



Pre-service EFL teachers' competencies for teaching young learners

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Abstract

This explanatory study aims to identify certain competencies that teachers need to possess for teaching young and very young learners from the perspective of Turkish pre-service EFL teachers who are conducting their practicum studies within the last year of the teacher training program. In this mixed-method research, a Likert-type 5-point scale, which was developed using the Delphi technique, including 29 terms measuring different competencies and related interview questions, was used to collect data. Turkish pre-service EFL teachers' points of view have been evaluated according to the factors and variables in the scale to reveal whether they feel competent enough to teach English to young learners during their teaching practicum and to what extent they implement their theoretical knowledge into classes. Interview questions were addressed to the two of the participants regarding their choices and results of the quantitative data analysis in the next phase of the study. The results at the end of this explanatory research pointed out that some pre-service teachers may get challenged more while teaching young learners for certain reasons.

Keywords

Pre-service teachers, teacher competency, teaching young learners

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Introduction

Learning and teaching are demanding and challenging processes, requiring consideration of various criteria to achieve learners' goals. For instance, learners must develop an awareness of their individual learning styles and understand how they learn best in various contexts and disciplines, as each student has unique learning preferences. As Dierking (1991) also suggests, learning is a complicated process that requires using not only a single method but also a combination of various models so as to complete the aims of the students. The learning process may be influenced by factors like prior knowledge, environment, educational institutions, interaction quality, available resources, motivation, cognitive abilities, and age (Muller & Louw, 2004). These factors affect all kinds of learning in general, including the field of foreign languages as well.

During the process of learning a foreign language, students of all age groups may periodically experience difficulties due to a variety of factors, including cultural differences and unfamiliar contexts (Setiyadi, 2020). Especially young and very young learners might have difficulty in recognizing something totally unfamiliar to them, as this may be the first time that they encounter a foreign language in their life. In addition to this issue, foreign language teachers encounter specific challenges when instructing young learners in their classrooms (Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022).

There might be lots of different reasons behind this problem that foreign language teachers have in different age groups. For instance, when instructing adult learners or high school students, educators may encounter challenges in fostering motivation for acquiring a new language (Seven, 2020). Especially the students who are late adults might suffer from being unmotivated to learn because they mostly have learnt helplessness. Young and very young learners are generally perceived as being easier to motivate and teach (Fenyvesi, 2020). However, it is challenging to keep them continuously engaged in the activities implemented in the classes since they have pretty short attention span. Also, as Uysal and Yavuz stated (2015), they are quite energetic compared to adults or teenagers; they are active participants and learn by interacting with one another. It is well-recognized by both parents and educators that children possess a very short attention span; they are proficient in imagination and visualization, and they require active engagement to learn effectively (Oktavia et al., 2022). For these reasons, they can be kept engaged in the lessons by means of different activities, especially hands-on experiences and the ones prepared considering the Total Physical Response approach (Khorasgani & Khaneghir, 2017).

Teachers need to recognize their students from different perspectives and be aware of their needs according to age and language levels. However, as mentioned above, there are lots of criteria to be considered when conducting teaching in young learners' classes, such as different learning styles and cognitive development stages. Apart from these, young learners may not develop self-regulation skills and may not control their emotions because they are still learning these step by step, as Moon suggests (2005). Therefore, they need more guidance from their teachers and parents in their learning process. For these reasons, to be able to assist and guide learners more in language learning, teachers should have certain competencies. This topic is a prevalent

research area both in Türkiye and internationally. For instance, according to a study conducted by Copland et al. (2013), EFL teachers may have difficulty in the young learners' classes due to the insufficiency of materials and sources in the Korean context. Also, as Moon (2005) claims, teachers may encounter challenges when teaching young learners since they still develop cognitively and physically. According to Khulel (2021), who conducted a related study in the Indonesian context, teachers perceive that it is difficult to teach them, especially in rural areas, since English is not used daily in the environment where children live. In another study conducted by Berdiyeva (2024), teachers should be knowledgeable about the latest trends, realistic materials, and world issues to create more effective learning environments. However, as demonstrated, the focus is mostly on experienced in-service teachers, with comparatively less attention given to pre-service EFL teachers. In the light of this, in this research, Turkish pre-service EFL teachers' competencies will be explored by identifying to what degree they feel confident enough to teach English to young learners according to their own experiences and perceptions in light of the challenges mentioned.

