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An Investigation of Peer-Teaching Technique in Student Teacher Development

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Abstract: Pre-service TEFL programs are designed to prepare candidate teachers of English language for their future careers. To this end they provide students with a wide variety of techniques and strategies for enabling them to acculturate into their profession. An effective way of creating a professional learning community is to use a process of peer-teaching. The present study attempts to examine the impact of peer-teaching application on pre-service EFL teachers' understandings of methodology course content and its effect on their learning and teaching experiences. The main goals of this study are to find out how teacher candidates view peer-teaching and how they think their understanding of course content is affected when peer-teaching technique is implemented. The study cohorts 38 pre-service teachers enrolled in a 14 week methodology course at a large, public university in Istanbul. Data were collected qualitatively via observations, interviews, peer-evaluation papers and self-analysis reports. All interview transcripts and written samples were inductively analyzed. Findings suggest that peer-teaching exercise is found valuable by teacher candidates in that it helps them to increase learning and to be reflective and at the same time provides the students the opportunity of self-reflection which later might lead to development of their teaching and evaluation skills.

Keywords: peer-teaching, pre-service teacher education, self-analysis, peer evaluation

Öz: İngiliz Dili Eğitim Programları, İngilizce öğretmeni adaylarını gelecekteki mesleklerine hazırlamak üzere yapılandırılmış programlardır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda söz konusu programlar öğrencilere mesleki bilgi ve becerileri kazandırmak için çeşitli teknik ve stratejiler sunarlar. Öğrencilerin mesleki donanımı kazanmalarında etkili yollardan biri de akran öğretimi sürecidir. Bu çalışmada akran öğretimi uygulamasının İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının yöntem derslerinin içeriğini anlama ve kendi öğrenme ve öğretme deneyimleri üzerindeki etkisinin araştırılması amaçlanmıştır. İstanbul'da bir devlet üniversitesinde yürütülen bu nitel çalışmaya yöntem dersine kayıtlı 38 İngilizce öğretmeni adayı katılmış, çalışma 14 hafta sürmüştür. Veriler gözlem, görüşme, akran değerlendirme formları ve öz değerlendirme raporları yoluyla elde edilmiştir. Tüm görüşme kayıtları ve yazılı belgeler tümevarımsal yöntemle çözümlenmiştir. Bulgular, akran öğretimi tekniğinin öğrenciler tarafından etkili bulunduğunu göstermiştir. Çalışmaya katılan öğrenciler bu sürecin kendi öğretim tekniklerini ve değerlendirme becerilerini geliştirdiğini öne sürmüşlerdir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: akran-öğretimi, öğretmen adayları, öz değerlendirme, akran değerlendirmesi

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Introduction

In recent years, in line with the assumption that in order to create a change on pre-service students and improve their teaching, students need to have opportunities of reviewing their teaching experiences that will enable them to make decisions about their future teaching practice (Schelfhout et al., 2006), many teacher education programs have given priority to “reflective thinking” and defined it as a fundamental learning goal for their students (Calderhead, 1989; Ross, Johnson & Smith, 1992; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Putman & Grant, 1992; Copeland, Birmingham, De la cruz, & Lewin, 1993; Zeichner, 1993). Consequently, most teacher training programs worldwide have recently experienced certain modifications that will serve as an intervention, and allow student teachers to have experiences and to develop reflective thinking skills which can lead to effective teaching practices (Gimenez, 1999; Harford & MacRuairc, 2008; Tairab, 2003; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Turkey has also kept up with this development. Especially, while navigating its way through the process of gaining membership to the European Union, the government has implemented several educational reforms to improve the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Included in these innovations was the introduction of eight year uninterrupted compulsory primary education. Consequently, education faculties were reorganized and restructured to provide the necessary numbers of qualified teachers. Through this restructuring program Higher Education Council (HEC) attempted to remedy insufficient teaching practice and the incongruity between theory and practice (YÖK, 1998). As a part of this restructuring movement in Turkey, in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice the 'competence-based model of teacher education' was established within the 'craft model' (ibid.). Thus the importance of practice was highlighted. The renewed TEFL curriculum was put into practice in the 1998–1999 academic years throughout the country with some minor modifications in different universities.

