Learning to Teach English: From Practicum to First Year Teaching

Zuhal Okan

Abstract
Teacher education is currently the subject of much concern in many countries around the world. There is, however, very little recent empirical research on what actually happens in teacher education programmes and in the first year of teaching. The study reported here provides evidence in relation to student teachers' experiences during their practicum. It tracks them as they work to gain a wider view of education and professionalism. The data for this phase of the study come from a diary study in which 33 student teachers were asked to reflect on their teaching practice. The second phase of the study has followed 10 of these newly qualified language teachers into their first year of teaching. The purpose is to see how they have developed into language teachers, how they relate what they have learned at the Faculty to real classroom situations. Data are collected from interviews. The analyses of these two sources of data were designed to identify emerging patterns, not to make grand generalizations. However, the findings clearly support the outcomes of other studies, and yield valuable insights into the process of teacher training.

1. Introduction
Student teaching has always been an important part of teacher education programmes. This initial teaching experience is believed to have long-term implications for students' future career as Bailey et al. (1996) cite in their introduction, that "teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints of teaching from their own experiences as students and these imprints are tremendously difficult to shake" (Kennedy 1991, p. 7).

Current research has shown considerable interest in student teachers engaged in their first experience of teaching. Johnson (1996) presents a case study of a student teacher completing a teaching practicum in an MA TESL programme in the United States. She found that the realities of the classroom rarely match pre-service teachers' expectations or images. The teacher in her study lacked the practical knowledge to cope with these realities and tended to maintain the flow of instruction and classroom order rather than focusing on the ways to enhance learning. Almarza's study (1996) also deals with how student teachers' pre-training knowledge interacts with the knowledge they gained in teacher education and how this knowledge is related to practice while participating in a pre-service teacher education programme. She discusses how student teachers modify their pre-training knowledge during teacher education. She concludes, "they teach in a way which does not bear much resemblance to their pre-training knowledge, although this does

not mean that this knowledge does not influence the way they think about their activity" (p.74).

Kwo's (1996) study reports on how student teachers develop in their classroom teaching over their teaching practice period. She identifies some key features that support more comprehensive learning of teaching in school context. Her study also raises important issues about conditions for reflective teaching and their implications for teacher education.

The experiences of teachers in their first year of teaching have also been relatively well covered in the general literature on teaching. Researchers have identified the needs or problems of new teachers such as frustration, anxiety and doubt they feel during the first year of teaching (Olson and Osborne 1991) or their concerns about self-image (Goodman 1987). Zeichner (1983) has found that some of the problems are related to teachers' feeling of inability to fit into a school's sociological system. On the other hand, Hebert and Worthy (2001) argue that first year of teaching is not necessarily a bad one, and report a case study of success. They draw attention to the interplay between personal background, experiences during teacher preparation, and workplace characteristics as factors to impact the success of the first year teaching.

Russell (1988) studies how beginning teachers learn the practical, professional knowledge of teaching. He particularly focuses on the theory-practice relationship from the earliest phases of formal pre-service teacher education programs. He states that experience is significant in learning the 'theory' of teaching. He adds that the first-year teacher has little time to reflect and finds it difficult to shift from the university to the school context. Therefore, he suggests considering the relationship between theory and practice as the alternate phases of a single activity. Calderhead (1988, p. 9) also agrees that "theory is implicit in practice, and the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education is not one of implementation – theory being translated into practice- but a continuously interactive one."

We know less about how newly qualified second or foreign language teachers manage to cope with the complexities of real classrooms and to what extent they make use of the preparation they receive from teacher education programmes. Moran's (1996) study focuses on a case study of a student teacher of Spanish completing a one-year internship. Using the tools of a narrative research, he and the teacher co-construct an account of the experiences and skills that contribute to her learning to be a teacher of Spanish. Richards and Pennington (1998) describe how five graduates of a BA TESL degree coped with their first year of teaching in Hong Kong secondary school classrooms. They found that teachers developed a set of working strategies, which "represented an oversimplification of the teaching context and also meant abandoning some of the principles and practices they had been taught in their teacher education program" (p.173).

