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Language Proficiency Level of English Language Teacher Trainees in Turkey

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Abstract: The conduct of this study was motivated by the relative dearth of research in Turkey to investigate the language proficiency of foreign language teacher trainees. To obtain student views about the issue, data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 36 teacher trainees from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students each in an English language teacher training program in Turkey. Besides, 36 volunteering teacher trainees from the 1st and 3rd year students each were given the same State Staff Foreign Language Proficiency Exam (KPDS) to shed light on the questionnaire results. The findings point to the participants' complaint and problem of English decreasing in proficiency level throughout their teacher training process and their attribution of this problem mainly to the curriculum and teaching practices, which should lead every stakeholder, but firstly teacher trainers, to reconsider foreign language teacher education in Turkey.

Key Words: Language Proficiency, Foreign Language Teacher Trainees, Curriculum, Teacher Education

Introduction

As it is the case in all the other professions, teachers need to have competencies and thus be competent enough to achieve effective teaching. As the operators of the education system; they are expected to comply with the requirements of the profession, which most of the time are represented in such competencies required and listed in the official documents of the Ministry of Education and the Council of Higher Education.

Reporting that competencies are defined as “the set of knowledge, skills, and experience necessary for future, which manifests in activities” (Katāne, Aizsila, & Beitere, 2006, p. 44) or “knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, motivations and beliefs people need in order to be successful in a job” (Gupta, 1999), Selvi (2010) states that the common understanding related to teachers’ competencies is divided into three main areas as field competencies, pedagogical competencies and cultural competencies although they can be composed of some different dimensions as well such as emotional competencies, communication competencies, information and communication technologies competencies (ICT) and environmental competencies. However, what is common in the literature about teacher competencies is that field (or content or subject matter) knowledge takes the first place and the situation is naturally not any different for language teachers (Day, 1993; Day & Conklin, 1992; Peyton, 2006; Selvi, 2010; Shulman, 1987). They refer to the essential competencies necessary for teachers to conduct their profession and the subjects that teachers will teach or students will learn (Selvi, 2010, p. 169).

As it is cited in Valencia (2009, p. 76), the subject matter or content knowledge is one of the components of teachers’ knowledge base (Golombek, 1998; Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 2005; Shulman, 1987; Wallace, 1991) and in the case of foreign language teachers, English constitutes the subject matter (Peacock, 2009, p. 278) due to the fact that they are expected to teach language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar and vocabulary). According to Teddick and Walker (1995), as a specialized case, EFL teacher education needs to focus on English language skills based in grammar, syntax and lexicon of the language and without this content knowledge, it is not possible for language teachers to judge themselves competent enough. As Banegas (2009) reports, Roberts (1998, p. 105) points out that having content knowledge means that language teachers master the knowledge of the systems of the target language and they competently use the knowledge. This means that teachers should have declarative knowledge of the language (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001, p. 23), i.e. knowledge about English grammar

and phonetics, for instance, and be simultaneously proficient and confident users of it as they will become language models for their learners (Barnes, 2002, p. 199). Murdoch (1994) calls language proficiency the bedrock of the non-native speaker English teacher's professional confidence and Lange (1990) rates it as the most essential characteristic of a good language teacher. Making a projection about language teaching in Turkey in the 21st century, Altan (2006) cites a high level of language proficiency as the most essential requirement for prospective language teachers.

The situation should not be any different for ESL teachers either. Tedick and Tischer (1996, p. 415) refer to the "constant challenge that second language teachers face in developing and maintaining language proficiency." According to the Standards for English-as-a-Second Language Teachers issued by the North Carolina State Board of Education (2002), the primary requirement is that teachers demonstrate a high level of competence and an understanding of language as a system. As Aydoğan and Çilsal (2007) report, a general overview of the system in USA shows that more than 40 states now employ their teachers with national teacher examinations that ask questions about fundamental grammar and cultural knowledge.

In addition to the agreed significance of English proficiency as a major constituent of content knowledge for future EFL teachers, one view is that any given proficiency level may need to be maintained and improved in language teacher training contexts. Both Berry (1990) and Cullen (1994, pp. 164-165) stress that this emphasis in language improvement is mostly felt in EFL contexts where teachers do not have many opportunities of interaction with native speakers of English, which is the case in Turkey. Berry (1990), for instance, conducted a study in Poland where teachers were asked to rank (teaching) Methodology, Theory (a term he used to refer to theories of language learning and teaching), and Language Improvement in order of importance according to their needs. Language Improvement was ranked first followed by Methodology. Theory was ranked as the least important item as the teachers felt that they had sufficient amount of knowledge of theory. This supports the claim of many researchers who sustain that non-native trainees consider language proficiency as the basis of their ability to fulfill their future professional role (DeFelice, 1998; Van Lier, 1995 among others cited in Luchini, 2004, p. 2). In a similar vein, Llorca (2006) concludes that there is a strong belief that non-native speaker teachers with a high language proficiency level will teach more effectively in more teaching contexts and at all levels, as language proficiency is thought to be closely linked with self confidence in

a teaching situation. According to Doff (1987); a teacher's confidence in the classroom is undermined by a poor command of the English language and it is a related fact that confident teachers perform their profession more effectively and efficiently (Topkaya & Yavuz, 2005).