The research questions that are addressed in this study are as follows;

1. Do the pre-service EFL teachers feel competent enough to teach English to young learners?
2. At which points do the pre-service EFL teachers feel the most and the least competent?
3. Why do pre-service EFL teachers believe that they do not feel competent enough to teach English to young learners?

Literature Review

“In recent decades, teaching and learning English has gained importance not only for adults but also even for very young children” (Tarakçioğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014, p. 67). Characteristics of young learners (7-9) and very young learners (3-6) who are the ones in primary school and kindergarten differ significantly from teenagers, such as high school students, in terms of attention span, learning styles, and the points of views to learn as expected. As children continue to grow both cognitively and physically, their

perspectives and beliefs about languages may evolve correspondingly (Ellis, 2014). They may need more guidance, support, and assistance in learning inside and outside of the classroom, which makes teaching more challenging, especially in crowded classes. For this reason, according to Minalla (2023), teachers should pay close attention to understanding their students from various perspectives, including age, background, diversity, language environment, and cultural influences, in order to effectively address this issue. As stated by Bakhsh (2016, p. 121), “A good teacher of young learners should be aware of all their differences because understanding them can help teachers decide on activities to be used in their teaching processes”. Teachers have a significant impact on young and very young learners' L2 development (Pinter, 2012). According to these, teachers can find the most appropriate materials to implement into their classrooms to enrich learning. They should consider young learners' characteristics, such as their high energy levels and short attention spans (Kimsesiz & Konca, 2023). In this context, employing Total Physical Response (TPR) methods, which incorporate games, songs, and physical activities, can assist teachers in maintaining higher levels of student engagement (Astri et al., 2023).

The challenges of teaching English to young learners can be examined in different sections since these challenges result from certain sub-categories such as insufficient technological tools, budget problems of the educational institutions, lack of equipment and ready-made materials in the schools, narrow / too crowded classrooms and so on (Copland, et al. 2013). Apart from these, difficulties in assessing young learners, the complexity of language learning, and the lack of teacher and student motivation may affect the process. “They easily get bored, losing interest after a short period of time,” as Hashemi and Azizinezhad noted (2011, p. 2084). For these reasons, educators may require a greater variety of classroom activities to capture students' interest and prevent frequent distractions. (Putri & Nurjati, 2023). In addition to this, teachers need to have certain teacher competencies such as self-confidence, reflection, managing, and so on. Also, they need to have a good command of English, as Gurton (2013) also noted, since children are very good at imitating, and they may imitate a mistaken use of language easily.

Teachers' competencies can be classified in various ways, including management skills, language proficiency, communication abilities, and more (Tran & Hua, 2023). Teachers could improve themselves in these areas as they gain more experience in teaching different age groups in certain educational settings. They need to conduct their studies in real-classroom environments so that they could recognize the diversity issue in real life. Therefore, it is compulsory for pre-service teachers in the faculty of education to take "teaching practicum courses" in their last year of the teacher training program so that they can encounter actual classrooms since the knowledge, in theory, is not going to be enough to have the competencies mentioned above, as K m r (2010) also suggested. Applying theoretical knowledge into practice gains more importance nowadays; thanks to this, 21st-century skills are also being added to the curriculum of teacher training programs accordingly. If pre-service teachers are not provided with more practical opportunities and skill-based teaching, they may not feel competent enough to teach especially to the young learners since it is more challenging and requires more efficacy.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This research is designed as a mixed-method explanatory one, including a quantitative and a qualitative part consecutively. By means of an explanatory design, it is possible to elaborate more detailed information from the participants. As stated by Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2018), the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design involves initially collecting quantitative data, which is then further elaborated through subsequent qualitative techniques. In this mixed-method research design, the participants are chosen randomly among the fourth-grade students of the "English Language Teaching" department in a state university. The number of participants is 31. Their age range is between 21 and 28. The number of female participants is 19, whereas the number of male participants is 12. The research has been conducted at the faculty of education with senior students who are also called as pre-service teachers. The participants have at least one semester of teaching practicum practice, which means they all have basic teaching experience. In T rkiye, senior students must pass the teaching practicum course at the

