Theory–practice dichotomy: Prospective teachers' evaluations about teaching English to young learners

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the prospective teachers' evaluations about the implementation of the primary ELT curriculum. Also it is aimed to inquire the possible problems and difficulties in teaching English to children. The study is based on qualitative case study design. Qualitative data were collected using participant journaling method from 31 preservice teachers who kept reflective journals throughout their observations of five mentor teachers. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis method by coding and creating categories/themes. Results showed that actual practices do not adequately meet the curricular and theoretical requirements in terms of objectives, content, learning-teaching experiences and evaluation. This theory-practice dichotomy about teaching English to children mainly includes the problems such as non-communicative objectives, failure to appeal students emotionally, overdominance of coursebooks and grammar content over communicative content, use of restricted methodology, ineffective use of technology and materials, insecure (coercive, aggressive, and discriminative) classroom atmosphere, lack of or inproper use of game activities, lack of group or pair work, failure to consider individual differences, lack or inappropriate integration of language skills, improper process evaluation, inadequate feedback, and traditional evaluation practices.

Keywords: Preservice ELT teachers, reflective journals, practicum, young learners, curriculum evaluation

Özet

Bu çalışma, öğretmen adaylarının ilköğretim İngilizce dersi öğretim programının uygulanmasıyla ilgili görüşlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca çocuklara İngilizce öğretiminde karşılaşılan sorunların ve güçlüklerin incelenmesi de amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmada nitel durum çalışması deseni kullanılmıştır. Nitel verilerin toplanmasında katılımcıların yazdıkları günlükler kullanılmıştır. Bu amaçla İngilizce öğretmenliği programının son sınıfına devam eden 31 öğretmen adayından okul deneyimi dersi kapsamında gözlemledikleri beş İngilizce öğretmeninin derslerine dair yansıtıcı günlükler tutmaları istenmiştir. Elde edilen veriler nitel içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılarak incelenmiş, kodlamalar yapılarak araştırmanın amacı doğrultusunda kategoriler/temalar oluşturulmuştur. Yapılan incelemeler sonucunda katılımcıların gözlemledikleri derslerdeki uygulamaların; amaç, içerik, öğrenme ve öğretme süreçleri ve değerlendirme boyutları açısından gerek dersin programının gerekse ilgili alan yazının gereklerini yeterince karşılamadığı görülmüştür. Elde edilen bulgulara göre çocuklara İngilizce öğretimi konusunda kuram ve uygulama arasında bu ikiliğin yaşanmasına neden olan sorunlar şöyle sıralanabilir: dersin hedeflerinin iletişimsel dil öğretiminden uzaklaşması, öğrencilere duyuşsal açıdan yeterince hitap edilememesi, ders kitaplarının ve kitaplardaki dilbilgisi içeriğinin iletişimsel içeriğin önüne geçmesi, sınırlı yöntem kullanımı, teknoloji ve materyallerin etkisiz kullanımı, güvensiz (zorlayıcı, agrasif ve ayrımcı) bir sınıf atmosferi, oyun etkinliklerinin yetersizliği ya da yanlış uygulanması, gruplu ya da eşli çalışmaların yetersizliği, bireysel farklılıkların dikkate alınmaması, bazı dil becerilerinin ihmal edilmesi ya da dil becerilerinin birbirleriyle doğru bir şekilde bütünleştirilememesi, uygun olmayan süreç değerlendirmesi, yetersiz geribildirim ve geleneksel değerlendirme etkinlikleri.

Anahtar sözcükler: Aday İngilizce öğretmenleri, yansıtıcı günlükler, staj, çocuklara yabancı dil öğretimi, program değerlendirme

1. Introduction

In foreign language teaching, age is one of the most critical individual differences (Matsuoka & Smith, 2008; Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2004). This significance mainly

stems from the developmental features, especially weaknesses and strengths of the learners from different age groups, such as children, adolescents, and adults (Harmer, 2007). Among those age groups especially the first one has become fashionable in terms of teaching English in many countries in Europe during the last few decades (Brewster et al., 2004). Many governments have put compulsory English education in their curricula (Afia, 2006; Shin, 2006). Given all these efforts to provide young learners with English as early as possible, the main challenge seems to make sure that the instruction they receive is developmentally appropriate, pedagogically sound, as well as culturally responsive (Koller, 2006). Yet, before dwelling on the quality of instruction provided for young learners, some points should be clarified both for professional teachers and especially for the parents of young learners: Who is the young learner?, Why is it important to teach English to young learners?, How to teach English to young learners? What is the curriculum for young learners like in Turkey?

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   Who is the young learner?

There is a general agreement in the literature about the definition of young language learners. Slatterly and Willis (2001) define the young learners as those between 7–12 years old while very young learners are defined as under 7 years of age. Scott and Ytreberg (2001) distinguish between two groups of young learners, one between 5-7 and another 8-11, considering mainly their ability to perceive the abstract and concrete. The Turkish primary curriculum for teaching English (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2006) defines the 'young learners' as the children from the first year of formal schooling (6 years old, in our case) to 12 years of age.