Related literature suggests that questions like “How proficient should a language teacher be?” have been asked for a long time almost everywhere in the world and the attempts to give some research-based answers have never been abandoned. Based on the Sri Lankan teacher trainees’ views on their training curriculum, Murdoch (1994, p. 253) reports that modalities of training have to be worked out in relation to the need to develop “the most valued aspect of a non-native English teacher's competence”—a high level of English language proficiency and this is in accordance with Berry (1990) and Cullen (1994) mentioned above. Murdoch claims that the findings provide strong support for curriculum revisions which would intensify the focus on trainees' language competence during formal training. Being in harmony with these, Al-Mekhlafi (2007) emphasizes that the majority of EFL teachers lack the adequate level of language proficiency and face related difficulties in their professional careers (Butler, 2004; Mc Gee & Phelan, 2004), and asserts that the development of the candidates’ language proficiency skills in English, especially in environments like Arabic countries where English is a foreign language, should be the most important component of any TEFL program. His findings indicate that the majority of prospective teachers believe that the courses on the development of the related competencies are not sufficient and thus the quality and quantity of such courses need to be re-evaluated. Barkhuizen’s (1997) study in South Africa revealed that the student teachers who participated in the study were seriously concerned about their own English proficiency. In his study with Argentinean graduate teachers on their teacher training programs, Banegas (2009, p. 49) concludes in the light of the participants’ views that even though teachers believe in the necessity of improving the pedagogical knowledge in the base, they cannot teach what they do not know. In other words, to know the ‘how’ without the ‘what’ may be fruitless in ELT in contexts where English is a foreign language.

The need for greater foreign language proficiency is strongly echoed also in the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (1999) and in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (2002). Taking this into account; Cooper et al. (2004) found

that grammar and conversational skills were perceived as the most important components of language teaching. In his study about teacher trainees' reflection on their practicum experiences, Kömür (2010) found that half of the student teachers admitted that they were not proficient enough in the target language and could not teach some grammatical structures effectively because they themselves had problems about them. This coincides with Fillmore and Snow's (2000, p. 29) remark about teaching writing: Teachers who are native speakers of English also feel insecure about their own knowledge of grammar and lexicon thinking that students may not get the kind of informative feedback they must have in order to become more effective writers.

The issue has also been the subject of obvious governmental concern and public debate. As Xuesong (2010) reports, in Hong Kong, the government and people held language teachers responsible for the falling language standards in the country and the authority ruled that all in-service language teachers should pass the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English examinations "so that they could continue teaching in schools". However, the exam results soon became a media focus. The news reports interpreted the results as showing unsatisfactory linguistic competence among language teachers and highlighted some of the common grammatical and pronunciation errors in the exams. Xuesong's data were the citizen entries into an open internet discussion about the issue and a striking quote that the researcher chose is as follows: "How can students learn English when teachers themselves make mistakes, too? (Xuesong, 2010, p. 6)" The results of the debate are reported to have contributed to the violation of the traditional figure of revered teachers in Chinese culture.

In the light of this unquestionable importance of English language proficiency for EFL teachers and teacher trainees, and the discussions over considering it to be a factor to reconceptualize language teacher training programs especially in contexts where English is a foreign language, the present study focuses on the situation in a particular ELT department in Turkey. Based on first-hand experience of nearly 10 years in language teacher education; the authors' assumption is that teacher trainees' English language proficiency level either worsens or remains more or less the same during their education, which results in the graduation of language teachers who still have their own serious problems with the language which they will be teaching in their career. The major aim of and the primary motivation behind the study is to document that this is a critical unresolved issue concerning language teacher education, of which teacher trainees are

complainingly aware too. Based on teacher trainees' opinions built on this awareness, the study attempts to reveal the sources of the problems and bring the issue up for discussion among teacher trainers in the first place and all stakeholders.

Another motivation for the study is that the number of the studies investigating the issue is not adequate in Turkey. Yılmaz's (2005) study is an example on the communicative competence of language teacher trainees and how far their communicative needs are taken into account in ELT departments. Because of the methodology adopted, this study has no concern for communicative competence and the focus is on grammatical and lexical knowledge. However; it would be hard to claim that grammar and lexicon has no place in communicative strength, in which the first and foremost component is Chomsky's grammatical or formal competence that refers to the knowledge of the syntactic, lexical and morphological knowledge of the language (Alptekin, 2002).

Based on the aforementioned review of pertinent literature and motivating factors for the study, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) How do the teacher trainees define the change, if there has been any, in their grammar knowledge since the beginning of their training?
- 2) How do the teacher trainees define the change, if there has been any, in their vocabulary knowledge since the beginning of their training?
- 3) How do the teacher trainees define the change, if there has been any, in their reading comprehension since the beginning of their training?
- 4) To what do they attribute the negative changes and/or lack of any change despite advancing in their teacher education?
- 5) What would comparing the results of an official national language exam (KPDS) taken by the 1st and 3rd year teacher trainees suggest about the findings?