education faculty by conducting their studies mostly in state schools in real-world classrooms. They are required to teach certain subjects according to the curriculum and assist students in practicing what they learned through engaging activities such as mini-drama, instructional games, and so on.

Research Design In this research, a mixed-method explanatory study was applied, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods to fully understand the research problem. This method involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, then following up with qualitative data to explain the initial findings (Birgili & Demir, 2022). Mixed-methods research is becoming more popular in social sciences and education for addressing complex questions effectively, especially when understanding the context is essential. Explanatory studies offer deeper insights into research topics that might not be gained by analyzing and evaluating data separately (Bowen et al., 2017). The explanatory sequential design is not just about deciding the order and type of data to collect; it also involves figuring out how to process and present the data, using various techniques that often come with challenges (Toyon, 2021).

Instruments

In conducting this research, a quantitative data collection tool, which is a Likert-type 5-point scale developed by Uztosun (2018) employing the Delphi technique, including 29 terms measuring different competencies, has been used in order to measure to what extent pre-service EFL teachers feel competent in teaching English to young learners and in which categories they feel the most confident. The reliability score of the related items was calculated as .96. After that, semi-structured interview questions regarding the reasons why they did not feel competent enough were asked to the 2 of the participants who volunteered to give more detailed information. These interview questions were prepared based on the answers chosen mostly during the quantitative part of the study. These two participants were chosen randomly.

Procedures

This research has been conducted in three phases; the first phase includes the data collection via a Likert-type 5-point scale consisting of 29 questions under one category which is “competency”. Related questions in the scale measure the teacher competencies under one category, that is, the competencies. Data was collected

voluntarily from senior students of the English Language Teaching department via an online questionnaire. Ethical considerations are valued in this study, and the participants in the Google Forms online program have signed consent forms. The second phase includes the quantitative analysis of data by SPSS software program. In the related program, firstly, the age and gender factors were analyzed to see how many participants were male or female, and then, items in the scale were evaluated accordingly by means of frequency analysis in the descriptive part. The terms in the scale analyzed regarding ascending and descending orders. In the third phase, certain interview questions were addressed to the two of the participants selected employing convenience sampling to underline the reasons why they feel not confident according to the answers they provided in the quantitative part of the study which was conducted first. The answers given by the participants were analyzed with thematic analysis. A qualitative analysis tool, “Atlas.ti,” was used while conducting the thematic analysis. The purpose of using the thematic analysis is to elaborate on what helps pre-service EFL teachers most to improve themselves in that area. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), thematic analysis is a suitable approach for analyzing a dataset to comprehend the recurring themes that reflect experiences, thoughts, or behaviors.

Findings

Do the pre-service EFL teachers feel competent enough to teach English to young learners & At which points do the pre-service EFL teachers feel the most and the least competent?

Table 1.

