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## **Teaching young learners: The role of theory on practice<sup>1</sup>**

**Esim Gürsoy**

Uludağ University, Turkey

**Şule Çelik Korkmaz**

Uludağ University, Turkey

### **Abstract**

The current study aims at investigating ELT trainees' understanding of beliefs about basic theory on teaching English to young learners and how this knowledge affected their teaching philosophy during implementation in the school experience course. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for data collection. The first group of data is gathered from 179 ELT trainees via a questionnaire, (Cronbach alpha .702) and the second group of data is collected from 27 trainees in the form of a structured interview. The results indicate that the trainees have gained the necessary theoretical information at a moderately high level. The interview results supported that the trainees implemented their beliefs about teaching young learners in most of the areas except for the organization of the resources and the use of appropriate teaching methodology. In other areas such as classroom management, child-adult differences, assessment, and children's characteristics trainees' beliefs were justified with their actual classroom practice.

**Keywords:** *teacher knowledge, trainees' beliefs, reflective practice, teaching young learners*

The implementation of the theoretical scientific knowledge in real classroom settings is an important point of inquiry for teacher education as practice is not always a reflection of the received information. Whether or not trainees can implement their "teacher knowledge" in real classroom settings is the concern for most teacher education programs. However, the implementation of the theory relies on the quality of teacher training, trainees' understanding of the concepts, and their teaching philosophy. In its broader sense, teacher knowledge refers to "a body of professional knowledge that encompasses both knowledge of general pedagogical principles and skills and knowledge of the subject matter to be taught" (Grossman & Richart, 1988, p. 54). This kind of knowledge is presented within the content of the courses in the curriculum; for the purpose

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of furnishing the teacher trainee with the necessary information related both to pedagogical and subject matter content.

In addition to ‘teacher knowledge’, the literature frequently discusses professionalism and “professional knowledge” when identifying the relationship between knowledge and practice (Richards, 1990; Tamir, 1991). Tamir defines professional knowledge as the “body of knowledge and skills which is needed in order to function successfully in a particular profession” (p. 263). Moreover, he (ibid.) argues that there has to be a distinction between ‘professional’ and ‘personal’ knowledge. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), personal knowledge “is a term to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons” (p. 25). Thus, it is not something just in the minds of the teachers, but is found in their practice. The development of the personal knowledge partly depends on the professional knowledge along with the prior educational experiences, beliefs, and etc. it is because of this reason that it is important to identify how much of the content knowledge learned matches with the trainees’ beliefs.

Teacher education, in general, is not only responsible for providing professional knowledge but also its application to classroom settings. Any program, which fails to accommodate the need for developing experiences on theory, will be inadequate to provide appropriate teacher education. Accordingly, Schön (1983) suggests that professional knowledge is composed of two different types of knowledge, which are named by Wallace (1991) as “received knowledge” and “experiential knowledge”. The experiential knowledge can be developed as the trainee gains new experiences in the teaching profession, which starts during teaching practice when trainees find some opportunities to implement their ‘teacher knowledge’, test their beliefs about teaching and learning, develop their teaching philosophy, use their former experiences as learners, and build new ones as prospective teachers. Thus, the personal knowledge develops as the trainee gains experiences. This process is also crucial for the teacher educator as well. It is the time for the educator to check how much or how well the received knowledge is put into practice.

The implementation of the professional knowledge is an indication of professionalism in a given field. Carr and Kemmis (1983) claim that “the methods and procedures employed by members of a profession are based on a body of theoretical knowledge and research” (p. 12). This claim is in parallel with the “applied science model” that is frequently being practiced in Turkey (Ekiz, 2003). This model is traditional and one of the most prevalent models in education (Wallace, 1991). According to the model, scientific research that is conducted in the field of education should be applied to the teaching-learning practices. Teacher trainees are expected to implement this scientific information effectively during practice (Ekiz and Yiğit, 2006).

As opposed to the claim that all problems faced in real classroom settings can be solved within the light of scientific research, Dewey (1933) suggested that problems could be solved via reflective teaching. Schön (1983, 1987), elaborating on Dewey’s ideas, claims that reflection could be systematic via reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflective teaching relies on teachers’ decisions shaped by the data gathered from scientific research (Pollard, 2002). It can be assumed that the received scientific knowledge is the first step of formulating experiential knowledge and thus, necessary for reflective practice.