Method

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of the Faculty of Education at Uludag University in Bursa, Turkey. It offers a B.A. program in English Language Education and a graduate program leading to an M.A. degree. The fundamental components of the undergraduate program comprise professional courses including methodological and pedagogical approaches to language teaching and testing,

language acquisition, language teaching methodology and those raising students' awareness of the English language system. Besides, the program organizes practice teaching in selected elementary and high schools. It admits students from among those who pass the two-phased national level university admission exam, which in its second phase measures and assesses solely the English language proficiency level of the students who aim to study in the ELT departments of universities.

The participants of the study are the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade Uludag University Education Faculty ELT department students who studied the fall term of 2010-2011 academic year. The number of the students participating from each grade is 36, thus their total number is 144.

Data Collection Tools

The data were collected by two different instruments. One of them, and the basic one, is a three-component questionnaire developed by the researchers (Appendix 1). With its first component that consists of three items calling for one of three response options (has deteriorated / has remained the same / has progressed), the questionnaire aims to investigate the opinions of teacher trainees on whether their grammatical, vocabulary and reading-comprehension knowledge and/or abilities have deteriorated, remained the same or progressed since the beginning of their training program. The tool has such a component as a plausible assumption would be that the higher the trainees' grade is, the more progressed they think their grammatical, vocabulary and reading-comprehension knowledge and/or abilities are. It was thought that if the findings contradict with this assumption, the problems which the study aims to document and point out can be emphasized on a firmer basis.

The second component of the questionnaire is for the trainees who think that there has been deterioration or no change in one or more of the abovementioned fields (grammar, vocabulary and reading-comprehension). The aim of that 3-item component is to give the respondents the chance to attribute in varying extents (a lot / partly / none) the expressed deterioration and/or lack of change to three particular reasons considered likely to be relevant, which are the curriculum, ways of teaching in the department and the compulsory Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) exam. This component was

developed and used in order to get at and discuss the sources of the problems in the light of the trainees' opinions.

In addition to these; the questionnaire includes two open-ended items. The aim of the first one is to enable the participants to add any more reasons for the deterioration and/or lack of change in their grammatical, vocabulary and reading-comprehension knowledge, in case they think that the preceding component would not suffice for a full expression of the reasons for the deterioration and/or lack of change in question.

The second open-ended item aims to give the participants the chance to indicate their suggestions for the solution of the problems that they thought have caused the deterioration or no change.

The other instrument is May 2007 KPDS exam (State Staff Foreign Language Proficiency Exam). The rationale was that, despite its shortcomings like falling short of measuring communicative abilities, KPDS assesses linguistic competence in terms of grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension and it can be used for research purposes as is done in Köse's (2010) study that investigates the reading-comprehension and translation skills of ELT students in the light of KPDS and researcher-developed test results. It was thought that a reasonable assumption would be that the higher the trainees' grade is, the higher their KPDS scores will be; and if the results come in contradiction with this assumption, the problems which the study aims to draw attention need to be addressed regarding the success of the training program.

Procedure

Firstly, 36 volunteering teacher trainees from the 1st and 3rd year students each were simultaneously given the same KPDS exam in a big hall. They were not told that the identical questions of a former official exam were going to be used, and the exam was administered the day after the announcement so that the students could not have the chance of a special preparation. No participant from the 2nd and 4th year students took the exam due to practical reasons as this organization was possible only with the 1st and 3rd year students who were taught by one of the researchers. The students who volunteered to take the exam were all those who needed to do well in examinations like KPDS as they plan to have postgraduate graduation and/or pursue an academic career, which all require good performance in such exams.

In the second stage of the procedure; the administration of the final version of the questionnaires was after piloting the initial version with fifteen teacher trainees not among the participants of the study so that the problems about the lay-out, instructions and question wording could be alleviated in the light of expert idea obtained. In the end, the questionnaires were given to 36 teacher trainees from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students each. The 3rd year students who completed the questionnaire were those who had taken the KPDS exam together with the 1st year trainees in the first stage of the procedure. The 1st year students were excluded in this phase as they had been in the department for a period of time too short (1.5 months) to be significantly affected by their educational process.

Data Analysis

The responses to the close-ended questionnaire items were analyzed in terms of the variables of year, gender and grade point average (GPA). The results were compiled in tables that present numbers and frequencies. On the other hand, in the way McKay (2006) describes, the responses to the open-ended items were analyzed with a holistic view in terms of the reoccurring themes and topics within the transcribed texts. The whole set of data was read over independently by two researchers for several times for inter-reliability check and an agreed summary is provided based on those reoccurring themes with selected exemplary quotations characterizing most of the responses given.

The results of the KPDS exam were analyzed hypothetically dividing its question groups into those apt to measure more of grammatical, vocabulary and reading-comprehension skills. Presented in tables, the overall scores and scores obtained from those question groups are discussed in the light of the data provided by the questionnaire.