Descriptive analysis of the teachers' competencies

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Give simple instructions while teaching young learners.	4,77	,497
11. Use games in teaching	4,74	,514
6. Teach English appropriate to language level of students	4,68	,541
24. Differentiate between children who have different developmental features	3,81	1,078
25. To grade or assess your learners' English language work	3,61	1,086

20. Implement methods to teach English to young learners (CLT, Audio-lingual, Total Physical Response, etc.)	3.19	1.302
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****Note:** $N = 31$

According to the findings of this study and in the light of the research questions given, it has been shown that teachers feel most competent in the part of “giving simple instructions” ($M = 4.77$), “using games” ($M = 4.74$) and “teaching English appropriately to the levels of students” ($M = 4.68$) whereas they feel the least competent in the part of “using kinesthetic activities mainly” ($M = 3.19$). They also do not consider themselves as confident enough in the part of “focusing on listening and speaking skills” ($M = 3.61$), in addition to the part of “differentiating between children and having different developmental features” ($M = 3.81$), as shown in the table above. A quantity of reasons can be observed as to why pre-service teachers consider themselves as not confident enough in teaching for their practicum courses in young learners' classrooms.

Why do pre-service EFL teachers believe that they do not feel competent enough to teach English to young learners?

According to the results of the thematic analysis, when the two participants were asked why they did not feel competent enough to differentiate between different developmental stages of children, they stated that they did not know about child psychology in detail. Teachers should have a thorough understanding of child psychology to be aware of cognitive and physical developmental stages, language acquisition processes, the critical period for language learning, and children's perspectives on foreign languages. This knowledge enables educators to tailor their teaching strategies effectively to meet the unique needs of young learners. Teachers should be aware of the factors affecting students' social and emotional learning (Nall, 2020). According to Participant A, “Knowing more about child psychology would help me a lot to shape my lessons according to their cognitive and age levels”. Participant B also stated that it is of importance to have more courses separating young and very young learners due to literacy as well. Also, when it was asked them the reason behind not being able to apply physical activities in the classroom, they noted that the classes are crowded and these sorts of activities cause chaos among students. In line with this study, a research conducted by Oliva, Pozo, and Franco (2020) in the Spain context, it

was also revealed that teacher education programs should be improved initially to complete the gaps.

Discussion

In prior studies, it was also demonstrated that there might be some insufficiencies regarding teacher training programs, and therefore, not every pre-service and in-service teacher feels competent enough to teach English to young learners in real-life classrooms. In the study conducted by Uztosun (2016) in Türkiye, it was concluded that teachers feel least competent in using physical activities and managing class time effectively. Similar results have been revealed in this study as well. Also, the perceptions of teachers from different countries about feeling not competent enough to teach in young learners' classes are revealed in the study conducted by Copland, Garton and Burns (2013) with in-service teachers worldwide. According to the findings of this study, for instance, Colombian teachers also underlined as the least competent in the "helping students with learning disabilities" part, whereas Tanzanian teachers underlined the challenge of being proficient in speaking.

In a study conducted by Mudra (2020), it was elaborated that another reason EFL teachers have difficulty in teaching English especially very young learners is that they are not capable of using and interpreting digital instructional materials both inside and outside of the classroom. In another study conducted by Teng (2020), it was stated that since young learners do not have advanced reading skills, teachers need to use a variety of materials. However, this situation may affect them negatively from time to time because it is a time-consuming process, and teachers feel incompetent. Also, according to the findings of the study conducted by Taghizahed and Yourdshahi (2020), EFL teachers should be more knowledgeable and positive about benefitting from digital instructional technologies regarding young learners' characteristics and features. A wide range of digital tools and materials are available online for children and very young learners, making it essential for teachers to receive more specialized training in this area. As shown in these studies as well, pre- and in-service teachers have similar challenges and perceptions about teaching English to young learners.

Conclusion

In summary, it is a quite well-known fact that teaching a foreign language to young learners is a challenging task that requires lots of energy, activity, creativity, and flexibility among EFL teachers. Therefore, they need to have certain competencies regarding teaching this age group, such as self-confidence, giving simple but clear instructions, repetitions, and using kinesthetic activities mostly. This study measured the degree to which EFL teachers feel competent in teaching young learners. According to the data collected from senior students of the ELT department, it is observed that there might be some problematic issues about feeling competent in certain areas, such as adapting materials, having good English pronunciation skills, being motivated, differentiating children with different personalities, and so on. The underlying causes of these challenges may result from overcrowded classrooms, particularly in state schools, where student numbers are substantial. Given that each student has unique learning styles and personality traits, educators are required to identify and address a diverse range of individual needs within a single classroom. When the classrooms include too many students, teachers have difficulty in using drama, demonstration, or acting out activities in the lessons as well. They have also pointed out that they do not feel competent in designing various practical teaching materials. This may result from insufficiency of the budget in the institutions for educational materials and classes' being too crowded. In some classrooms, there is not even a wide area for students to move and show action for drama and acting out activities.

