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Evaluation of a language course within the framework of socially responsible teaching

Pınar Sali¹

Uludağ University, Turkey

Esim Gürsoy²

Uludağ University, Turkey

Abstract

This paper reports on the preliminary results of a research study which aimed to evaluate a GILE-based course (Global Issues in Language Education), as perceived by the teacher trainees in an ELT department. More specifically, it aimed to identify the ELT teacher trainees' expectations from the GILE-based course that used environmental problems as its major theme. The course was included as an elective course in the ELT program within the framework of Socially Responsible Teaching (SRT) in order to initiate efforts to integrate global issues into language teacher education and thus to contribute to the linguistic and social development of ELT trainees. Data were collected via a questionnaire developed by the researchers through an extensive literature review. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part were open-ended questions that asked the participants to state their views about the possible benefits of a GILE-based course and to talk about their expectations from it. The second part aimed at identifying the teacher trainees' awareness about environmental issues and expectations from the course and consisted of 22 Likert-type questions. The questionnaire was found to be highly reliable with a .81 alpha value. The research results indicated that nearly half of the trainees did not elect the course with an environmental concern and that the trainees' expectations and the course objectives did not match in certain aspects.

Keywords: *global issues in language education, socially responsible teaching, teacher training, environmental education, foreign language development*

¹ Lecturer Dr., ELT Department, Uludağ University, Turkey. **Email:** pinarsali@uludag.edu.tr

² Assistant Professor Dr., ELT Department, Uludağ University, Turkey. **E-mail:** esimgursoy@yahoo.com

Introduction

Foreign language learning and teaching have seen many changes since the use of the Grammar Translation Method in the 20th century. The focus on form in the earlier methods and approaches has been replaced by a focus on meaning as the aims for learning languages have changed. In addition, the tendency towards communication in the foreign/second language has paved the way for learner-centered approaches which have then yielded to learning-centered teaching. According to Cameron (2001) “knowledge about children’s learning is seen as central to effective teaching” (p. 1). Although learner-centered teaching is an important improvement, attention on the learner rather than the learning process might result in missing what educators try to do in schools (Cameron, 2001). Therefore, it is not adequate to put the child or the curriculum at the focal point of the teacher. The teacher should be concerned with the learning needs of the students and the vast potential that the learning environment offers. The language learning activities should be intellectually demanding and should maximize learning (Cameron, 2001) to help learners reach their potential. One way to increase the intellectual involvement of the learner is via the use of Socially Responsible Teaching (SRT). SRT might be defined as the intentional efforts to help learners understand themselves and the world around them by enabling them to develop skills and knowledge to act upon the problems that arise in the social and physical environment. SRT should be part of language classes not only because it is our responsibility as a human being and a global citizen, but also SRT topics provide meaningful contexts to use foreign language communicatively. The shift towards meaning-focused language teaching has brought contextualized language learning in its wake. The contextualization of learning helps learners “interact, share ideas, develop social and language skills and gain social and language awareness” (Gürsoy, 2011, p. 47). The use of methods and approaches such as Content-based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Theme-based Teaching, and Topic Work have a facilitative role when contextualizing the language learning process. These methods and approaches have two goals: content and language. While the learners learn about the content they develop their language skills. Thus, content creates a need to use the language skills (Gürsoy, 2010) and practice discourse types (Yang, 2009).

The movement towards the use of SRT topics to contextualize foreign language learning has been reflected in Global Issues in Language Education (GILE). Global education is a relatively new approach to language education that aims to integrate global issues such as environmental destruction, poverty, and social inequality into the learning process. According to Cates (2002) “it aims to enable students to effectively acquire a foreign language while empowering them with the knowledge, skills, and commitment required by world citizens to solve global problems” (p. 41). Kniep (1985) similarly defines global education as “efforts to bring about changes in the content, methods and social context of education in order to better prepare students for citizenship in a global age” (p. 15).

Developing ‘action competence’ should be one of the goals of SRT and GILE. Competence in this context refers to skills and willingness that one possesses to contribute to the decision-making process and action, as different from activity, suggests intentionality to change (Jensen, 2000; Jensen & Schnack, 1997). Knowledge and awareness about global

issues are not adequate to solve them, therefore, education programs should not only increase awareness but also help students develop critical thinking skills to participate actively in the solution of world problems. Drawing from Howe and Warren (1989), Gooch et al. (2008) argue that “critical thinking involves interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation” (p. 176). The teachers should possess the skills to think critically and to trigger critical thinking in their students. Global issues, as a context, not only help language educators develop socially responsible behaviour for themselves, but also provide them with the context to help their students develop language skills as well as action competence, while developing their critical thinking skills.