Results

1. Findings about the 2nd Year Students (Female: 31, Male: 5)

Table 1

2nd Year Students' Responses to Questionnaire Items Investigating the Change in terms of the Knowledge of Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading-Comprehension

	Grammar			Vocabulary			Reading		
	D	S	P	D	S	P	D	S	P
Female	11 35.48%	10 32.25%	10 32.25%	14 45.16%	9 29.03%	8 25.80%	1 3.22%	8 25.80%	22 70.96%
Male	2 40%	1 20%	2 40%	0 0%	0 0%	5 100%	0 0%	0 0%	5 100%
Total	13 36.11%	11 30.55%	12 33.33%	14 38.88%	9 25%	13 36.11%	1 2.77%	8 22.22%	27 75%

D: has deteriorated **S:** has remained the same **P:** has shown progress

As is shown in Table 1, 24 second year students (67%) think that their grammatical knowledge has either deteriorated or remained the same since the beginning of their teacher education. Being 23, the rate is almost the same about vocabulary knowledge. As for reading comprehension, 27 respondents (75%) think that there has been progress.

Regarding the gender variable, the females do not divert much from the general tendency while the salient difference about the males is that they all believe in a progress on their vocabulary knowledge.

Table 2

2nd Year Students' Responses in terms of their GPAs

	Grammar			Vocabulary			Reading		
	D	S	P	D	S	P	D	S	P
GPA (2-3) n: 21	13 61.90%	3 14.28%	5 23.80%	7 33.33%	6 28.57%	8 38.09%	1 4.76%	5 23.80%	15 71.42%
GPA (3-4) n: 15	0 0%	8 53.33%	7 46.66%	7 46.66%	3 20%	5 33.33%	0 0%	3 20%	12 80%
Total	13 36.11%	11 30.55%	12 33.33%	14 38.88%	9 25%	13 36.11%	1 2.77%	8 22.22%	27 75%

D: has deteriorated **S:** has remained the same **P:** has shown progress

As the table suggests, 16 (76%) out of 21 teacher trainees with a GPA between 2 and 3 think that there has been a deterioration or no change in terms of their grammar while the rate is 8 (53%) out of 15 for those with a GPA between 3 and 4. As for vocabulary, the rates are 13 (62%) and 10 (66%) respectively. When it comes to reading comprehension, the belief in progress dominates for both the groups with the rates 15 (71%) and 12 (80%) respectively.

Table 3

The Reasons to which the 2nd Year Students Attribute the Deterioration or Lack of Change in terms of Grammar

	Teaching			Curriculum		
	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None
Female (n: 21)	8 38.09%	11 52.38%	2 9.52%	5 23.80%	14 66.66%	2 9.52%
Male (n: 3)	0 0%	2 66.66%	1 33.33%	1 33.33%	2 66.66%	0 0%
Total	8 33.33%	13 54.16%	3 12.50%	6 25%	16 66.66%	2 8.33%

Table 4

The Reasons to which the 2nd Year Students Attribute the Deterioration or Lack of Change in terms of Vocabulary

	Teaching			Curriculum		
	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None
Female (n: 23)	5 21.73%	17 73.91%	1 4.34%	6 26.08%	16 69.56%	1 4.34%
Male (n: 0)	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%

Total	5 21.73%	17 73.91%	1 4.34%	6 26.08%	16 69.56%	1 4.34%
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As the two tables above suggest, the 2nd year teacher trainees do not display a clear standpoint in terms of the teaching practices and curriculum as reasons. About the effect on both grammar and vocabulary knowledge, more than half of them chose the option “partly” but it is worthy of note that, among the total rates, the highest rate of the choice of “None” is only 13%. As there was no trainee choosing the option of KPSS among the 2nd year students, there is no section allocated for it in Tables 3 and 4.

2. Findings about the 3rd Year Students (Female: 29, Male: 7)

Table 5

3rd Year Students’ Responses to Questionnaire Items Investigating the Change in terms of the Knowledge of Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading-Comprehension

	Grammar			Vocabulary			Reading		
	D	S	P	D	S	P	D	S	P
Female	17 58.62%	11 37.93%	1 3.44%	14 48.27%	10 34.48%	5 17.24%	1 3.44%	11 37.93%	17 58.62%
Male	4 57.14%	3 42.85%	0 0%	4 57.14%	2 28.57%	1 14.28%	0 0%	5 71.42%	2 28.57%
Total	21 58.33%	14 38.88%	1 2.77%	18 50%	12 33.33%	6 16.66%	1 2.77%	16 44.44%	19 52.77%

D: has deteriorated **S:** has remained the same **P:** has shown progress

As is shown in Table 5, 35 third year students (97%) think that their grammatical knowledge has either deteriorated or remained the same since the beginning of their

teacher education. Since 30 students opted for deterioration or no change, the rate (83%) can be claimed to be not much different about their vocabulary knowledge. As for reading comprehension, 19 respondents (52%) think that there has been progress. There are no outstanding differences between the males and females in terms of the opinions about the change in their grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