Being one of the recent topics of investigation, foreign language teaching to young learners requires knowledge about child developmental theories, specific classroom management techniques, selection and use of specific teaching techniques, materials and activities appropriate for child learners. Hence, general methodological knowledge about approaches to teaching English as a Foreign Language requires changes and adaptations to

be used with this specific age group. Gürsoy (2012) argues that methods and strategies that are appropriate with adults cannot be used with children as they have different characteristics. Gürsoy (2012) and Halliwell (1992) argue that children bring in their natural instincts and skills that they used during L1 acquisition to the language classroom. Thus, children, by nature, like talking and having fun, learn visually and kinesthetically. Moreover, as young learners are still developing cognitively they can learn indirectly. Any information such as grammar rules presented explicitly is very difficult for them to understand. Meaning for children can be constructed within a context. Words and sentences presented in isolation are not meaningful and hence easy to forget. For children language can serve as a means to learn about content rather than a goal to be reached at. Therefore, activity-based/task-based teaching and action-based teaching is appropriate for young learners. Whereas, a variety of methods and approaches can be used with adults as they are fully cognitively developed and capable of analytical and hypothetical thinking. This methodological change and knowledge might cause trainees to question their learning experiences and beliefs about teaching and learning, in general, which in turn would enable them to develop their teaching philosophy. Even though the course has two hours of practice each week following the theory lessons, trainees' application of these theories in front of their classmates is far from realistic. However, the practice sessions provide the trainees develop new experiences related with the teaching of young learners in a controlled environment. The trainees are expected to implement this theoretical information in real classroom settings during the School Experience conducted in the first term of the senior year.

Our applications are a result of our past experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. The effect of experiences tends to be stronger as they are already tried out and thus, safe. It can be difficult to overcome the experiences by trying out new information to form new experiences. Akcan (2011) stresses the importance of conducting research that investigates the extent to which theoretical knowledge is transferred to teaching practice. Developing an understanding of how much and how well the teacher training process is reflected in teaching practice would enable the teacher trainers to evaluate their course content and researchers to evaluate the curriculum applied in teacher education. Hence, the current study aims at investigating 3<sup>rd</sup> year ELT trainees' understanding of and beliefs about basic theory about teaching English to young learners and how this knowledge affected their teaching philosophy during the implementation in the school experience course by encouraging them to be reflective of their teaching. Thus, trainees are given opportunities to use their received scientific knowledge to formulate their experiential knowledge through reflection. The process is hoped to provide the trainees to test their teaching philosophy for young learners and identify matches and mismatches between their knowledge, beliefs and classroom practices.

## **Methodology**

### *The context of the study*

'Foreign Language Teaching to Young Learners' is a two-term course that provides the trainees both with general and specific methodological concepts related to child learners. The course has two hours of theory and two hours of practice. The first term course content provides information related to children's characteristics such as, differences between child-adult learners; children's pre-dominant learning styles and ways of learning; classroom management; lesson planning; teacher talk; providing support; assessment; selection and organization of resources. The second term trainees' are provided with more specific methodological knowledge related to the teaching of language

skills, and use of resources such as stories, predictable books, songs, rhymes, games etc. to facilitate the language learning process.

Trainees find opportunity to implement this knowledge during the first term of the fourth year when they go practice teaching to primary schools within the context of school experience course. The second term of the fourth year trainees visit high schools for teaching practice.

### *Participants*

This study was conducted with 179 ELT teacher trainees (143 female and 36 male) during their third year of study at Uludağ University English Language Teaching Department during 2010-2011 academic year. During the following academic year (2011-2012) 27 participants were interviewed via a structured interview at the end of their school experience. Convenient sampling was used in the selection of the participants.

### *Research questions*

The current study aimed to identify trainees' beliefs about teaching English to Young Learners and how their beliefs found body in their classroom practices. Therefore the study aims to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the trainees' beliefs about teaching English to young learners?
2. To what extent did the participants develop knowledge about teaching young learners based on the categories formed in the questionnaire?
3. Do trainees reflect their beliefs during implementation?
4. Which trainee - beliefs do not correspond to their theoretical knowledge?