The role of the language educator has always been defined within the narrow framework of teaching language skills, grammar, and vocabulary. However, Cates (2002) states reasons for language teachers to care about global problems. The first reason is that of a personal and an ethical one. For most language teachers it would be morally incorrect to ignore issues that concern the world. Secondly, these problems are also a matter for the teaching profession. As each profession has its own obligation for the society, developing social responsibility should be considered as one of the duties of the teachers. Finally, our status as language teachers in the field of education makes our role prominent as the educators were given the “responsibility in promoting peace, justice, and an active concern for the world’s problems” (Cates, 2002, p. 43).

Although Global Issues in Language Education (GILE) have been met with considerable interest in the field of ELT, they have not been yet reflected in foreign language teacher education programs as a way to promote teacher trainees’ development as globally, socially and linguistically competent future teachers (Gürsoy & Salı, 2014). The same lack of foci can be observed in the foreign language teacher education programs within the context of the current study. The infusion of global issues into foreign language teacher education programs might help us, as foreign language teacher educators, empower prospective language teachers with the knowledge and skills as globally aware individuals and language teachers.

Previous research pointed to a need to include global perspectives in language teacher education programs (see Arıkan, 2009; Cates, 1997; Erten, 2004; Gürsoy, 2010, 2012; Gürsoy & Sağlam, 2011; Jacobs, Goatly, & Ming, 1995; Karn, 2007; Sağlam & Gürsoy, 2010). Earlier studies indicated that the ELT trainees did not make any efforts to solve environmental problems (Sağlam & Gürsoy, 2010), however, they seemed to have positive attitudes towards the integration of environmental issues into language lessons (Gürsoy & Sağlam, 2011). It is suggested in the literature that such integration could start as early as pre-school or primary school (Erten, 2004; Şimşekli, 2004). Though few, several studies put emphasis on the use of environmental issues as a context for young second language learners (Gürsoy, 2010, 2012).

Although only a few research studies indicated the importance and necessity to use GILE in foreign language teacher education, global issues need to be considered as an indispensable part of teacher education in general, to bring about a change in the society to

help individuals develop behaviors and skills to solve global problems. As a contribution to the efforts to practice GILE in ELT teacher education programs, a new elective course was offered at a large state university in Turkey. The motive behind this initiative was to commence and maintain efforts to make global issues part of language teacher education in the context of the present study and hence to foster the prospective language teachers' linguistic and social development. As this GILE-based course was offered for the first time, the current study was undertaken to evaluate the given course through the eyes of the ELT teacher trainees and sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the ELT trainees' expectations from a GILE-based course in a foreign teacher education program?
2. What are the ELT trainees' views about the integration of environmental issues into foreign language education?
3. What do ELT trainees report about their knowledge of environmental problems?

The answers to these questions are of significance to aid the development of the GILE-based course that has been implemented for the first time in an ELT department. This, in turn, might enable us to continue with the efforts to furnish future language teachers with the skills and knowledge required for being a socially responsible global citizen and to shed some light on the integration of GILE into other ELT teacher education programs.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions posed in the study, a descriptive research design was adopted. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire.

Course Objectives

In order to be able to make a comparison between the participants' expectations and the aims of the course, a brief mention of the course objectives seems to be essential at this point. The GILE-based course was a new initiative introduced into the ELT program where the present study was carried out. Adopting a 'theme-based language learning' approach, the given course aimed at developing the trainees' awareness on global issues related mostly with the environment (such as the formation of the earth, the effects of industrialization, and the destruction of the nature) and their knowledge and skills of language. Topics such as world cultures, geography, or space were not within the scope of the course content as they were not directly dealt with the environmental issues.

The course, which was carried out by one of the researchers, was offered as an elective within the fall term in 2013-2014 academic year. The course work was primarily based on audio-visual materials and a textbook developed for a larger research project which looked at the use of documentaries in foreign language teaching. It is especially noteworthy here that the present study does not aim to evaluate the course materials nor does it seek to answer the research questions of this project. It should also be noted that the course did not set

off to teach the ELT trainees how to integrate global issues into foreign language classrooms. The textbook was designed in light of 'Home' documentary (Bertrand, 2009), which mainly focused on the human threats to the ecology of the Earth and was thus composed of topics on environmental issues. In the textbook was included a variety of language skills and vocabulary activities presented in the form of fill-in-the blanks, matching, sentence completion, question-and-answer exercises. Additionally, the classes were supported by whole class discussions and listening activities. However, limitations on class time (the class met two lesson hours once a week) made it impossible to complete all of the planned classroom activities.