One common theme emerging from all the studies reviewed here is that the nature of learning to teach is a complex one. How both student teachers and novice teachers manage these complexities of real classrooms is the concern of this study. Beginning with the views of student teachers and continuing with the views of first-year teachers, the following sections provide excerpts from diaries and interviews, and report participants' statements illustrating their perspectives on becoming a language teacher.

2. Method
2.1. Participants and data collection
In the first phase of the study a total of 60 (only 33 turned in regular diaries) fourth-year Turkish students majoring in English Language Teaching were asked to keep weekly diaries during their teaching practice of twelve weeks about anything related to their teaching experience: emotional reactions to instruction, problems they face in teaching, evaluating their personal weaknesses and strengths, and so on. They were told not to worry about style, grammar, or organization in recording entries and that the goal was to get complete and accurate data while the recollections are still fresh. The students were already familiar with diary keeping from their participation in a project on portfolio assessment during the first year of the programme.

The second phase of the study followed 10 of these 33 students into their first year of teaching. The intention was to see the way they have developed as teachers; the problems they face, to what extent they are able to link what they have learnt at the Faculty to real classroom situations. The data was elicited from interviews. A total of 10 teachers (two telephone interviews) were interviewed in their own schools. The interviews were semi-structured and informal in nature. The questions included issues emerging from diaries kept by the participants during their practice teaching as well as their experiences, difficulties they faced, for instance, in terms of the relationship with the students, or maintaining classroom organisation, etc. The teachers worked in a variety of settings –three in rural, four in suburban schools, and three at universities. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis purposes.

2.2. Data analysis
At the end of the practicum, when all diaries were collected, they were organized chronologically and compiled in separate files for each participant. The data analysis was carried out in a similar fashion as it was in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and involved a continuous process of reading and re-reading the diaries to identify categories and sub-categories in what has been referred to as constant comparative technique. Four broad categories emerged from this first phase of data analysis: initial frustration with practicum and their own teaching experience; links between taught courses and school; the role of mentor; and the role of supervisors.

These categories, with the exclusion of the role of supervisors, informed the design of the semi-structured interview schedule with first year teachers. The interviews were transcribed and analysed. The themes that emerged from practicum were then compared with their thinking at their first year of teaching. If, for example, a dominant theme in the interview data supported a dominant theme in the diary data, this finding, as a pattern grounded in the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967), is retained. Ultimately, the following themes were agreed upon and presented subsequently.

3. Results
3.1 Initial survival concerns both in practicum and first year teaching
As research into novice teachers' concerns suggests, at the initial stages of training, survival described as 'concerns about one's adequacy and survival as a teacher' (Fuller and Bown 1975 as cited in Gray 1998; Mau 1997), appears to take priority over all other concerns. Not surprisingly, in this study, most diary writing in the first weeks of the practicum refers to the problems student teachers had in the areas of maintaining discipline, organization and classroom management. Particularly noticeable was the lack of self-confidence discussed by the majority at the beginning of school experience. For example, one student said, "I felt like a small boy holding his father's hand (referring to his supervisor)." The following extract also exhibits student teachers' tension:

To me all the students look like a bomb ever ready to explode. I feel as if I were in a minefield. Nothing seems to make any difference, neither teachers' screams nor even their threats. If these teachers with so many years of experience cannot handle them, how are we going to do it? (1st week Gamze)

Gamze worked in the school where she completed her practice teaching. It was also the high school she graduated from. During the interview she made it frequently clear that she felt at home in this school and appreciated her colleagues' professional and personal support during her first year of teaching. The only thing she was frustrated about was her inability to keep her pupils quiet or focused for very long at a time. As a student teacher, she had complained in her diaries that she found it hard to get her pupils to behave and she rejected to be strict in the classroom. However, in her first year of teaching, she said she could no longer challenge the pattern of quietening pupils and that she started to yell at them too. Apparently, she was not very pleased about that, but she could not find any other way out of it. That is what she said in the interview:
I know that I was taught to be tolerant and understanding towards our students... you know not hurt their feelings, be kind etc. I really tried but they abuse this kind of behaviour because they are so used to being controlled. If you do not behave like the other teachers do, they do not take you seriously.