### *Data collection tools and procedure*

Data is collected via qualitative and quantitative research methods. First group of data was collected with a questionnaire at the end of the first term of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, after the trainees were provided with the information related to Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Based on the Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was found to be .702. The second group of data was gathered via a structured interview at the end of the school experience course in the 4<sup>th</sup> year related to their implementation of the theoretical knowledge.

The 25- item structured questionnaire with a five- point Likert-type rating scale (from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) was prepared by the researchers in order to explore the participants' beliefs about teaching young learners based on the scientific knowledge given during the course. The highest point that could be received from the questionnaire is 125 and the least point is 25. The high points gathered from the questionnaire indicate trainees' beliefs related to the theory and the low points indicate limited knowledge and incorrect beliefs. Although the items were related to their received scientific knowledge, their agreement or disagreement with the item indicated their beliefs about the topics in question.

The items were grouped under six categories as: 1. Child-adult differences (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 18); 2. Children's characteristics (6, 7, 9, 12, 13); 3. Methodology (8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 20, 23); 4. Classroom management (16, 21); 5. Assessment (19, 22); and 6. Using resources (24, 25). Each of the items was prepared according to the content of the theoretical lessons.

The aim of the interview was to enable the trainees to reflect on their practices and identify how well or how much they were able to implement the theoretical knowledge in real classroom settings. This way it is not only aimed at identifying the application of scientific knowledge but also pave the way for reflectivity.

### Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed through SPSS 13.0. for descriptive statistical analysis such as the frequency analysis of the items. Moreover, the means and standard deviations were calculated in order to find out the participants views regarding the categories and the items in the questionnaire.

For the qualitative aspect of the study, the data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and content - analyzed to get a deeper understanding related to the extent the participants implemented the theoretical knowledge gained in the lesson. The interview results were used to support and to counter check the findings from the questionnaire.

### Findings

The 25- item structured questionnaire designed to investigate ELT trainees' understanding of basic theory about TEYLs revealed that most of the participants have gained the scientific knowledge of teaching English to young learners and developed their beliefs accordingly. Considering that the least point that could be get from the questionnaire is 25 and the maximum point is 125, trainees' overall score on knowledge and beliefs about theories of teaching young learners is found to be 92.3, which is between "I have no idea" ( $\bar{x}=75$ ) and "I agree" ( $\bar{x}=100$ ) being mostly closer to "I agree". The result indicates that trainees have a moderately high level of understanding of the theory related to the topic which is also an indication of what they believe about teaching English to children.

Table 1 below indicates to what extent the participants developed knowledge about teaching young learners based on the categories formed in the questionnaire, whereas, table 2 shows the results for each individual item formed to learn specific knowledge and beliefs about teaching young learners. The most striking results, displayed in table 2, are presented and discussed under related categories in table1 in the light of the results emerged from the interviews.

Table 1  
*Means of the Questionnaire Categories*

Categories	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Classroom Management	1	5	4,257	0,88266
Assessment	1	5	4,0615	0,81186
Children's Characteristics	1,4	5	3,9933	0,51096
Child/Adult Differences	2,17	5	3,959	0,51736
Using Resources	1,5	5	3,2793	0,71906
Methodology	1,75	4,63	3,1711	0,653

The mean scores of the categories presented in table 1 indicated that the teacher trainees displayed moderately high knowledge and positive beliefs about theoretical knowledge with regard to classroom management. The interview results revealed what kind of management strategies were actually used by the teacher trainees during their school experiences. In the data analysis "I" stands for the interviewee and "Is" stands for the interviewees.

Based on their results (23 Is), it can be said that the most frequent strategies used by the student teachers were; using intonation and stress (12 Is), taking students' attention by using eye contact (15 Is), being silent (10 Is), and walking in the classroom (6 Is). Although most of the participants in the questionnaire agreed that telling the classroom rules at the beginning of the lesson helps children be more responsible for their actions

(item 21, mean: 4,3687), none of the interviewees, except for I8, could transfer this knowledge into their practice. Thus, they preferred not to get into the process of setting rules with the students. The expression of I9 indicated how the use of appropriate methodology helped him to manage his class: “love is a solution for everything. I memorized their names. With the help of my enjoyable activities, videos, and pictures, classroom management was not hard for me”.