Within the framework mentioned, pre-service TEFL programs were re-modified in 2006-2007 academic year. One major orientation was to place more emphasis on teaching methodology and teaching practice while preparing teacher candidates with the knowledge base necessary for teaching a foreign language (Grossman et al., 2007). This new program dictates that preparation for the teaching profession requires the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the three domains as “subject matter training”, “pedagogy” and “general culture”. Regarding the program, the subject matter training courses consist of 97 credits while pedagogical domain consists of 37 credit hours including the teaching practice, and the remaining 26 credit hours include the general cultural courses (YÖK, 2007). The teaching practice in 2006-2007 year teacher education program involves two sessions of school experience during the first and second semesters of the fourth year (YÖK, 2007); however, actual teaching practice is delayed until their final semester. This new curriculum aims at equipping teacher candidates with a variety of techniques and strategies for enabling them to acculturate into their profession (Göker, 2006).

A way for pre-service teachers to acquire pedagogical knowledge and skills is through examination of their teaching practices and reflecting upon it (Göker, 2006). Using a process of micro-peer teaching has been considered as an effective technique for transferring theory into practice for pre-service teachers in teacher education programs (Kpanja, 2001). Originally, micro-peer teaching was conceptualized and developed to provide teachers an opportunity to assess and improve their teaching skills (Allen & Ryans, 1969). In this study, the term micro-peer teaching refers to having students teach a micro level lesson to their peers in methodology courses in order to acquire experience in lesson planning, materials development, presentation and through reflection to gain awareness about their teaching behaviors.

There is convincing research on the efficacy of micro peer-teaching in terms of providing a context for reflecting upon their teaching practice, exposing them to the realities of teaching, and thus develop and improve their teaching skills (Metcalf, Hammer & Kahlich, 1996; Kpanja, 2001; Peker,

2009; I'Anson, Rodrigues, & Wilson, 2003; Subramaniam, 2006; Vare 1994). Micro peer-teaching can also offer students some spaces to think about the type of teacher they want to become and micro-teaching sessions can be used for experimenting with this type of teacher freely (Bell, 2007). The pre-service students' views about micro-teaching are also positive. They have expressed that they found it an effective and invaluable opportunity which helps them get prepared for their future careers (Akalin, 2005; Amobi, 2005; Benton-Kupper, 2001; Metcalf, 1993).

Student teachers come to their teacher education courses with their pre-set beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning (Kagan, 1992) and there is an axiom that teachers, being conditioned by their previous schooling experiences, tend to teach the way they were taught (Britzman, 1991; Frank, 1990; Goodlad, 1990; Handler, 1993; Lortie, 1975). Among the courses offered to pre-service teachers, methodology courses are one of the few opportunities for teacher candidates to view new knowledge through aspects different from the ones they developed by their prior knowledge about teaching and learning (Molebash, 2004). Therefore, a basic objective of a teacher preparation program should be to provide pre-service teachers with appropriate teaching experience. By enabling students to teach and analyze their teaching behavior, peer-teaching can be an invaluable learning experience for prospective teachers, and it might lead to a consequent improvement in their teaching pedagogy.

Methodology

Aim

This preliminary classroom study attempts to examine the impact of peer-teaching technique on pre-service EFL teachers' understandings of methodology course content and its effect on their learning and teaching experiences. The principal concerns in this study were twofold; first to find out how teacher candidates view peer-teaching process, and second to identify how they think their understanding of course content is affected when peer-teaching technique is implemented. For this purpose the following research questions were posed;

1. How does peer teaching affect EFL student teachers' understanding of "Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching" course content?
2. How do pre-service teachers view peer teaching practice in terms of its contribution to their professional development?

Subjects

The teacher trainee sample consisted of second year 38 pre-service teachers enrolled in a 14 week 3 credit "Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching" course at a large, public university in Istanbul. The most challenging event of the course was a micro-peer teaching practice allowing participants to experiment with their personal philosophies and theoretical knowledge about teaching. The reflective strategies (reaction papers, interviews, self-analysis of micro teaching experience and a portfolio construction) were implemented as course requirements to help the participants make explicit their unarticulated and personal thoughts about peer teaching.

Data Collection Procedures

Students as a group of four were assigned one micro-teaching experience throughout the semester. Prior to each group's weekly peer teaching, the members of the groups held conferences

with the course lecturer where they negotiated about the activities and content to be taught by student teachers.

Since one of the important elements in microteaching activities is feedback (Amobi, 2005), following each peer-teaching experience, the candidates wrote down a guided self-reflection report in order to give an account of how they felt about peer teaching and what kind of preparations they made before peer teaching. In addition to self analysis reports, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these students as to elicit their understanding of the purpose of peer teaching and in what way they benefitted from this practice. For the remaining of the class, “the observers”, evaluative forms and observation schedules were given to be filled in while observing their peers’ instructional strategies.