Participants

The participants of the study constituted the total population of the course ($N = 28$). 10 of the participants were male and 18 were female. Only a minority ($n = 3$) were a member of environmental organizations.

Instrument

Data for the study were collected via a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part of the instrument consisted of open-ended questions that inquired about the trainees' expectations regarding the GILE-based course and their views about the integration of environmental issues into foreign language education. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 22 Likert-type items and aimed at identifying the teacher trainees' awareness about environmental issues and expectations from the aforementioned course. The instrument was found to be reliable with an alpha value of .81.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In order to analyze the qualitative data, the participants' responses to the open-ended part of the questionnaire were first read thoroughly by the researchers. Then, they were grouped, coded and described in the form of frequencies. The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS for Windows (version 18), and descriptive statistics were reported as frequency and mean value (M) with standard deviation (SD).

Findings

This section is devoted to the report of the findings of both the qualitative and quantitative data. First, the findings of the quantitative data are reported. Subsequently, the findings from the qualitative data are presented.

Findings from the quantitative data

The quantitative data came from the second part of the questionnaire. The seven items in this part inquired about the trainees' awareness about the environmental issues. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and the percentages of the participants' responses to each item in this part of the questionnaire.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations and percentages regarding the trainees' awareness on environmental issues

		M	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No idea
1.	I have knowledge about what to do to protect the environment.	.64	.03	39.3	35.7	17.9	3.6	3.6
2.	I would like to contribute to activities and projects regarding environmental protection.	.71	.02	10.7	64.3	10.7	7.1	7.1
3.	I know how to solve environmental problems.	.32	.85	21.4	57.1	17.9	-	3.6
4.	I have knowledge about environmental organizations and their activities.	.75	.10	10.7	50	25	3.6	10.7
5.	I think I need to develop my awareness about the environment and environmental protection.	.03	.97	17.9	53.6	10.7	17.9	-
6.	I follow the media regarding the environment and environmental protection.	.92	.15	7.1	50	25	3.6	14.3
7.	I think that it is my responsibility as an English teacher to develop my students' environmental awareness.	.46	.07	53.6	32.1	3.6	7.1	3.6

As can be seen in the table above, most of the participants thought that they were knowledgeable about environmental protection, environmental organizations and activities and about ways to solve environmental problems. A great majority of them also claimed that they would like to contribute to the activities and projects about environmental protection and seemed to consider themselves responsible for helping their future students develop environmental awareness.

The remaining 15 items in the questionnaire aimed at investigating the ELT teacher trainees' expectations from the GILE-based course. The means and the percentages for each questionnaire item are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations and percentages regarding course expectations

		M	SD	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No idea
		Percentage (%)						
1	This course will contribute to my environmental awareness.	3.82	1.24	25	60.7	-	-	14.3
2	This course will be helpful in developing environmental awareness in foreign language classes.	3.96	1.07	28.6	57.1	3.6	3.6	7.1
3	The course will help me develop my students' environmental awareness.	3.89	.99	17.9	71.4	-	3.6	7.1
4	The course will develop my social responsibilities.	3.92	1.05	25	60.7	3.6	3.6	7.1
5	The course will contribute to the development of my speaking skills.	3.00	1.58	14.3	42.9	7.1	-	35.7
6	The course will contribute to the development of my writing skills.	2.35	1.41	3.6	28.6	14.3	7.1	46.4
7	The course will contribute to the development of my listening skills.	3.32	1.49	17.9	50	3.6	3.6	25
8	The course will contribute to the development of my reading skills.	3.35	1.44	14.3	57.1	3.6	-	25
9	The course will contribute to the development of my pronunciation.	3.07	1.51	10.7	50	7.1	-	32.1
10	The course will contribute to the development of my vocabulary knowledge.	4.14	1.00	35.7	57.1	-	-	7.1
11	The course will contribute to the development of my knowledge of grammar.	2.71	1.27	3.6	28.6	32.1	7.1	28.6
12	I think there will be interesting activities in this course.	3.42	1.37	14.3	57.1	7.1	-	21.4
13	I have elected this course because I liked the content.	3.96	.99	25	60.7	7.1	-	7.1
14	I have elected the course because I think it will develop my language skills.	2.75	1.14	3.6	21.4	42.9	10.7	21.4
15	I have elected the course because it fit my schedule well.	3.50	1.20	21.4	35.7	21.4	14.3	7.1

As the GILE-based course used a theme-based approach, the participants' ideas related to both the content and language goals of the course were investigated in the abovementioned items in Table 2. The results suggested that the participants mostly focused on the content gains and were dubious in some of the language gains of the course such as the development of their writing skills and the knowledge of grammar. As indicated in Table 2, the majority of the participants expected that the course would contribute to their environmental awareness. Most of them also agreed that the course would provide them with the information and skills about integrating environmental issues into their own classes and that the course would develop their social responsibility.