What underlies these age thresholds is mainly the question "When is it too late for a child to acquire a foreign/second language?". Some researchers answer this question within the framework of a broader issue called *critical period* (Gordon, 2007; Johnson & Newport, 1989, 1991). Lenneberg (1967, as cited in Singleton, 1995) defines critical period as a biologically or a neurologically based period which ends around age 12 (the onset of puberty), beyond which a conscious and laboured effort replaces natural and effortless

language acquisition process. To Lennenberg, around puberty, with the the specialisation of the dominant hemisphere of the brain for language functions (the lateralisation process), critical period ends (as cited in Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Some psycholinguists advocate that with the completion of brain lateralization and loss of the plasticity of the brain after critical period, one's language aptitude declines (Agullo, 2006; Demirezen, 2003; Gordon, 2007: 56; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Robertson, 2002; Zhao & Morgan, 2004). Although it is maintained that the ability to acquire a language naturally does not disappear at puberty at all (Krashen, 1981), acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood are generally believed to achieve higher second language proficiency in the long run than those beginning as adults (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979; Long, 1990). Birdsong also (1999) highlights that one real advantage of having children start learning English at an early age is that they are better equipped to develop English language acquisition. This is also backed by some recent researches using innovative brain mapping technique which is able to obtain three dimensional scans of the brain (Gordon, 2007). According to the findings of these studies the area responsible for language learning goes through a furious growth from around age 6 to the onset of puberty. Contrary to this absolute "younger is better" approach, some researchers (e.g., Selinger, and Walsh & Diller) argue that young learners are better at some lower order skills such as pronunciation, while higher-order skills, such as grammar, depend more on further maturing of the brain beyond puberty (as cited in Singleton, 1995). Similarly, the young learners are proved to be best at comprehension and storytelling in addition to pronunciation (Brewster et al., 2004). As a matter of fact, it can be inferred that it would be advantageous for language learners to start studying English within a critical period - before 12 or 13 years old - so that they can enjoy the developmental benefits of that period (Shin, 2006).

2.2. *Why is it important to teach English to young learners?*

As emphasized above, one main reason for teaching English to young learners is the convenience of their age for language acquisition. The belief that "younger is better" and children learn much more quickly and efficiently is generally appreciated by many,

especially by the supporters of *Critical Period Hypothesis* (Brewster et al., 2004; Robinson, 2003). Another reason for the popularity of teaching English to young learners is because it is a *lingua franca* today, which means a common language used for communication between two people whose languages are different (Harmer, 2007). Thus, especially parents want their children to learn English as early as possible so that they will be able to benefit from English as an important part of their academic and business career in the future.

Teaching English to young learners also has gained importance as English has become a part of international policy, at least in European Union context. Today all EU citizens are encouraged to have a European Language Portfolio (ELP). No matter what their ages are, people keep a personal record to show their interaction with other languages and other people from different cultural backgrounds. Given the main purposes of ELP, some benefits of this broad language learning policy can be said to include fostering children's tolerance towards other cultures, maintaining free movement across Europe, having an opportunity to evaluate one's own language learning, and getting motivated for life-long learning (Brewster et al., 2004).

Moreover there are empirical results in favor of the positive effects of early English education. Katsuyama, Nishigaki and Wang (2008) found in their research on 1466 elementary school children in Japan that children who took English lessons in elementary school had more aptitude and interest towards learning English than the children who didn't receive any English. Thus, positive impressions and attitudes with regard to early language learning experiences are likely to fuel the learner's desire for further language learning. Yet, of course children's skills and appetite for learning English are supposed to be developed and sustained on the condition that they first start to learn it according to the pedagogical principles, which will be discussed below. If children's first experience of learning English is unpleasant, they may grow up with powerfully negative feelings towards the language (Dönryei, 2001; Schindler, 2006).

2.3.   How to teach English to young learners?

This question requires the deepest and widest consideration, which needs long volumes. Yet, here it is best to mention about the most general and widely accepted points. While teaching English, children's needs, emotions, ideas about learning process as well as their physical, cognitive, and affective abilities should be taken into consideration. While their levels of proficiency seem to be dependent on many factors including type of program and curriculum, number of hours spent in English class, and techniques and activities used (Shin, 2006), there is an agreement in the literature about the priority of affective objectives. Schindler (2006) highlights that the main aim of early language education should be to hook students when they're young and keep them interested in learning English for the rest of their lives. This pedagogical hook can be achieved by providing children with a safe, entertaining, and educational environment, thus making them feel competent and confident while learning English sustainably (Dörnyei, 2007; Schindler, 2006; Scott & Ytreberg, 2001).

Children are born with a natural appetite and interest for learning, and their desire to learn should be fueled when they begin school (Cameron, 2001). Teachers have the most important roles in creating an encouraging emotional atmosphere in the classroom. Thus, a cooperative rather than competitive atmosphere (especially including a winner and some physical reward) works better with young learners (Scott and Ytreberg, 2001). The students should feel that they are winning and having fun altogether. Yet this should not be understood as enjoying with little learning. The motto should be learning by enjoying. Children especially have fun with movement and physical participation, and the more fun the students have the better they will remember the language learned (Shin, 2006). As Scott and Ytreberg (2001) emphasize children's understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears, and the physical world is dominant at all times.