Dilek, another participant, had the following to say in her practice teaching:

Managing them is so hard! I seem to be communicating better with the students, though. Still I don't feel very confident because they keep trying us, testing us if we know a particular word or not. God knows what they are going to ask me when I teach! My mentor tries to comfort me and advises me to answer such questions like "How would I know everything, I am not a walking dictionary!" But no use.... (2nd week Dilek)

In her first year of teaching she commented that

When I look back I understand that I have made a big fuss about managing children, you know, controlling them in the class. Now, I feel more relaxed and of course, happier than I was before. It was a real relief to overcome my anxiety every time I walk into the classroom.

Her statements indicated that her perspectives toward teaching and about what she should be doing to manage the classroom had changed. Gamze, in particular, appeared to shift away from her initial beliefs toward perspectives that were consistent with those encouraged by her new school.
Another student teacher comments on her first experience of teaching:

When I walked into the classroom, I felt like I was in a morgue. I simply froze. Twenty kids were looking into my eyes, waiting for me to say something. I was speechless. It was a moment of real panic. I never felt like that before. Never. Then I said to myself "Come to your senses". I somehow started speaking but it took me quite a while to repress my shaking. (4th week Zeynep)

Almost all of the first year teachers including Zeynep mentioned feeling more confident. For the majority, discipline and control were still dominant concerns in their minds. It was in fact one of the very first thing they mentioned during the interviews when asked about how they developed as teachers. It seems that professional development is seen by many as an ability to control students better in the classroom.

3.2 Role of experience
Student teachers seemed to be frustrated with the whole process of teaching experience. In the diaries there were frequent references to feeling of a lack of confidence. One reason put forward by a student teacher was that they did not feel fully in charge of the classes they were supposed to teach. Several of them also commented that they looked forward to teaching their own class making their own decisions in the future.
I wish we could just observe and learn, nothing else... I would rather be appointed as a teacher directly after I graduate without any field experience. I feel, then, I would adapt myself better because now we are not fully in charge of the classes we are supposed to teach. It is a game and everybody, yes, everybody is aware of this fact.

All I know is that this practice teaching will give me nothing but stress and anxiety.
(1ˢᵗ week Sevgi)

When asked if she still holds the same views as a first year teacher, she said the following:

No matter how competent you are in your field, I still believe, experience is essential. Because then, on a trial-and-error basis you find out what works ...see this doesn't, so, you don't do it again.

The following two extracts also hold the same view:

The ability to teach can only be gained through experience. Courses do not prepare you for it.
There is too much you have to find out yourself.

The only way you learn how to become an English language teacher is to be in the classroom. Curriculum courses give you lots of ideas but not how.

This expressed preference for placement in the classroom indicates, according to Calderhead (1988, p. 53), that student teachers value classroom experience in the process of learning to teach. As they are not totally sure what teaching involves, they appear to develop resolutions such as 'You learn from experience' or 'That's the sort of thing you eventually pick up in the classroom.' To Calderhead, such a view of learning "may well discourage student teachers from developing any understanding of the processes of learning to teach."

Berliner (1987) also argues that to see experience as the best teacher one has to recognise two facts: first, some individuals never learn much from their experience, and second there are other factors as important such as possessing rich schemas about certain phenomena. He states that
Learning from experience probably requires the application of what we now call metacognitive skills. These skills include the ability to ask questions of oneself as one is performing some activity; monitoring one's own and other's behaviour in a setting; seeking alternative solution strategies to problems; systematically encoding cues in the environment that provide information about the pace of the activity, sequence of the activity, the adjustments to be made in the activity; and so forth. (p. 61)

The questions that need to be posed then are: how can we enhance the reflective skills that Berliner mentions during pre-service teacher education so that student teachers will

be able to interpret their own experiences of learning to teach? Is it possible to review our understanding of theory-practice relationship in our programmes? Can we reduce the differences between university courses, which are seen as the theoretical component of the programme, and practice teaching as 'practice'?