The participants reported rather low expectations of the course when the development of their language skills was concerned. Most of the items related with the language skills development had relatively high percentages on the 'no idea' scale. Although more than half of the participants thought that the course would help them develop their speaking skills, nearly one third of them stated that they did not have an idea about this possible gain of the course. For the development of the writing skills, almost half of the participants seemed to be dubious. Most of the participants, on the other hand, expected an improvement in their listening and reading skills. However, there were also some other participants (one fourth of them) who were unable to offer an idea as to the development of these skills in the GILE-based course. As is clear in Table 2, more than half of the participants reported that they expected a development in their pronunciation skills, but nearly one third of them stated that they had no idea. However, the ratio seemed to change when it comes to the development of vocabulary. Almost all of the participants thought that the course would enable them to improve their vocabulary knowledge, whereas most of the participants did not expect an improvement in their knowledge of grammar. More than half of the participants also reported their expectation that there would be interesting activities in the course.

As for their reasons for the election of the course, the majority of the participants stated that they decided to take the course because they liked the content of it. More than half of the participants, on the other hand, reported that they elected the course because it fit their weekly schedule. Relatively a few of the participants mentioned that they decided to take the course with the expectation that the course would develop their language skills.

Findings from the qualitative data

The participants' responses to the open-ended questions in the first part of the questionnaire constituted the qualitative data for the present study. There were a total of five questions in this part of the questionnaire which aimed to gain insights into the ELT trainees' expectations and views about a GILE-based course.

Table 3

ELT trainees' expectations from the GILE-based course

Q1. What do you think you will be learning in this course?		(N = 28)
1.	I will develop my environmental awareness.	16
2.	It will develop my world knowledge.	11
3.	I will be learning about cultural and natural richness in the world.	6
4.	I will be learning how to raise my own students' environmental awareness.	4
5.	My speaking skills will be developed.	2
6.	My listening skills will be developed.	2
7.	My reading skills will be developed.	1
8.	I will be learning about geography.	1
9.	I don't have an idea.	2
10.	This course will not contribute to the development of my environmental awareness.	1

A large number of participants reported that the course would develop their ‘world knowledge’ ($n = 17$) and ‘environmental awareness’ ($n = 16$), when asked to state what they thought they would be learning in the GILE-based course. As indicated in Table 3, these were followed by, in descending order, ‘learning how to develop their own students’, ‘environmental awareness’, ‘speaking’, ‘listening’, ‘reading’, and ‘geography’. As the two of the participants stated, they did not have an idea about what they would be learning in the course. One of the participants reported a negative reaction to the course itself, adding that it would not contribute to his/her development of environmental awareness.

The participants were asked in another question to express their views about the integration of environmental issues into foreign language classes and to state their reasons for why environmental issues should be part of foreign language education. As can be seen in Table 4, most of the participants ($n = 22$) seemed to hold positive ideas about the use of environmental issues in language classrooms. Four of the participants did not agree with the idea that environmental issues should be part of foreign language classes. Two of them recommended that environmental issues be dealt with in a separate course. There was only one participant who was not able to offer a specific view.

Table 4

ELT trainees’ views about the integration of environmental issues into foreign language classes

	(N = 28)
1. Environmental issues should be within the scope of foreign language classes.	22
2. Environmental issues shouldn’t be within the scope of foreign language classes.	3
3. Environmental issues should be a separate course.	2
4. I am undecided.	1

The participants mentioned the following reasons for why environmental issues should be integrated into foreign language classes, as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5

ELT trainees’ views about why environmental issues should be integrated into foreign language classes

Environmental issues should be within the scope of foreign language classes, because this would...	(N = 28)
1. provide the ground for theme-based language instruction.	9
2. develop environmental awareness.	8
3. contribute to the development of language skills.	2
4. offer motivating and interesting content.	2
5. develop vocabulary knowledge.	2
6. promote intercultural understanding and communication.	1
7. facilitate cultural awareness.	1

The participants were also asked to mention why they had decided to take the GILE-based course. Nearly half of the participants reported that they took the GILE-based course to avoid the other elective courses offered at the department. This was followed by the other reasons, in descending order, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6
ELT trainees' reasons for taking the GILE-based course