In this respect Total Physical Response (TPR) method by James Asher is a very popular method among teachers of young learners, because it requires the children to listen and physically respond to a series of instructions from the teacher (Larsen-Freeman, 2000;

Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Involving students in making visuals and realia, called craft activities, (such as painting, making puppets, origami, play doughs etc.) can be physically satisfying for the young learners, as well (Shin, 2006). When possible other activities can also be embedded with physical movements. A singing activity, for example, can be coupled with dancing easily, or a story can be transformed into role-play activity. Yet, teachers should be careful not to keep the tempo of the lessons at a stable pace. That is, activities should not always be physical and fast or vice versa. A variety of activities with different paces and tempos are necessary since children have a short attention span (Scott & Ytreberg, 2001; Shin, 2006).

A sound pre-existing knowledge and recycled language can be provided to the students by establishing routines (Cameron, 2001; Scott & Ytreberg, 2001). Routine classroom language such as "Good morning!", "Sit down!", "Stand up!" "Who wants to play….", "I want a volunteer!" etc. and routine classroom activities such as "Painting time, "Singing time", "Story time" can build up a core language at the beginning of the year, which the students can handle and use themselves. Preferably, these routines should be thematically consistent, that is, activities, songs, and stories should be built on recycling the curricular language content in time lapses. Also these routines make students feel secure and maintain motivation as these activities take children's attention and ensure the learners to know what is going on, what will come next (Brewster et al., 2004; Scott & Ytreberg, 2001; Shin, 2006). Gradually the students can build on this core language by receiving even richer comprehensible input through listening to/watching teacher while reading or telling a story loudly (Mixon & Temu, 2006). Or especially videos and television can be useful tools in language classes on the condition that they are graded according to the students' level, short enough (5-10 minutes), and in the suitable genre such as cartoon, animation etc. (Phillips, 1994).

No matter which activity the teacher uses, young learners should be supported by contextualizing the language with visuals, realia, and mime and gestures (Brewster et al., 2004; Gordon, 2007). Such contextualization should match the meanings in the stories that the teacher tells or songs that she sings to provide comprehensible input (Shin, 2006). In

addition, teachers shouldn't forget the importance of peripheral learning: enriching classroom with printed objects such as posters and flashcards. These may help children acquire the print awareness subconsciously (Brewster et al., 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Coursebooks, which are considered as the main material of a lesson by many, should be selected and used very carefully. If coursebooks dominate the lesson and control the teaching, the communicative continuum is at stake (Harmer, 2007). Then it is better to use the coursebook as a framework in which you paint your own picture depending on your students' needs and interests.

As it can be understood, teacher's role in this process is highly demanding. They should adapt their language, teaching techniques and methods, and the emotional, cognitive and physical atmosphere in the classroom according to the children's needs and readiness; otherwise, a successful learning cannot be achieved. As more knowledgeable and skillful persons, teachers are responsible for scaffolding the children as suggested by Bruner (as cited in Brewster et al., 2004). What is more, teachers should expose the children with target language as much as possible throughout the process (Harmer, 2007; Moon, 2000). Although using L1 is somewhat useful especially in lower levels, L1 use should be integrated and balanced carefully. Also, L1 culture can be used e.g. by involving stories and contexts that the students have previously experienced with in their L1 (Ytreberg, 1997). This will help the young learners connect a completely new language with the background knowledge they already have (Shin, 2006).

As for the evaluation of the young learners' performances in the very early stages of learning, formal evaluation including written/oral tests or quizzes should be avoided as they threaten the students (Edelenbos, 1997; Harmer, 2007). Instead, a process-oriented formative evaluation including observing, detecting, and reporting the weaknesses and strengths of children should be preferred (Edelenbos, 1997; Scott & Ytreberg, 2001). Moreover, students should be encouraged to make self-evaluation to become aware of their own weak and strong sides (Brewster et al., 2004; Moon, 2000). Self-evaluation may be done with a rather general judgment using such items as "I found this activity boring"; "I didn't concentrate well today"; "I have made good progress this term." Young learners may

mark such judgments with symbols, perhaps a happy face to indicate agreement and a sad face to indicate the contrary, or a sun and a cloud (Little & Perclová, 2001). More constructivist ways of assessment such as diary writing, learning logs, self assessment and portfolio evaluation can also be useful with the young learners, since giving formal exams and grades shall spoil the positive emotional atmosphere we want to create.