Besides, participants mostly noted that they have difficulty in understanding child psychology, using mainly kinesthetic activities, differentiating children with different personal developments as cognitively or physically, and focusing on teaching listening and speaking skills according to the mean values of the answers given to the form. There might be a quantity of reasons underlying these problems. For instance, as a reason for the first problem, teachers do not take the course "Child Psychology" compulsorily in teacher training programs. Rather, they take it selectively. Nonetheless, all the pre-service teachers should be knowledgeable about child psychology so that they could also be aware of cognitive/physical developmental stages, language acquisition, critical periods, children's points of view toward foreign languages, and so on. Understanding child psychology is crucial for EFL teachers to create effective and

supportive learning environments. Knowledge of child psychology enables teachers to recognize their students' cognitive and emotional development stages, allowing them to tailor their instructional strategies accordingly. By understanding how children think, learn, and interact, teachers can design lessons that are developmentally appropriate, engaging, and responsible to the needs of young learners. This will also assist them in differentiating students according to their personal development and learning styles. Apart from this, pre-service teachers claimed that they have difficulty in using kinesthetic activities such as drama, acting out and simulations in their lessons. Additionally, limited classroom space can restrict movement, hindering the effective execution of TPR methods. Moreover, the diverse learning needs and varying levels of language proficiency among students can make it difficult for teachers to ensure that all learners benefit equally from TPR activities. This problem may result from insufficient school materials and lessons in teacher training programs. This is because the pre-service teachers have only one course about teaching foreign language to young learners in their four-year training program, which is not enough to teach to this age group.

As a result of this study, the perceptions of pre-service EFL teachers regarding their senses about feeling the most and the least effective in terms of teacher competencies have been revealed. According to the results, pre-service teachers feel themselves most confident in terms of giving simple but clear instructions, using gestures/body language, using effective materials, and benefitting from visuals and games, on the one hand. However, on the other hand, they do not feel competent enough to teach English to young learners in terms of certain parametrizes as mentioned before due to several reasons including teacher training programs and school environments. The terms they feel the least competent in are as follows; applying kinesthetic activities, being motivated enough, being able to differentiate and arrange the classes into each student's needs, and so on. In order for pre-service teachers to improve their teaching, some developments may need to be directed.

Implications

Certain implications can be asserted according to the results of this study in guiding pre-service teachers to feel more competent in teaching English to young learners' groups. For instance, the course of "Child Psychology" can be applied as a compulsory one

rather than selective in the faculty of education so that the pre-service teachers gain more insight and awareness into the conscious and subconscious behaviors of children. Also, more courses about teaching English to young learners can be integrated with the schedule of teacher training programs so that pre-service teachers could learn more about the games and activities to implement into their classes. Apart from these, some sorts of musical lessons, such as guitar courses or violin courses, may be integrated as selective courses into the curriculum of teacher training. In this way, teachers can draw students' interest more in the lessons by playing instruments themselves rather than playing them on the smart board and can sing together with students. Lastly, but most importantly, the teaching practicum part of the education faculty can be expanded to two years rather than one year of teaching experience. Thanks to this regulation, pre-service teachers could have more experience of teaching in real-life classrooms rather than only having theoretical presentations before they start working as teachers in educational institutions. Apart from these, a larger group of samples can be used to obtain more generalizable results for further studies.

Ethics Committee Permission Information

This research study was conducted with the Research Ethics Committee approval of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, dated 28.12.2023, and numbered E-84026528-050.99-2400002338.

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