3.3. Links between taught courses and school

In many teacher education programmes it is assumed that there should be a theoretical component based on the knowledge of subject matter, language teaching methodology, materials etc., and a practical component including opportunity for practice teaching. It follows the idea that students learn the theory of how to teach English in a university classroom, and then put what they have learned into practice in primary or secondary school classrooms. How this theoretical knowledge will be linked to practice is usually left to students and they are expected to utilise this knowledge base as they acquire experience in the classroom. However, the question to what extent they are able to make use of the courses they receive when they encounter real classroom situations still remains unanawered.

The diaries suggest that student teachers feel that schools do not always reflect the kinds of learning suggested as appropriate in taught courses. Many of them stated that what they learned from their coursework was not always easy to put into practice in school.

I must tell you that I do not see here even half of what we have been taught. We have been told not to hurt students' feelings, to prepare lesson plans, to use various techniques that would interest students. But none here. I do not want to be a teacher like them. (6th week Ali)

First year teachers were also asked to comment on the contribution of four-year teacher preparation courses to their development as a teacher, what they thought was missing in this programme, and whether they were able to apply what they learned to their present teaching contexts. Almost all the responses to these questions point to the fact that they had not been sufficiently prepared to cope with the demands of a real classroom situation especially in the areas of classroom management or in more practical terms test writing. One teacher, in particular, draws attention to working in state schools:

Only when I started teaching did I realise how ill prepared I was for a real classroom situation. I cannot apply what I have learned in methodology courses because we were trained with only private schools in mind. But now I am working with children with almost no educational background let alone any English background.

Six teachers reported that they find it hard to put the knowledge they acquired in the Faculty into practice.

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Yes, you get a lot of information. The problem is you do not implement it. Usually, we do not have time to think about it. I have got to follow the rules of this school.

During the interviews teachers frequently emphasised the importance of practical experience as opposed to theory in teaching English. They have been found to attribute little worth to professional training. They regard classroom competence as largely as a matter of personality.

We were told to use communicative approach in teaching English. You know, how to make the lesson interesting, be creative, use group work or pair work… these kinds of things. But nobody told me how I could do it with 60 students in the classroom. (Fatma)

Fatma said she started with a belief in the principles of communicative language teaching but soon she felt the constraints of covering the curriculum in time were more dominant and shifted away from a communicative approach. Her teaching style became more textbook based and grammar focused.

I just cannot implement everything we learned on a day-to-day basis and get the material covered. They say, "you are three units behind" for example. Because curriculum says that you have to cover this.

The extract given above shows that student teachers do not have realistic expectations about what the practice teaching would be like. Unfortunately, this student's experience is not unique. Recent educational research suggests that student teachers' expectations rarely match the realities of the classroom. Such mismatch, deriving most probably from a lack of practical knowledge, might be the cause for student teachers' tendency to focus simply on maintaining the flow of instruction and discipline.

Diary entries and interview results regarding the link between taught courses and the teaching experience has revealed the need for teacher preparation programmes to put forth a realistic view of teaching that recognizes the realities of classroom life and adequately prepares student teachers to cope with those realities. It is essential that student teachers be provided with knowledge about how classrooms work and what the practicum experience will be like.

3.4. The role of mentors

The role of mentors in learning to teach is usually considered as obvious. It is assumed that the more time student teachers spend working alongside experienced teachers the more familiar they will get with varied classroom practices. In fact, research suggests that mentors could and should play an active role in student teachers' learning (Zeichner 1980; Borko and Mayfield 1995).