2.4. Turkish Curriculum for young learners

Teaching English to young learners at state primary schools is a recent issue in Turkey. A primary EFL program for young learners was launched at 4th and 5th grades in 1997-1998 school year (Demirezen, 2003; Kırkgöz, 2007). To Kırkgöz (2007) this curriculum was the first to introduce the communicative language teaching approach to Turkey. However, some researchers argue that this 1997 curriculum failed to have a communicative impact either because of large classes, lack of sources, inadequacy of lesson hours (2 hours a week), and in-service training (Büyükduman, 2005) or because of teachers' use of traditional teaching methods (Kırkgöz, 2007). Moreover, there are also findings about the inadequacy of affective objectives and failure to realize the intended affective objectives of the 1997 curriculum (Er, 2006).

Following the comprehensive curriculum development studies between in 2004 at primary level, the primary EFL curriculum was also renewed and implemented as of 2006-2007 school year (MoNE, 2006). This new curriculum favors the principles of a constructivist understanding with a learner and learning centered, process oriented instructional approach using more varied, task-based as well as communicative activities such as dramatization, student conversation, stories, games, chants, rhymes, craft activities etc. (MoNE, 2006; Zehir Topkaya & Küçük, 2009).

The curriculum for teaching English at primary level from 4th grade to 8th (MoNE, 2006, p. 38) specifies that,

> It should be borne in mind that regardless of their age, children need input that is comprehensible, developmentally appropriate, redundant (repeatedly received from a variety of sources), and accurate (grammatically correct with proper word choice and pronunciation). They are eager to use the language productively when it is functional and communicative (representative of actual speech and personally relevant), frequent (ample opportunities to practice), redundant (speak repeatedly on the

same topic), and consistent with their identity (less formal, peer-oriented, expressive use of language). The classroom context should be supportive and motivating, communicative and referential (speaking in real time, about real events and objects, to accomplish real goals), developmentally appropriate, and feedback rich (no formal correction but feedback and correction in the process of natural communication).

Beside this all-embracing approach, the curriculum restricts its scope and defines the 4th and 5th graders (aged 10 – 12 year-olds) as young learners and lists their characteristics together with some instructional implications and what-to-dos (MoNE, 2006, p. 38):

1. The young learners are characterized with short attention span, which necessitates greater range of activities in class.

2. They have the knowledge of the world growing, thus more topics can be included in the lessons.

3. Children can properly take learning more seriously, thus can be given responsibility by working independently.

4. But they are still children; thus, they have a need for security and pleasure, which necessitates the teacher to be sensitive to their needs and moods.

5. Moreover, they are cooperative with their friends and can do more group or pair works.

6. Furthermore children have their intellectual, motor and social skills developing; thus, they can be challenged more through more demanding activities.

7. Lastly, they are getting more aware of their learning strategies, which increases the individual differences in the class. Thus, teachers need to provide variety of methods and techniques and topics to personalize their learning experience.

Based on the above mentioned characteristics of young learners, the curriculum suggests that young learners' syllabus should include the following activities with their benefits (MoNE, 2006):

1. Singing: it helps to acquire a sense of rhythm.

2. Songs, rhymes/chants: they are wonderful means of teaching stress and intonation patterns.

3. Games, including musical ones: they constitute a context for language use for children. They become themselves when they play or sing.

4. Games and songs: they contribute to socialization.

5. Craft activities: they give children a sense of accomplishment.

6. Physical and mental involvement in the production of something concrete and useful makes children forget about the formal side of teaching which often proves counterproductive.

Moreover, Kırkgöz (2007) suggests that the curriculum provides the know-how about the medium of instruction (use of L1 and L2), how to implement game, story, singing, and drama activities, and preparing and implementing evaluation materials. Also Kırkgöz (2009) states that the coursebooks used with young learners at fourth grade are able to meet pupils' needs in terms of language, outline, content, methodology, and language skills.

2.5. *The purpose of the study*

As it can be understood from the reviews above, the formal primary curriculum for teaching English has a great deal in common with the relevant literature about teaching English to children (Ersen-Yanık, 2008). From a curriculum evaluation perspective, however, some feedback about the successful implementation of the curriculum is needed. Thus, in this study, it was aimed to examine the prospective teachers' evaluations about the implementation of the primary ELT curriculum. Also, it was aimed to inquire the possible problems and difficulties in teaching English to young learners.

3. Method

3.1. *Research Design*

This qualitative study is based on case study design. It aims to analyze one or several cases within their limitations (place, time etc.) (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). The data

for this case study were collected using participant journaling method (Hatch, 2002). According to participant journaling method, participants agree to keep some kind of written record of their experiences and reflections during the research process, and these records are shared with researchers and become data for their studies. These reflective journals are kind of "annotated chronological records or 'logs' of experiences and events" (as cited in Faizah, 2008). The data obtained from these journals were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis aims at providing knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). It involves "recording and analyzing various forms of print or visual texts to see how they handle that particular phenomenon" (Biklen & Casella, 2007, p. 6).