Table 6

3rd Year Students' Responses in terms of their GPAs

	Grammar			Vocabulary			Reading		
	D	S	P	D	S	P	D	S	P
GPA (2-3)	10	5	1	9	5	2	1	7	8
n: 16	62.50%	31.25%	6.25%	56.25%	31.25%	12.50%	6.25%	43.75%	50%
GPA (3-4)	11	9	0	9	7	4	0	9	11
n: 20	55%	45%	0%	45%	35%	20%	0%	45%	55%
Total	21	14	1	18	12	6	1	16	19
	58.33%	38.88%	2.77%	50%	33.33%	16.66%	2.77%	44.44%	52.77%
D: has deteriorated			S: has remained the same			P: has shown progress			

As the table suggests, 15 (94%) out of 16 teacher trainees with a GPA between 2 and 3 think that there has been a deterioration or no change in terms of their grammar while the rate is 20 out of 20 for those with a GPA between 3 and 4. As for vocabulary, the rates are 14 (87%) and 16 (80%) respectively. When it comes to reading comprehension, we see that there is only one person in the two groups who opted for deterioration and the rates of the teacher trainees opting for no change and progress are very similar.

Table 7

The Reasons to which the 3rd Year Students Attribute the Deterioration or Lack of Change in terms of Grammar

	Teaching			KPSS			Curriculum		
	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None
Female (n: 28)	9	18	1	5	7	16	18	7	3
	32.14%	64.28%	3.57%	17.85%	25%	57.14%	64.28%	25%	10.71%
Male (n: 7)	2	4	1	2	2	3	3	3	1
	28.57%	57.14%	14.28%	28.57%	28.57%	42.85%	42.85%	42.85%	14.28%

Total	11	22	2	7	9	19	21	10	4
	31.42%	62.85%	5.71%	22%	25.71%	54.28%	60%	28.57%	11.42%

Table 8

The Reasons to which the 3rd Year Students Attribute the Deterioration or Lack of Change in terms of Vocabulary

	Teaching			KPSS			Curriculum		
	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None
Female (n: 24)	8 33.33%	15 62.50%	1 4.34%	5 21.73%	6 26.08%	13 54.16%	14 58.33%	8 34.78%	2 8.69%
Male (n: 6)	1 16.66%	4 66.66%	1 16.66%	2 33.33%	1 16.66%	3 50%	3 50%	2 33.33%	1 16.66%
Total	9 30%	19 63.33%	2 6.66%	7 23.33%	7 23.33%	16 53.33%	17 56.66%	10 33.33%	3 10%

As the tables above suggest, the 3rd year teacher trainees have a distinctively clearer standpoint than the 2nd year students especially about the curriculum as a reason. Regarding the curriculum’s negative effect on both grammar and vocabulary knowledge, more than half of them chose the option “a lot”. It is an important point that, as is the case about the 2nd year students, relatively very low numbers of students think that the negative effect of the teaching practices and curriculum is “none”. It should also be added that KPSS exam, which is the last prerequisite for employment as a language teacher despite demanding no language proficiency from candidates, is now perceived as a factor by the 3rd year teacher trainees while there was no 2nd year student who viewed it as influential in any way. This shows around when teacher trainees begin to prepare for it with no concern over their language proficiency at all.

3. Findings about the 4th Year Students (Female: 22, Male: 14)

Table 9

4th Year Students’ Responses to Questionnaire Items Investigating the Change in terms of the Knowledge of Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading-Comprehension

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
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	D	S	P	D	S	P	D	S	P
Female	13 59.09%	7 31.81%	2 9.09%	10 45.45%	6 27.27%	6 27.27%	0 0%	2 9.09%	20 90.90%
Male	6 42.85%	5 35.71%	3 21.42%	3 21.42%	5 35.71%	6 42.85%	0 0%	6 42.85%	8 57.14%
Total	19 52.77%	12 33.33%	5 13.88%	13 36.11%	11 30.55%	12 33.33%	0 0%	8 22.22%	28 77.77%

D: has deteriorated **S:** has remained the same **P:** has shown progress

As is shown in Table 5, thirty four 4th year students (86%) think that their grammatical knowledge has either deteriorated or remained the same since the beginning of their training program. Being 24 (66%), the rate is still relatively high about vocabulary knowledge. As for reading comprehension, the results are very similar to the 2nd and 3rd year teacher trainees' scores. A considerable number of the 4th year students seem content with the change in their reading-comprehension skills. There are no outstanding differences between the males and females in terms of their opinions about how their grammar and vocabulary knowledge has been affected, which is again in accord with the findings about lower grade students.

Table 10

4th Year Students' Responses in terms of their GPAs

	Grammar			Vocabulary			Reading		
	D	S	P	D	S	P	D	S	P
GPA (2-3) n: 17	7 41.17%	5 29.41%	5 29.41%	7 41.17%	5 29.41%	5 29.41%	0 0%	4 23.52%	13 76.47%
GPA (3-4) n: 19	12 63.15%	7 36.84%	0 0%	6 31.57%	6 31.57%	7 36.84%	0 0%	4 21.05%	15 78.94%
Total	19 52.77%	12 33.33%	5 13.88%	13 36.11%	11 30.55%	12 33.33%	0 0%	8 22.22%	28 77.77%

D: has deteriorated **S:** has remained the same **P:** has shown progress

As the table suggests, 12 (70%) out of 17 teacher trainees with a GPA between 2 and 3 state that there has been a deterioration or no change in terms of their grammar while the rate is 19 (100%) out of 19 for those with a GPA between 3 and 4. As for vocabulary, the rates are 12 (70%) and 12 (63%) respectively. Concerning reading comprehension,

there is no student in the two groups who opted for deterioration and the rates of the teacher trainees opting for progress simply dominate.

