulness of supporting the course with real classroom experiences: *"I think we can learn how we can be teachers in classrooms, while we are living in the classroom atmosphere. We learn lots of things in our universities but we can achieve to be a good teacher by seeing a good teacher."*

3rd year prospective teachers of English also made many connections between the relevant university course and the observed elements in schools. They frequently referred to the pedagogical content knowledge base that they gained in the course as they evaluated the observed teachers. The increased level of confidence could be sensed in their evaluations. Moreover, the observation task in young learner classrooms provided teacher candidates with a new level of awareness and decisiveness.

In addition to the various benefits, for some pre-service teachers, the classroom observation experience and interaction with students changed negative views about wanting to teach at the primary level into positive.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, more courses specific to teaching foreign languages to young learners are needed in ELT teacher education programs. In addition, real-life, vicarious and reflective experiences and assignments need to be integrated into the syllabus of the courses related with teaching English to young learners.

In terms of research implications, how various experiences, such as observations in real young learner classrooms or the Practicum shape and/or change prospective teachers' perceptions of their own readiness and willingness needs to be investigated in longitudinal qualitative, data-driven studies.

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