Data were collected qualitatively via observations, semi-structured interviews, peer-evaluation papers and self-analysis of peer-teaching experience of the participants. All interview transcripts, field notes and written samples were inductively analyzed (Patton, 2002). Observation was used as a tool to keep remaining students focused on the presentation of the peer teaching group and to enable them to pay constant attention to their peers’ teaching behaviors and evaluate different teaching strategies. All the information supplied in Turkish by the participants was translated into English by the researchers.

Data Analysis

In the present study data were analyzed using a qualitative approach, specifically open coding analysis method. The open coding was used to conceptualize the data by breaking, comparing, contrasting and categorizing it (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open codes for each case were developed after reading and rereading the data and highlighting phrases, sentences or passages. From open codes, major categories or salient codes were developed by making connections between a category and its subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Translated quotes from interviews and peer-evaluation papers were provided to show the significant patterns in the data.

Findings

The analysis of data from the interviews and self-analysis reports yielded the following four themes. As shown in Table 1 the major issues discovered were student teachers’ views about the aims of micro peer-teaching, their feelings about this process and how they thought this experience contributed to their development as teachers and what problems they encountered throughout this practice. Each of these themes and the coded responses that fall under the themes are given below.

Table 1: Themes emerged and coded responses

Themes emerged from interviews and evaluation reports	Coded responses
<i>Views about the aims of micro-peer teaching</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides experience• Provides opportunities for seeing our weaknesses• A first step to teaching• Turns us into active participants from passive recipients• Provides opportunities of getting feedback

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An effective way to improve ourselves especially with the help of peers• Helps us to put theory into practice
<i>Feelings about micro-peer teaching</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enjoyable• Satisfactory• Though it creates anxiety at the beginning, it is fun• Non-threatening, flexible classroom atmosphere• Beneficial
<i>Views about its contribution to their professional development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presents new teaching techniques and styles• Enables us to learn through doing• Helps us to recognize the importance of how to attend to the learners (eye contact, use of body language)• Creates awareness of how to teach• Improves our teaching practice• Makes us gain confidence in teaching.
<i>Basic problems encountered</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The class size, physical conditions• An unreal classroom atmosphere to practice teaching• Occasional lack of interest of the peers• Timing

When students were asked what they thought about the aim of micro-teaching, in terms of gaining experience, one student expressed her feelings as *“First of all, I think, by placing a real student mass in front of me, it made me get used to teaching and I loved it. Now it [teaching] has turned into something I want to do...”* Another comment was more related to teaching aspect, he explained it as *“I feel the basic aim of this technique was related to the way a lesson is taught and how it is evaluated by their friends so that we can teach more appropriately...”*

Regarding their feelings about micro-teaching, one student’s remark is especially interesting. Very enthusiastically she commented as *“I see micro-teaching as the most wonderful thing that can ever be done in an education faculty. Because you really see how it [teaching] is practiced...”* One male student also stated that *“I think it is very useful, very necessary. And I advocate that the things we learn through micro-teaching are more permanent. In my opinion, it is far better than theoretical knowledge. A better and more permanent learning takes place.”*

Among the positive outcomes of micro-teaching another theme that appeared was the contribution of micro-teaching experience to students’ professional development. One of the students focused in eye contact and how she learnt that it is important to keep an eye-contact with the students *“Yes, this micro-teaching has changed my teaching. I didn’t use to look at students’ eyes, I mean not much. I used to avoid looking at them. I noticed this. I have to look at them, I have to pay attention to them,*

they need this. If I don't look at them, they are distracted. There are some students in our class, if I don't look at them; I see that they start doing something else..."

Despite all these positive remarks, there were some aspects of micro-teaching that the students found problematic. Their main concern was about the class size. Because the total number of registered students this course exceeded 50 students, they found it hard to cope with this "crowd". One student said *"It is really hard for us to try to teach on a class of 50 people. And we understand our teachers better now. We are four people, four teachers but we cannot silence the students"*. Another student articulated his problem with timing. He complained about not being able to demonstrate the lesson he originally designed due to time restrictions. He commented *"I wish we had more time. I prepared so many things and just as I was in the middle of my lesson I realized that I had exceeded the time limit."* Also, physical configuration of the classroom prevented some of the students to better practice micro-teaching technique. One teacher candidate reflected as *"I meant to do group work and with these long rows of fixed desks I did not get what I had aimed at through group work. We need more space for teaching."*

The second source of data came from the responses of the remaining students who observed their classmates' micro-peer teachings. During observations, they kept notes and filled in forms in which they expressed their views about and gains from the experience. As a result of analysis of these written samples, three core categories were identified. These categories are illustrated with examples from evaluation sheets.