3.2. *Participants*

Participants were 31 senior ELT students at İnönü University who had had 116 credit courses during the first three years, nearly half of which were about teaching in general or teaching English in particular. These candidate students were instructed to write reflective journals based on their observations during the EFL lessons conducted by five mentor teachers at practice schools during the first semester of the 2008-2009 school year. The classes they attended were composed of rather young learners, i.e. 4th, 5th, 6th graders, children at the age of 9 to 12-13 (MoNE, 2006). The mentor teachers were 5 female ELT teachers (with pseudonyms: Derya, Merve, Esin, Lale, and Cemile) from 5 different primary schools. They had teaching experiences ranging between 5-25 years. As the teachers were chosen by the school principals based on the criteria of capability to provide pedagogical models to candidate teachers, they were assumed to be suitable for critical case sampling method in terms of qualitative purposive sampling (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). According to critical case sampling method, if a hypothesis is not proven in a certain case (*critical case*), then it is already not proven in other similar cases or vice versa. In this study, although it is not intended to generalize the results, it is assumed that if these mentor teachers nominated by school principals are not adequate in terms of applying the principles of teaching English to young learners both in relevant literature and the curriculum, then their colleagues may already not be adequate, but not the vice versa.

3.3. Data collection

Participants were asked to keep the reflective journals as a part of 3 credit course called School Experience. According to the definition by Council of Higher Education (CoHE, 2009), the course includes observing a school day of an in-service teacher and students, observing how a teacher organizes a lesson and what stages she divides her lesson, how she applies the instructional methods and techniques, what kind of activities she uses, what she does for classroom management and control, how she finishes the lesson, and how she evaluates the students' works; analyzing the organizational structure of the school, how the principal performs his/her duty, and school's relations with the society in which it takes place, and preparing a portfolio filing students' works during school experience. The content of the journals written by preservice EFL teachers who reflect about their observations regarding their mentor teachers' teaching English to young learners constituted the main data for this study. The preservice teachers were mainly asked and instructed to keep their journals considering the consistency between the quality of instruction in the practice schools and the curricular/theoretical principles about teaching English to young learners. To provide a more definite framework, participants were given four categories i.e. *objectives, content, learning-teaching process,* and *evaluation* to observe and reflect about. Participants were encouraged to write their journals weekly and either e-mail or hand it to the researcher on a regular basis.

3.4. Data analysis

The input received from the practitioners was regularly recorded to the Nvivo 8 qualitative analysis software program. Each participant (*P*) was defined with a number and the name of the mentor teacher observed (e.g. *P1 observing Lale*). Data were systematically coded according to themes and certain categories were obtained. To make more reliable analysis and interpretations, journal entries by different preservice teachers about one certain teacher were compared to check agreement and consistency. Finally, findings about the mentor teachers were shared with the participants observing them to check to what extent researcher's comments match their reflections (British Sociological Association

Medical Sociology Group, 1996; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). The emerging themes were presented and commented using direct quotations from the participants.

3.5. *Limitations of the study*

Although Hatch (2002, p. 141) points to the strength of this type of journaling in terms of providing "a direct path into the insights of participants" as individuals comfortably express their feelings, ideas, and insights as powerful data, participants may not preserve their objectivity in favor of or against the mentor teacher. Thus, it is assumed that some participants' reflections might be based on some biased observations. Therefore, in order to control the possible biased observations and comments, the researcher constantly sought for consistency between the comments by different practitioners about the same mentor teacher.

4. Findings

The findings of this qualitative study are presented in the order of *objectives*, *content*, *teaching-learning experience*, and *evaluation*, which are the components of ELT curriculum for young learners. A general visualized demonstration of the findings showing the resulting themes and number of journal entries/codings can be seen in Figure 1.
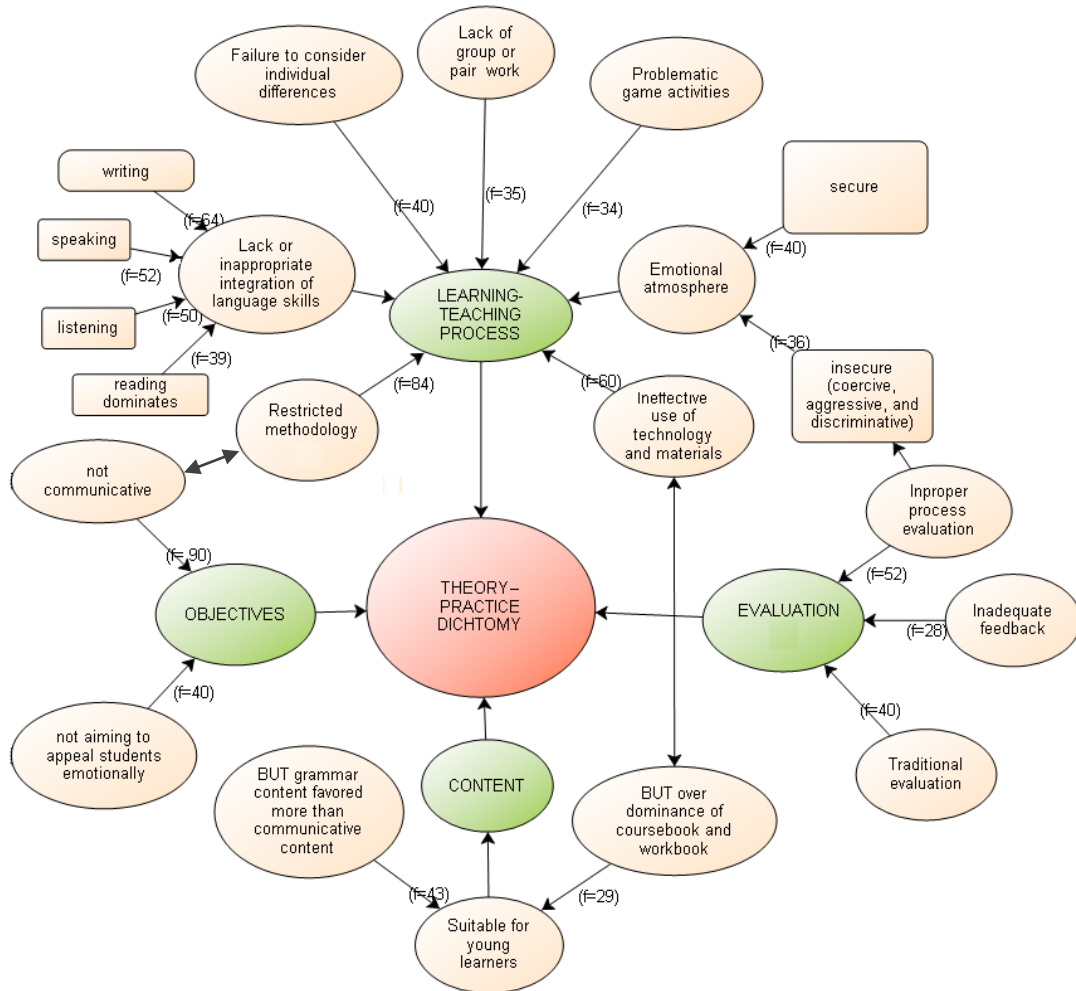
Figure 1.