Table 2

*The Results of Descriptive Statistics based on an Individual Item in the Questionnaire*

<b>Item No.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
1. Similarity of children and adults when learning a foreign language	4,6257	0,82762
2. Similarity of children and adults in terms of their desire for communication	4,4078	0,86515
3. No need for children to learn a foreign language	2,8101	1,56425
4. Children's being less enthusiastic than adults in learning a foreign language.	3,7877	1,25853
5. Using similar techniques to children and adults in learning a foreign language.	4,4749	0,92602
6. Children and kinesthetic activities.	4,7374	0,79556
7. Children and visual activities	4,743	0,80789
8. Children's needs for learning the grammar rules.	3,5307	1,19122
9. Imagination and fantasy as children's reality	4,0894	0,95567
10. Rote memorization and repetition in children's vocabulary learning.	2,352	1,32569
11. L1 use in foreign language teaching.	3,2793	1,2133
12. Organizing pair /group works	2,5419	1,22345
13. Knowing every word in a sentence to grasp the meaning.	3,8547	1,08675
14. Children's losing concentration due to variety of activities.	3,7151	1,23723
15. Teaching and explaining directly.	3,7933	1,3268
16. Involving children in the classroom rule-making process.	4,1453	1,10215
17. L1 use when giving instruction.	3,2067	1,23923
18. Child/ adult difference in group work	3,648	1,20585
19. Children's assessing themselves.	3,5698	1,22675
20. The value of the process. Involved in learning activity.	3,1676	1,22926
21. Telling the classroom rules at the beginning for classroom management	4,3687	1,0644
22. Benefits of assessment	4,5531	0,91874
23. Providing maximum support to children	2,324	1,45958

24. Students' involvement in the organization of resources in the classroom	4,2905	0,97409
25. Teachers' role in keeping resources safe and to re-use them	2,2682	1,34734

Considering the mean scores, the second highest category is related to assessment. The results of the questionnaire with regard to assessment were in line with what Moon (2000) suggested, accordingly, most of the participants believed that both teachers and children benefit from assessment (item 22, mean: 4, 5531) and self-assessment is educationally appropriate for young learners (item 19, mean: 3, 5698). This result is in line with what they did during their teaching, 25 out of 27 interviews stated that they applied different types of assessment techniques such as checking comprehension through questions, using worksheets, exercises, observation, activities such as drama, songs, stories, and TPR. However, most of the teacher trainees (20 Is) could not implement self-assessment techniques during their teaching practice. As Moon (2000) emphasized, although involving pupils into the assessment process is beneficial in terms of the learning outcomes it is not easy to do it in practice. The participants in this study experienced the difficulty of using self-assessment techniques due to limited time they had for teaching.

Although the category of children's characteristics was placed on the third rank (mean: 3, 9600), the mean scores of an individual item presented in table 2 indicated that the two highest scores were related to children's characteristics. The participants mostly believed that children enjoy visual (item 7, mean: 4, 7430) and kinesthetic activities (item 6, mean: 4, 7374) as underlined by Gürsoy (2012) and Halliwell (1992). Interview results support this finding obtained from the questionnaire and they revealed that all participants more or less could implement their knowledge of children's characteristics when teaching to young learners. The interviewees expressed that they used different visual materials such as realia, pictures, flashcards, video, PowerPoint presentations, cartoons, puppets, costumes. As children are predominantly visual and kinesthetic most of the interviewees (18 Is) stated that they used kinesthetic activities including games, drama, role-play, songs, and puzzles. These results indicate that the teacher trainees could teach in accordance with children's characteristics.

Moreover, when children characteristics were taken into consideration, the interviewees expressed their views about classroom environment and teachers' behaviors/attitudes. Although a few interviewees stated that they did not do anything about the classroom environment (5 Is), most of them indicated that they made the classroom physically attractive, enjoyable and interesting via visuals such as displays, cartoons, and flashcards and affectively positive, interactive, comfortable, stress free and relaxed by being positive, friendly, tolerant and encouraging.