Diary data from student teachers have been analysed for its reference to the role of mentors. Virtually all diary comments referred to the mentor's behaviours, involvement and interaction. Since the student teachers had been asked to record in

writing what was of most interest or importance to them, this suggests that, once in school, the role of the mentor was what concerned them above all else.

The majority felt that, in general terms, their mentors were helpful and supportive throughout the teaching practice. Still, there were specific mentor behaviours which were considered unhelpful. A number of students reported that some mentors did not want them in their classes, which created tension and sometimes difficulties with the student teacher feeling unwanted and uninformed. Several students complained that some mentors did not even bother to introduce them to the class. This caused some misunderstanding as the following extract illustrates:

Thank God most of the students gave up watching us throughout the lesson, except from two kids sitting just in front of us. From the beginning to the end they kept watching us. Today I was taking some notes and one of these students wanted to see what I had written. I said "no". Then he said, "Excuse me Miss, are you secret agents?" He was so serious that I had to keep myself from laughing. I cannot help admiring his imagination though. When we told him that we were student teachers he was pleased. (2nd week Leyla)

I do not understand. They want us to feel like a teacher but do not bother to introduce us to the classes. (2nd week Neşe)

Another most commonly stated complaint was that they were used as replacement teachers while their mentors were ill, or covered for other absent staff.

I feel awful today. Although I was at school just to observe a class, I was asked to replace a teacher at a very short notice. It was a reading lesson and I had to read the passage during the break. Naturally, I was extremely tense because I had no proper lesson plan or something. I just panicked. I realized once more that managing a class is really difficult. Now I see that it is very easy to say "If I were her I would do this, and that" while you are only an observer in the class. No self-confidence left. I still feel so bad when I remember those awful moments. (3rd week Ayşe)

A common cause for concern for several student teachers was unwanted intervention from mentors during their lessons. Perhaps most frustrating was the following diary entry:

It was near the end of the lesson. I was writing fill in the blanks questions on the blackboard. I must have forgotten to put the comma in 'Don't'. Ms. ... raised her finger and said a bit mockingly "Teacher, can I ask you something? Is this a new word?" referring to my mistake on the blackboard. I corrected it but felt my knees were wobbly (9th week Zeynep)

The results of the study suggest that student teachers seem to be affected by the behaviours of mentors more than anything else. A good relationship with mentor seemed to be the most important aspect of teaching practice. Student-teachers felt

encouraged when, in the early days of teaching, the mentor made it clear that they are not unwanted in their classes.

The following extract illustrates the contrast between the statements from a pre-service perspective and the statements from a first-year perspective. Duygu, as a student teacher, often expressed her disappointment with the teachers she observed during her practice teaching. She was surprised that these teachers followed the textbooks very strictly and hardly brought new and supplementary materials into the classroom. She said, "That is why the lessons are so boring." When asked how she feels now in her first year of teaching at a state school she said that

Yeah, I remember writing that. I still believe that when the lesson is boring very little learning can take place. The teacher should provide students with various materials, conduct communicative activities... But now I realise it is easier said than done. Time constraint, the size of the class, plus, the pressure to cover the material... I try my best, but...

Ali, on the other hand, taught at the university and felt freer to experiment with ways of adapting textbook exercises. He even implemented lesson plans, which involved reading assignments, student-centred activities. Although he still holds the belief that what he has learned contradicts what he experiences in real classroom situations, he feels more self-confident in diverging from the lesson plan.

The above extracts illustrate the differences between two institutional contexts and how influential this contextual factor is in first year teachers' behaviour. In the first example the teacher seems to be adjusted to a school situation, which is in a way very much like her school during student teaching, while the other teacher adjusted to a very different situation and continued to develop his own perspective in teaching. In his case, his school situation enabled him to implement successfully a communicative style teaching. Duygu, on the other hand, seemed to be experiencing a dilemma between the highly routinized and pragmatic approach to the teaching of English and the beliefs she had during her practice teaching.