1. **Gains in principles of different methods:** The students found peer teaching useful since they could understand the principles of methods especially when the basics of methods were demonstrated by their friends. They could see how the principles could be implemented in a real classroom environment. They noted that

"I'm acknowledged about how to use Desuggestopedia in practice in my future career."

"I learned that lecturing shouldn't be used while teaching."

2. **Gains in presentation skills:** Through micro peer-teaching students were able to see the principles involved in presenting language material. They could notice the preparation and structuring phases of presentation process as well as use of audio-visual aids and body language.

"I realized that visual materials are very important in presenting new topic."

"I recognized that drama is an effective tool for teaching especially at the beginning of the lesson."

3. **Gains in classroom activity design:** The students stated that by watching their friends' micro-peer teaching, they were able to identify the tasks and activities that would be beneficial for students and they could discriminate between activities that were effective and that fail to create an impact on them. In a way, they gained an appreciation of what works in the classroom and what not. They expressed their views as follows;

"I recognized the importance of activity design."

"I found answers to the questions like which activities I could use, what I can do and what is

the best to be done while using contend-based method.”

“I learned what kind of activities can be used in order to eliminate the problem of vocabulary learning.”

“I think, these presentations helped me understand different the ways to teach new content words and grammar.”

Conclusion and Discussion

Findings suggest that peer-teaching exercise is found valuable by teacher candidates in that it helps them to increase learning and to be reflective and at the same time it provides the students with the opportunity of self-reflection which later might lead to development of their teaching and evaluation skills. The student teachers offered a range of views indicating the benefits they got from their peer teaching practice. In this paper it was argued that peer teaching can be a potentially useful way to stimulate student teaching. This study confirmed that involving student teachers in peer teaching offers several benefits for student teachers themselves and teacher educators. This supports the view that through micro peer teaching, they get more proficient in being able to make judgments about their teaching decisions (Tsang & Wong, 1996). As reflected by the student teachers, microteaching experience improved their teaching competence and it contributed to a great extent in making them better teachers by offering opportunities of looking at themselves in a non-threatening environment and thus grew in their teaching capability. They were able to put theory into practice and thus bridged the gap between theory and practice (McKenna & French, 2010).

A possible disadvantage of peer-teaching, as acknowledged by Courneya et.al. (2008), is that it can provoke anxiety and hence can cause stress. Similarly, the participating students in this study expressed that they felt stressed at the beginning; nonetheless, if the individuals know the factors that create anxiety and are informed of anxiety level, this awareness will increase their academic success (Tobias, 1979). In addition, though the student teachers were more positive about their experiences about student teaching, they faced several difficulties with it. Common problems mentioned include big class size and physical conditions of the setting. This echoes the need to have smaller groups in such methodology courses so that everyone has a chance to experience such practices. Student peers' lack of interest from time to time was another issue of complaint, which in fact is an extension of having a high number of students in the classroom. The perceptions of the participants about the realistic and unrealistic dimension of this process is similar to students who performed the role of a teacher without having the necessary expertise (McNamara et al. 2002) and their friends' playing the role of students at a lower-level of language proficiency contributed to creating this sense of unreality.

This study was limited to include only the second grade students enrolled in *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* course at a state university in Istanbul during the fall semester 2009-2010 academic year. While the sample involved all the students taking this course, we cannot assume that the subjects of this study are representative of all foreign language education department students in this university or of foreign language teacher education students elsewhere. Another limitation is related to vide-recording that was not used in this study. Even though video-recordings of peer teaching practices can provide pre-service teachers with solid images of their practices and form a context for reflecting on their own practices and thus develop their analysis skills needed to notice the subject matter in lessons and get an understanding of effective instructional strategies (Berthoff, 1987; Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 1996; Cannings & Talley, 2003; Cochran-Smith & 1993, 1999; Sherin & Van Es, 2005; Schön, 1983; Valli, 1992), they were not utilized in this study due to technical limitations.

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