In the interview the teacher trainees were asked to share their experiences with regard to pair and group work. The results of the questionnaire indicated that they were not sure whether children can work together in pairs or groups independently of the teacher (item 12, mean; 2, 5419). However, most of the interviewees (23 Is) found such activities beneficial in terms of language learning and practice, and they were eager to continue using them in the future, which means that real experiences with young learners clarified their knowledge about how children can work in the classroom. On the other hand, 4 interviewees expressed negative ideas about using pair and group activities due to classroom management problems, class size, and classroom conditions.

The category, which appears on the fourth rank, is related to child/adult differences (mean: 3, 9590). In accordance with the previous literature (see Read, 1998), based on the analysis of the individual items most of the trainees thought that children are not similar to

adults when learning a foreign language (item 1, mean: 4, 6257), they cannot use similar techniques that they use with adults when teaching children (item 5, mean: 4, 4749), and younger and older children are not similar in terms of their desire to communicate (item 2, mean: 4, 4078). In the interview, the participants also stated that they used child-appropriate activities, materials, and techniques. The interviewees claimed that they used visual and fun activities (16 Is), games (10 Is), kinesthetic and hands-on activities (9 Is), songs (7 Is), stories (3 Is) realia and technology (5 Is) to cater for the adult/child differences. In terms of the techniques, they mostly pointed out that they presented the language within a fun and meaningful context (9 Is) to provide implicit teaching (2 Is), gave purpose considering students' needs, interests and styles (8 Is), supported their learning through simplification, modeling, demonstration, and body language (8 Is), used a multi-sensory approach (1I) and recycled the language (1I).

The category of using resources was placed in the fifth rank with 3, 2793 mean scores. Although the participants agreed that children should be involved in the organization of resources in the classroom (item 24, mean: 4, 2905), they were dubious about whether or not the teachers should be the only person to be in charge of the organization of resources to keep them safe and re-use them (item 25, mean: 2, 2682). However, within the theoretical content of the course trainees were informed about the benefits related to shared- responsibility in organizing resources (Moon, 2000). As a result of involving children in the organization of resources, children feel more responsible in protecting the resources, develop positive feelings as the classroom environment provides democratic opportunities to students by becoming an active participant of the decision making process, become more autonomous, and the process contributes to creating a student-centered environment, etc. The interview results revealed that although the teacher trainees integrated various resources into their teaching such as pictures, flashcards, worksheets, puppets, puzzles, costumes, technological devices, real objects, cards, toys etc. they could not involve students when organizing those resources due to the following reasons: they could only visit the practice school for four hours a week; three teacher trainees shared a lesson to do micro-teaching; most of the interviewees prepared their resources before the lesson, they thought that they did not have a say in the organization of the resources. Yet, their beliefs about the need to involve students in the making and organizing resources are an optimistic expectation for them to apply the theory in their real classrooms.

The last category with a mean score of 3,17 was related to teaching methodology including various points such as teaching vocabulary and grammar, teacher talk including the use of L1, using variety of activities, valuing process and product and providing support. As it is seen from the results, the theoretical information stressing the importance of indirect grammar teaching with young learners without presenting the rules was agreed by more than half (60,8%) of the trainees. In addition, interview results were in line with what is stressed by Döner Yılmaz (2012) that the most beneficial way to teach grammar to young learners will be creating context to present language structures to pave the way for indirect learning. As children have limited cognitive abilities and lack abstract thinking, developing positive beliefs with regard to contextualized language learning is crucial to enable children learn the language implicitly and in a meaningful way. During the participants' teaching practice, it was clear that a slightly higher number of teacher trainees (66,6%) taught grammar in a meaningful way within a context and/or indirectly (20 Is). This result indicates that during teaching practice trainees were able to use theoretical knowledge, and there is an improvement in terms of their beliefs about teaching grammar.

For teaching vocabulary, 67 % of the participants agreed that rote memorization and repetition is necessary for children to learn vocabulary (item 10, mean: 2, 35).