4. Conclusion
Overall, the results of this study seem to generally accord with the experiences of student teachers reported in Calderhead (1987)'s study. It is clear from student teachers' diaries that in the early weeks of the teaching experience they were totally preoccupied with a concern about classroom management and reported a high level of anxiety, even questioning the role of practice teaching in their future career as a teacher. However, what is striking is that this high level of anxiety seems to stay with the student teachers throughout the teaching practice. From their statements, it has emerged that pressure of teaching practice has a great impact on their

performance. A brief re-look at some of the statements that express their frustration would be beneficial here:

Students look like a bomb ever ready to explore.
I feel as if I were in a minefield.
God knows what they (students) are going to ask me when I teach!
All I know is that this practice teaching will give me nothing but stress and anxiety.
It is unfortunate that my supervisor was present in the classroom.
No self-confidence left.
I felt like I was in a morgue. I simply froze.

It is apparent that student teachers need help to overcome this feeling of tension and anxiety. Although they, as first-year teachers, reported in the interviews that their confidence increased and that they felt more in control of their teaching as time went by, self-doubt and anxiety should be seen as important elements in their professional development. As Calderhead (1987) suggests since student teachers are not likely to question their assumptions while they are still working to establish secure routines of teaching, the first thing to do is to help them develop a basic confidence and competence in teaching. He also points out that if teacher education truly aims at promoting reflection, the tutors and supervisors should provide assistance to student teachers in interpreting and evaluating teaching practice. In my opinion, a workshop in the early weeks of teaching practice, complemented by counselling meetings could be very helpful for the student teachers deal with their sense of frustration. Student teachers could be encouraged to discuss their anxiety openly so that they could see that they are not the only ones going through this process.

The picture emerged from the first phase of the study point out the influential role of mentors in shaping student teachers' performance during teaching practice. Although diaries are full of criticisms of mentors, which vary from their dependence on textbooks to a lack of rapport with children, student teachers still seem to value their feedback highly. Thus, an important implication for language teacher education programmes might be establishing a cooperative dialogue with the entire teaching environment, mentors, in particular.

Zeichner et al. (1987) state that when new graduates face with the real work of teaching, personal change and development are truly set in motion, which lead to a complex and dynamic process of adjustment by individuals to the institutional and occupational cultures within which they must operate. In our data the teachers seem to be influenced by a number of factors in their teaching contexts. One such influence, as exemplified in Gamze's case, was other teachers working in the school. It is apparent that they exert influence on new teachers to conform to the set routines and practices. First-year teachers, unable to challenge these routines, prefer to submit to this pressure rather than change them. Here, as Richards and Pennington (1998, p. 187) put it, we see teacher education as "inadequate in providing a foundation of values and practices that could

successfully challenge the overwhelming influence of the status quo of the teaching context."

Again, related to the impact that teaching context has on the teachers' development, we see that first year teachers shift away from what they have learned during their pre-service training to what the institution they work in demands. As a result, these teachers seemed to have adopted an understanding of language teaching, which is, unfortunately, conservative and routine as they moved from a pre-service programme to the first year of teaching experience. Leaving aside the principles and practices of communicative language teaching, they focused on implicit grammar teaching, stayed close to their textbooks and preferred a teacher-centred approach.

The reasons may vary from the constraints of the teaching context to the nature of traditional Turkish culture emphasising a teacher-centred structure in the classroom. More importantly, though, these findings have direct implications for the design of language teacher education programmes. The data suggest that teacher preparation courses remain ineffective in helping beginning teachers cope with the realities of teaching coupled with uncertainty, frustration and anxiety they feel during the first year of teaching.

It is more than clear that providing students with the most updated information on language teaching does not suffice. What is needed, perhaps, as Richards and Pennington (1998, p. 190) suggest, is
... an extended period of classroom experience combined with repeated cycles of guided reflection. ...a model of teacher preparation using mentors in the university sector who work closely with individual teachers to help them adapt their teaching to the realities of their teaching contexts, while developing their value system and practices in a way that incorporates the knowledge gained in their education courses.

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