Table 11

The Reasons to which the 4th Year Students Attribute the Deterioration or Lack of Change in terms of Grammar

	Teaching			KPSS			Curriculum		
	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None
Female (n: 20)	10 50%	10 50%	0 0%	8 40%	8 40%	4 20%	10 50%	9 45%	1 5%
Male (n: 11)	1 9.09%	9 81.81%	1 9.09%	4 36.36%	1 9.09%	6 54.54%	5 45.45%	6 54.54%	0 0%
Total	11 35.48%	19 61.29%	1 3.22%	12 38.70%	9 29.03%	10 32.25%	15 48.38%	15 48.38%	1 3.22%

Table 12

The Reasons to which the 4th Year Students Attribute the Deterioration or Lack of Change in terms of Vocabulary

	Teaching			KPSS			Curriculum		
	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None	A lot	Partly	None
Female (n: 16)	8 50%	8 50%	0 0%	5 31.25%	7 43.75%	4 25%	9 56.25%	7 43.75%	0 0%
Male (n: 8)	3 37.50%	4 50%	1 12.50%	2 25%	2 25%	4 50%	4 50%	4 50%	0 0%

Total	11	12	1	7	9	8	13	11	0
	45.83%	50%	4.16%	29.16%	37.50%	33.33%	54.16%	45.83%	0%

As the two tables above suggest, the 4th year teacher trainees seem to be expressing the harshest criticism against the teaching practices and curriculum. It is seen that, about the two variables in question, they are the group who produced the smallest number of “None” choices. It needs to be emphasized here that KPSS is not a factor for them more responsible for the deterioration than the teaching practices and curriculum are.

4. Results of the KPDS Exam

Table 13

Distribution of the Question Types in KPDS May 2007 Exam

1-4	Vocabulary
5-14	Grammar
15-24	Cloze Test
25-34	Sentence Completion
35-44	Translation
45-50	Paragraph Completion
51-56	Providing the Appropriate Response in Consideration of the Situation Given
57-62	Taking the Odd Sentence Out to Achieve the Unity of Meaning
63-68	Choosing the Sentence with the Closest Meaning to the One Given
69-74	Dialogue Completion
75-100	Reading-Comprehension

Table 14

Correct Answer Averages According to Each Question Type

	1-4	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-50	51-56	57-62	63-68	69-74	75-100	Total
1st Year (n: 36)	1.15	7.15	6.42	5.45	7.57	2.96	5.21	3.69	4	4.78	12.24	60.62

3rd Year (n: 36)	0.84	7.03	7.15	5.75	7.81	3.57	5.15	4.24	4.72	5.09	15.57	66.92
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As the two tables above suggest; the 3rd year students are ahead with a difference of roughly six points in total. This might seem confusing in terms of the questionnaire findings that indicate an agreement between the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students that they feel some kind of deterioration or no change about their grammatical and/or lexical knowledge. However, with a deeper look, it can be seen that the questions at which the 1st year students are superior are between 1 and 15 and it is a fact that they are the only questions “targeted directly” at measuring grammatical and lexical knowledge. On the other hand, another clear finding based on the questionnaire is that the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year teacher trainees

seem content with the development regarding their reading-comprehension. Parallel to this finding, we see that the last 25 questions of the KPDS exam are the ones in which the 3rd year students scored more than 3.5 of the total difference of nearly 6 points.

5. Findings based on the Open-ended Questionnaire Items

As mentioned before; the questionnaire used has two open-ended items, among which the first one asks respondents to mention the additional reasons to which they attribute the deterioration or lack of change if they think there has been any.

One reoccurring response to that item, among especially the 3rd and 4th year teacher trainees, is the burden of the assignments, which coincides with the finding of Peacock (2009: 267) in an Asian program that the Year 3 assignment load was too heavy and pace too fast. Students complain about the frequency and intensity of the assignments. They state that assignments prevent them from striving for self-improvement as they are de-motivating. Some representative responses are quoted below:

“To be honest, I think that some assignments and presentations are needless and given simply to fill the class hours in a way.”

“Some lecturers give assignments and act as if we had only their courses to study for. This much homework, especially when seen pointless, makes us so bored.”

“I am always in a hurry to finish assignments somehow. I cannot even think of reading in English for pleasure or self-improvement.”

Another reoccurring common response is on the lack or inadequacy of feedback to be provided about assignments and written exams. The teacher trainees seem to view effective feedback on their products as an opportunity to revise, consolidate and enhance their linguistic knowledge. A relevant quotation is below:

“We take lots of exams and do lots of assignments but we cannot see where we have made mistakes and which words we have used in a wrong way. What we get is only some grades.”