Visualized demonstration of resulting categorical themes [Frequencies (f) refer to the number of journal entries/codings].

4.1. Objectives

The journal entries by participants generally agree on the inconsistency of the practices in general with the actual curriculum and principles of literature on teaching English to young learners. About 90% (n=28) of the participants stated that curricular and pedagogical requirements of primary EFL they have learned at university is more comprehensible and richer than what they have actually observed during their practicum:

> *What we have learned at university does not have the slightest match with what is going on actually.* [P1 observing Deniz]

The practices I observed seriously breach the specified goals and contemporary constructivist teaching approaches, and still repeat the traditional grammar-based goals and instructional practices… [P2 observing Esin]

It is very oblivious that children do not know why they learn English…They seem they just have to… [P11 observing Lale]

A systematic analysis of the journal entries about the comments on the curricular goals revealed criticisms about two main categories: to teach functional and communicative aspects of English and to create a liking towards English. In terms of the former one about 77% (n=24) of the participants were found to have a total of 90 entries stating that actual instructional activities do not serve a communicative purpose to improve the ability to speak or write in real time, about real events and objects, to accomplish real goals as mentioned in the curriculum (MoNE, 2006). On the contrary, there was an agreement in journal entries about the dominance of especially classical grammar-translation method and secondarily audio-lingual method:

Surprisingly nothing is communicative… [P2 observing Esin]

I don't think teachers have the slightest idea about the acquisition of a foreign language in the communicative way. [P4 observing Esin]

I usually find the teacher try to explain something, sometimes using her mimes and gestures, but it is done rather in Turkish than in English, which means students are not exposed to any communicative comprehensible input. [P8 observing Esin]

I have been witnessing classes where children are taught only grammar and vocabulary. [P6 observing Lale]

Lessons are very monotonous with the teacher telling the class the grammar point first followed by controlled practices in the book. [P27 observing Merve]

The most communicative moments were when the children were asked to memorize the dialogues and recite or answer to teachers' questions about the dialogues. [P22 observing Merve].

There is no natural communication stimulated with information gap or relevant to the students' real lives - I mean some cuddle effect...[P20 observing Lale]

I have not yet seen any activity in which there is some meaningful speaking… I cannot qualify reciting the memorized dialogues as communicative, which is what is done solely for the sake of speaking. [P1 observing Derya]

Lessons are based on accuracy in terms of grammar rather than fluency in terms of speaking or writing. [P12 observing Merve]

Teacher is more driven by the Nation-wide Diagnostic Exam (SBS) than the curricular objectives, thus lessons are more test- and grammar-oriented than communicative. [P7 observing Cemile]

Especially for the 6th and higher classes SBS exam seems to be a controlling agent, since some journal entries mention that teachers feel themselves obliged to deviate from the curriculum for the sake of preparation to SBS. Moreover, some practitioners quote that this obligation is posed on them by students and their parents:

Teacher once said "I have to complete the list of topics and exercises in the coursebook and workbook. And it requires teaching grammar. This is what the students and their parents ask us to do since their children will take SBS". [P12 observing Merve].