Interview results support the results of the questionnaire, as they mostly used various visual materials such as pictures, flashcards, realia, PowerPoint presentations, and body language. Three of the trainees preferred teaching vocabulary by proving L1 equivalences of the words. Showing the picture of a word is another form of direct instruction. Replacing the translation with the visual material has similar effects on learning as the meaning is isolated and learning depends on memorization. Due to children's limited cognitive abilities they tend to forget quickly if the information is out of context and thus, not meaningful. Only, less than half of the trainees (10 Is) emphasized the importance of indirect and contextual vocabulary teaching. According to Linse (2006), vocabulary can be taught directly and indirectly depending on the type of activity and the students' immediate needs. Although both indirect and direct vocabulary teaching were emphasized in the theory lessons, their responses indicated that they mostly gave importance to visuals as a reflection of the knowledge related to the characteristics of young learners and they did not consider indirectness and contextualization as one of the most prominent methodological feature.

How and when to use L1 in language classes and importance of using L2 to increase exposure were emphasized and discussed in theory lessons; however, the results of the questionnaire indicated that the teacher trainees' knowledge about the use of L1 was not clear. Nearly half of the participants (48, 6 %) agreed that foreign language can be taught to children by using L1 (item 11, mean 3,2793). In contrast, half of the participants (51, 4%) disagreed that instructions of an activity should be given in L1 (item 17, mean: 3, 2067). On the other hand, the interview results were more positive than the questionnaire. Eight of the interviewees stated that they never used L1 in their classes as they clarified meaning via demonstration, body language, and audio- visual aids. Some of them said they used L1 when children did not understand, while giving instructions, managing the classroom, and helping children understand the main aspects of the subject.

With respect to providing support, the participants revealed not so positive beliefs in the questionnaire. 66.5 % of them stated that they should always provide maximum support to facilitate children's learning (item 23, mean: 2,3240). However, in theory lessons it has been frequently discussed that support should be reduced gradually to help the learners become autonomous and to provide i+1 level of instruction (Moon, 2000; Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2005). Furthermore, more than half of the interviewees displayed inadequate knowledge related to providing support. Only ten of the interviewees stated that they used visual materials (11 Is), organized activities from known to unknown and easy to difficult (8 Is), gave feedback (6 Is), encouraged students (6 Is), used body language (5 Is), and gave clues (4 Is).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The results of the study indicated that the participants have developed positive beliefs in accordance with some theoretical issues such as classroom management, assessment, characteristics of young learners, and child-adult differences. The interview results supported the trainees' opinions about these issues and provided detailed information about how these are implemented in real classroom settings. However, the results related to the beliefs about some methodological issues indicated that the trainees' former learning experiences have much more control over their beliefs than the received knowledge. As a result, in some specific methodological issues such as the use of L1 and vocabulary teaching, trainees' experiential knowledge relied on their prior experiences, which were considered as traditional. In conclusion, it can be interpreted that nearly half of the participants believed that vocabulary teaching could be done directly and did not consider contextualization. Similarly, about half of the trainees believed that L1 use is

necessary for teaching English to children. Basic reason, as indicated by the participants, was their lack of self confidence in their language knowledge/skills, and knowledge about alternative methods that help to reduce the amount of L1 in teaching.

The results of the present research are in a way the reflection of the foreign language education in Turkey. As a result of exam-oriented education system and traditional language teaching methods, foreign language education mostly relies on vocabulary teaching and frequent use of L1. Becoming a part of this system and due to developing developmentally incorrect learning experiences, trainees encounter difficulties when replacing them with the scientific knowledge. As important is the scientific knowledge, teachers' beliefs also play an important role in the development of their teaching philosophies. Thus, it can be suggested that in order to develop positive and developmentally appropriate learning experiences it is important for policy makers to reconsider the cornerstones of Turkish education system.

### **Biographical information**

Esim Gürsoy is currently an assistant professor at the ELT Department of Uludağ University. She holds an M.A. in teacher education from Ohio University, USA and a Ph.D in English Language Teaching from Anadolu University, Eskişehir. Her research interests include, teaching English to young learners, pre-service teacher education, and integrating socially responsible teaching to ELT.

Şule Çelik Korkmaz is working as a lecturer in the ELT Department of Uludağ University. She received her MA in 2001 from the same university. She is currently a Ph.D student in the ELT Department of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. Her research interests are teacher education, teaching young learners, and materials development.

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