The second open-ended item of the questionnaire asks respondents to write about their offers to solve the problems causing the deterioration they have referred to. A point made almost once in every two response by the 3rd and 4th year students is that courses on grammar and lexicon taught only in the first year is not functional at all. They offer either

to study such courses at a time not far from graduation or distribute them among the four years all. Some representative responses are as follows:

“We directly study grammar and vocabulary in our courses in the 1st year. In time, we focus on different things and forget really much about it.”

“If the course of contextual grammar is to be taught, it must be in the 4th year. In our first year when my grammar knowledge was still fresh, the course did not help me a lot.”

“I have forgotten a great deal of grammar and vocabulary since my first year. I now see that I have difficulties to teaching even some very simple topics during the practicum. Besides that, we have learned lots of academic field words but forgotten many of those to be used while teaching.”

Another frequent response is about the reorganization of the curriculum. The teacher trainees offer either to be taught fewer educational courses in Turkish and literary courses or to be given the chance to choose courses on language skills instead of the abovementioned ones, both of which seem to require questioning the role and function of the general compulsory educational and literary courses.

Some exemplary responses are provided below:

“I find some courses like the history of Turkish education so needless. Instead of them, courses to improve linguistic knowledge and skills can be taught.”

“Literary courses like poetry analysis can be made elective. I should be able to choose alternative courses on language development.”

Another reoccurring response as an offer of solution is on the way the courses are taught. The idea is not making any concessions about teaching in English. A relevant quote is as follows:

“Class hours are the only chance for exposure to language in interaction.”

Discussion

The findings of the present study suggest that a considerable number of the teacher trainees (out of 108 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year students in total, 91 [84%] about grammar and 77 [71%] about vocabulary) are of the opinion that, during the process of their teacher education, there has been either deterioration or no positive change in their grammatical

and lexical knowledge of English. This can be thought to be confirmed by the results of the KPDS exam and the data provided by the open-ended questionnaire items exemplified above. Another major finding is that this is a source of concern for the teacher trainees and they attribute the existence of problems to the teaching practices and curriculum to a large extent. The 3rd and 4th year students were found to feel more concerned than the 2nd year students did, which can be ascribable to the fact that they have faced the responsibility to teach grammar in their practical courses and teaching practicum experiences in the field at schools while the 2nd year students have thus far received only pure field knowledge in classroom. A point worthy of note here is that the 3rd year students were the ones who seemed to be the most concerned group and responded to the open-ended items most extensively and expressed the strongest verbal criticism over the curriculum especially. This might be due to the fact that they were the only group who took the KPDS exam together with the 1st year students and their performance, which they stated as highly unsatisfactory, led them to further question their English proficiency level and teacher training program. Another important result of the study is that the opinions of the teacher trainee groups did not differ much in relation to the variables of gender and GPA. One exceptional finding of the study is that reading-comprehension is the only field where the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year student teachers thought they have shown considerable progress, which can also be viewed as confirmed by the 3rd year trainees' KPDS exam results. This can be attributed to their continued exposure to academic reading in the department. Experiences and observation suggests that reading course books, lecture notes and printouts is still the dominant way to prepare for the exams and classes. Reading, which can be claimed to be the least demanding skill among other skills of writing, listening and speaking, seems to be the principally required skill throughout the training program.

These findings are important in terms of the fact that we need language teachers who, in the first place, have cleared up their own problems with the language that they will be teaching. Turkey is a country where language teacher trainees have almost no chance to interact with native speakers to improve their language skills and most of the time, their teacher education process is their last opportunity to revise, consolidate and/or perfect their English in a formal environment. Here one can raise the objection that it is the students' own responsibility to preserve and improve their language proficiency, which is a point mentioned also by two or three teacher trainees as a response to the open-ended items of the questionnaire. In such a case, a counter-objection can be raised about why we teach

some language courses like contextual grammar and vocabulary in the initial phase of teacher education. If we think that they are necessary to be taught and teach them, we can also question their content and share in the curriculum as the participants of this study did when responding to the questionnaire items.

In the light of the relevant literature, the results of the study are in accordance with those of others that focus on the inadequacy of language teachers' proficiency and emphasize the fact that the need for language improvement is mostly felt in contexts where teacher trainees and teachers do not have many opportunities of interaction with speakers whose English is their L1 (Berry, 1990; Fahmy and Bilton, 1992; Cullen, 1994; Murdoch, 1994; Al-Mekhlafi, 2007; Banegas, 2007). The findings are also in harmony with studies that bring forward the need to reschedule teacher training programs based on the concern about the low level of English proficiency among prospective EFL teachers (Lima, 2001). In his study evaluating a foreign language teacher training program in Hong Kong, Peacock (2009: 267) found that a major weakness reported by the 3rd year students was the insufficiency of the "English courses targeting the linguistic competence –grammar, vocabulary and basic language skill- to consolidate their English proficiency."