What is paradoxical in this argument is the pseudo inconsistency between the curriculum and the national exam (SBS) both prepared by the Ministry of Education. A quick look at the multiple-choice questions in this SBS exam will prove that it is not grammar based, but based on communicative, situational, and functional use of English contextualized with visuals as much as possible. Thus, the argument about the grammar-richness of the SBS exam fails to be realistic, but perhaps is a good means to excuse the teacher's grammar-based instruction.

On the other hand, about 55% (n=17) of the participants were found to have a total of 40 entries stating that most teachers' do not effort so much to appeal the students emotionally in order to give them some appetite for learning English, despite the fact that especially the new beginners are very enthusiastic about learning a foreign language:

There are lots of 4th and 5th graders who are very fond of learning English but when it comes to 6th, 7th and 8th graders their passion seem to have faded away. [P18 observing

Merve]

The youngest students, as far as I have observed, have an immense desire to learn a foreign language, but the practices are short of satisfying this desire…the teacher hardly ever uses materials and activities to make the lessons more enjoyable. [P28 observing Cemile]

Teachers seem to know about the proper methodology, yet they do not implement them. They even find them as utopia. Thus students lose their like for the lesson… [P10 observing Esin]

Just because of the teacher teaches English students see English as a mass of rules and formulas, thus they fail to develop some liking for English. Even I get bored… no games…no visual contextualization other than those in book. [P25 observing Cemile]

In some cases, especially with Lale, it proved that the objective to motivate young learners can be achieved more pedagogically:

When teacher uses some extra material such as English cartoons, and songs which students watch or sing and they play simple English games, students get motivated and indulged in the lesson, and after this engagement she passes on following the coursebook. [P30 observing Lale]

In other cases, especially for Derya, the reason why students like the lesson was not because of the way English was taught through entertaining pedagogical practices, but because of teacher's personality:

The teacher is loved by her students. However, I think this is not because she teaches English enjoyably and successfully. [P1 observing Derya]

….Despite these methodological and pedagogical lacks, students seem to love her very much because she is very kind to them, which indirectly caused the students to love English lessons. [P14 observing Derya]

Although I have not yet observed any remarkable enjoyable communicative activities, especially 4th graders are extremely willing and enthusiastic about learning English. They love their English teacher very much. They always rush around her during the breaks. [P23 observing Derya].

> *She was not the kind of teacher who puts the screws on.* [P5 observing Derya]
>
> *....I think this was because she is not compulsive.* [P26 observing Derya]

These findings suggest that, when coupled with diversified activities all developmentally appropriate to motivate young learners, teachers' tolerance and similar affective support can build a sound basis to keep young learners interested in learning English for the rest of their lives (Schindler, 2006).

4.2. Content

The term *content* refers to the answer to the question "what to teach." In other words, it is the language input young learners are exposed to through the coursebook, teacher, additional materials like tales, stories, songs etc. The analysis of the journal entries reflecting the observations of prospective teachers revealed that about 84% (n=26) of the participants were found to have a total of 72 entries commenting about the content. One common view (29 entries) was about the excessive use/over dominance of coursebook and workbook:

> *Teacher is like a guide who hurries to finish the coursebook.* [P28 observing Cemile]
>
> *The teacher is teaching strictly following the coursebook and she never brings in extra content.* [P23 observing Derya]
>
> *Teacher is strictly following the coursebook.* [P16 observing Esin]

In general participants (n=20) agree that coursebook content is suitable for young learners as it is designed for young language learners, but they also point (43 entries) that teachers favor the grammar content rather than using learner-based communicative content such as dialogues, stories, songs by integrating several language skills:

> *Units contain dialogues and songs, which are suitable for the age group, but the teacher rarely uses them.* [P13 observing Esin]
>
> *As far as I have observed, the teacher has not used any tales, fables, stories or songs....she teaches the grammar directly and asks the students to note them down.* [P10 observing Esin]

> *First focusing on the grammar points, teacher continues with the exercises.* [P25 observing Cemile]
>
> *After telling the grammar point teacher passes on a question-answer session.* [P23 observing Derya]

Among others, only Lale's class seems to represent the best practices in terms of content:

> *Although she teaches based on the coursebook, she does her best to expose the students with suitable English content through cartoon movies, animations, songs, rhymes available in the special English classroom...* [P11 observing Lale]
>
> *She usually teaches using the coursebook...but students have the opportunity to listen to songs and watch cartoons.* [P29 observing Lale]

4.3. Learning-Teaching Process

Learning–teaching process is concerned with the question "How to teach". After the journal entries about this question were coded and categorized, certain aspects of learning-teaching process were found to be emphasized including (in the order of number of entries) methodology, educational technologies and materials, emotional classroom atmosphere, language skills, individual differences, grouping, and games and physical movement respectively.