	(N = 28)
1. I don't want to take 'Pragmatics'.	13
2. I would like to learn more about different cultures.	11
3. It looks like an interesting lesson.	10
4. It is a new elective course offered in the department.	9
5. It looks like easy to pass.	7
6. I am interested in global issues.	4
7. I'd like to develop my speaking skills.	3
8. It is similar to Geography.	3
9. I'd like to develop my environmental awareness.	2
10. It will be an audio-visual course.	1
11. It will involve different types of materials.	1
12. I liked the content of the lesson.	1
13. I'd like to make others aware of environmental issues.	1
14. My friends have just taken it.	1
15. I like animals.	1

Another question in the questionnaire asked the participants to reflect on the possible contributions of the GILE-based course to their own development as future language teachers. Nearly all of the participants ($n = 27$) reported positive views about the possible contributions of a GILE-based course and stated their belief that the course would contribute to their own development.

Table 7
ELT trainees' views about the contributions of the GILE-based course

	(N = 28)
1. The course will contribute to my development.	27
2. The course will not contribute to my development.	1

When asked to elaborate on the ways how a GILE-based might contribute to their development, the participants mentioned the following, in descending order (Table 8):

Table 8

ELT trainees' views about the contributions of the GILE-based course

	(N = 28)
1. It will develop my world knowledge.	14
2. It will help me develop my own students' environmental awareness.	8
3. It will develop my own environmental awareness as a prospective teacher.	5
4. It will develop my knowledge of environment-related vocabulary.	5
5. It will develop my speaking skills.	4
6. It will contribute to my language development.	3
7. It will help me integrate environmental issues into language education.	2
8. It will develop my listening skills.	2
9. It will develop my writing skills.	1
10. It will develop my reading skills.	1
11. It will develop my pronunciation.	1
12. It will develop my critical thinking skills.	1
13. It will encourage me for being a member of environmental organizations.	1

Discussion and conclusion

The qualitative and the quantitative findings were discussed below in light of the research questions posed in the current study.

The first research question aimed to identify the ELT trainees' expectations from the GILE-based course. As revealed both in the qualitative and quantitative data, the participants appeared to have high expectations when the content gains of the course were concerned. Most of the participants, for example, reported that the course would contribute to the development of their environmental awareness and world knowledge. However, the trainees reported lower levels of expectations in general as to the language gains of the course and seemed to be dubious particularly in such language gains of the course as the development of their writing skills and the knowledge of grammar. This revealed a mismatch between the overall goals of the course and the trainees' expectations of it. Although the course set off to develop the trainees' content and language knowledge, the participants focused more on the content gains of it. The only exception to this was the trainees' high expectation that the course would aid in the development of their vocabulary knowledge, as revealed in the quantitative data.

The second research question in the current study attempted to reveal the ELT trainees' views about the integration of environmental issues into foreign language education. The answers to this question came from the open-ended part of the questionnaire yielding qualitative data. It was encouraging and promising to find out that the ELT trainees in the current study had positive views about the infusion of environmental issues into foreign language classes. These positive views might be interpreted as good prospects for making environmental issues part of foreign language education.

The other research question was concerned with the ELT trainees' views about their knowledge of environmental problems. The second part of the questionnaire provided the answers to this research question. The current study revealed that the trainees had positive ideas about being an active participant of environmental protection, as the majority agreed that they would like to join in environmental projects and activities. They also seemed to feel responsible for the development of their future students' environmental awareness. All these might be considered as an indication of 'action competence' and are heartening in that they reflect the participants' awareness about environmental issues and their willingness to become part of the solutions to environmental problems. Nevertheless, what some of the trainees reported as to their reasons for taking the GILE-based course was particularly interesting. They mentioned two reasons for why they decided to take this course: they thought it would be rather an easy course to pass when compared to the other electives or it fit their schedule well. Surprisingly enough, developing their environmental awareness and knowledge of language was not an overriding concern for these trainees. Moreover, despite the fact that the course was using Theme-based Language Instruction, the trainees were not clear about their ideas regarding the development of linguistic skills and mostly focused on the development of their content knowledge.

Although the results indicated limited awareness and expectations from the course content, the trainees' positive stance towards the significance of environmental issues as themes to be exploited in the foreign language classrooms is promising to offer similar GILE-based courses for language teacher training programs. These and other similar global issues could also be made part of some other methodology courses, and ELT trainees could be shown ways for how to infuse global issues into their own classes. All these efforts would undoubtedly nurture and accelerate the growth of ELT trainees both as linguistically competent and globally aware future language teachers.

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