In Turkey; there is no study directly focused on the issue, which is one of the facts which inspired the conduct of this study. However; it can be mentioned here that, in their evaluative piece of research on a particular teacher training program in Turkey, Coşkun and Daloğlu (2010: 35) revealed the idea of the instructors that the program focuses mainly on student teachers' pedagogic competence at the expense of their linguistic competence and there needs to be more courses to develop it. This coincides with Teddick and Walker (1995: 502) suggesting that programs that prepare teachers for foreign language and ESL settings have concentrated on the "how" without questioning the "what" together with "why" and "who". In another study about teacher trainees' reflection on their practicum experiences, Kömür (2010) found that half of the student teachers admitted that they were not proficient enough in the target language and could not teach about some grammatical structures effectively because they themselves had problems about them. This is a result in accordance with the findings of the present study characterized in the response of a participant as follows: "I sometimes ask myself if I can teach about grammar while I have problems with it." A congruent complaint is voiced in Butler's (2004: 268) study about East Asian countries, where the English teachers were found to feel least proficient in productive grammar. This cannot be considered a baseless concern. Knowing about

grammar or any other set of knowledge would not readily amount to knowing how to teach it but as is cited in Hadjioannou and Hutchinson (2010: 90), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 1) underscore the need to have a solid foundation in understanding and applying English grammatical structures by arguing that “the more teachers know about grammar, the more expeditiously they should be able to raise a learner’s consciousness about how language works.”

That only 1st and 3rd year teacher trainees took the KPDS exam is a major limitation of the study. If 2nd and 4th year students had taken the exam too and given a performance worse than or close to that of the 1st year trainees, the findings and arguments of the study could be supported more strongly. As another important limitation of the study; it should be mentioned that, due to the adopted methodology based on the indicative capacity of KPDS; productive abilities and communicative competence of foreign language teacher trainees, which is essential for teachers to facilitate learning in today's communicative classrooms (Halley and Fox, 2001), is out of the scope. As a matter of fact; what Yılmaz (2005: 15) reports about it in relation to Turkey is the inability of student teachers to make use of the foreign language for their communicative purposes, which is an idea welcomed also by many participants of the present study who needed to add their overlapping complaints even though the open-ended questionnaire items did not demand it specifically. As another limitation, it can be indicated that the qualitative component of the study could have been strengthened via interviews with the student teachers and their instructors about the results.

Conclusion

This study was inspired by several studies in different parts of the world which focus on how proficient language teachers are and/or should be. The researchers perceived this issue as an important problem in Turkey as well and discovered that a considerable number of the participating teacher trainees feel either deterioration or no positive change in their grammatical and lexical knowledge, which are constituents of general language proficiency and contribute to every language skill. In Turkey, the inadequacy of the studies on the issue could make one think that we are either content with the proficiency level of our prospective language teachers or tend to ignore the existing problems.

Overall, this study is important as an attempt to draw attention to an issue not investigated extensively enough in Turkey yet. By doing so, it has aimed to generate ideas

about a new research agenda and reconsideration of foreign language teacher training programs in the country. Further research with bigger samples and multiple measurement tools can be conducted on different components of teacher trainees' linguistic competence and on how related problems can be solved.

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Appendix A

Değerli öğretmen adayları,

Bu anket, aldığımız öğretmenlik eğitiminin etkileri ve sonuçları hakkında sizlerden görüş edinmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Veriler ve bulgular araştırma amaçlı kullanılacaktır. Katılım tamamen gönüllülük esasına dayalıdır. 7. ve 8. Sorular için yanıtlarınızı anket kâğıdının arka kısmına yazabilirsiniz.

Cinsiyet: **Sınıf/Şube:** **GANO:**

1) Öğretmenlik eğitiminiz sürecinde, İngilizce gramer bilginizdeki değişimi nasıl tanımlarsınız?

- a) Gerileme oldu b) Aynı kaldı c) Gelişme gösterdi

2) Öğretmenlik eğitiminiz sürecinde, kelime bilginizdeki değişimi nasıl tanımlarsınız?

- a) Gerileme oldu b) Aynı kaldı c) Gelişme gösterdi

3) Öğretmenlik eğitiminiz sürecinde, okuma-anlama becerinizdeki değişimi nasıl tanımlarsınız?

- a) Gerileme oldu b) Aynı kaldı c) Gelişme gösterdi

* Yukarıdaki üç sorunun herhangi birinde “a” ya da “b” yanıtı verdiyseniz, bu sonucun ortaya çıkmasında

4) derslerin işleniş şekli ne kadar etkili oldu?

- a) Çok fazla b) Kısmen c) Hiç etkisi olmadı

5) KPSS sınavına girecek olmanız ne kadar etkili oldu?

- a) Çok fazla b) Kısmen c) Hiç etkisi olmadı

6) müfredat programı ne kadar etkili oldu?

- a) Çok fazla b) Kısmen c) Hiç etkisi olmadı

7) Bunların dışında veya bunlara ek olarak neden ya da nedenler öngörüyorsanız, lütfen belirtiniz:

8) Etkili olduğunu düşündüğünüz nedenleri ortadan kaldırmak için çözüm önerilerinizi yazınız: Katkılarınız için teşekkürler...

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