4.3.1. Methodology

As it was discussed earlier in the *objectives* part, almost all of the participants are found to have criticisms against poor methodology mainly restricted to grammar-translation method (GTM) and a simplified version of audio-lingual method (a total of 84 entries):

> *Instead of using a methodology through which students can develop communicative competence, the teacher employs GTM and audio-lingual practices……...Grammar is taught deductively….. Exercises contain no information, opinion, or reasoning gap.* [P7 observing Cemile]
>
> *Teacher is indeed making remarkable effort to teach English, but unfortunately she cannot avoid using grammar-translation method. I think this is because she did not graduate from ELT department.* [P1 observing Derya]

These young children are taught more or less in the way adults are taught a foreign language: very abstractly and through explanations about rules. [P10 observing Esin]

Soon I realized that students try to translate whatever the teacher says into English. [P20 observing Lale]

Classes are dominated by classical methodology: grammar is priority. [P18 observing Merve]

Speaking means memorizing the dialogues and answering the controlled practice questions…..Lessons are so translation-based that students have become translators. [P22 observing Merve]

It is evident that the presentation, practice and production (PPP) sequence of audio-lingual method is poorly applied usually omitting the communicative production stage:

She is entering into classroom, saying "Good morning!", presenting the language item in the coursebook and passing on the controlled practices. [P3 observing Cemile]

Teacher uses question-answer method…After finishing telling the lesson (presentation)*, she asks questions and seeks for responses* (practice). [P23 observing Derya]

She generally uses PPP sequence and Audio-lingual method. Students have got accustomed to this monotonous way so much that they have become "examplematics," who give examples with fixed words/phrases or sentences. [P20 observing Lale].

Activities are generally controlled practices….no room for free activities. [P9 observing Lale]

4.3.2. Instructional Technologies and Materials

The journal entries (60 entries) by most of the participants repeatedly pointed to the lack of suitable facilities, technologies and materials, with a special emphasis on peripheral learning materials. As it was mentioned in the *contents* part, the main material used was coursebooks and workbooks:

My first material use with young learners was an extraordinary moment….To illustrate simply, when I brought in some extra materials (e.g. visuals, realia and a puppet), what I had was strange looks from students. [P2 observing Esin]

I haven't seen any instructional technologies used or visual materials hang on the walls. [P9 observing Esin]

Since the cassettes have not been obtained…, listening activities have been reduced to dialogues loudly read by the teacher. [P5 observing Derya]

I have not witnessed any materials other than the coursebook used… Students liked the puppets I used during the lesson and they thanked me during the break. [P27 observing Merve]

Although Lale had the best conditions and facilities in terms of instructional technologies and materials, she was not found to be effective in using them:

There are pictures, dialogues, a calendar, a chart with the names of disease on etc. on the walls… This is peripheral learning. [P6 observing Lale]

The classroom is very beautiful and specially arranged for English classes…. But I have realized that it does not matter if it is not utilized effectively. [P20 observing Lale]

The school management has provided the English teachers with four special English classrooms… But it was very evident that teacher has not made any preparation or planning to utilize them. [P11 observing Lale]

It can be understood that the teachers observed are not successful in effectively using instructional technologies and materials or in enriching the lesson by designing their own materials, but use the most practical (i.e. coursebooks and workbooks) or available ones (i.e. videos, projectors, computers, CDs etc.) rather ineffectively. Considering the findings of a previous study (Er, 2006) about English teachers' perceived inability to have access to materials and technologies recommended in the curriculum, teachers seem to be very dependent on ready materials provided by the Ministry. Nor they attempt to develop their own materials as substitutes to enrich their lessons (İşpınar, 2005).

4.3.3. Emotional Classroom Atmosphere

Almost all participants were found to have reflected about the quality of emotional atmosphere (a total of 76 entries). The main emphasis seems to be on the distinction between a secure environment where teacher cares about young learners' feelings (40

entries) and an insecure one where communication between teacher and students is coercive, aggressive, and discriminative especially when assessing students' performances (36 entries):

> *Students generally seem to love their teacher, because, to quote the students, "She does not get angry."* [P11 observing Lale]
>
> *She has a good rapport with the students. Students feel themselves secure. They are not nervous while answering questions because they know she wouldn't get angry and scold in case of a wrong answer.* [P27 observing Merve]
>
> *She never sits during the lesson. If she does, she sits by students…. She calls her students with pleasant nicknames.* [P24 observing Derya]
>
> *There is a distance between her and students. To be honest, she can be tenderer to 4th, 5th, and 6th graders… I did not like her way of harsh assessment announcing the exam results especially to students with low scores.* [P16 observing Esin]
>
> *The way she addresses and warns the students does really affect the students adversely.* [P19 observing Cemile].
>
> *I am very disappointed that shouting and scolding is still a means of disciplining the students.* [P13 observing Esin]

Another interesting finding was about an evaluation practice applied particularly by Derya and Esin which adversely affects the classroom atmosphere. According to the journal entries, using rather an unpedagogical practice of peer-assessment, the teacher selects certain students at the beginning of the lesson to note down pluses for those students who either participate the lesson or give correct answers, and minuses for those who are naughty, make noise or give a wrong answer during the lesson. The journal entries point especially to the disciplining, excessively competitive, aggressive, and, thus, insecure nature of this practice:

> *One obvious aim of this "+ and –" list seems to quieten the class, but sometimes it causes a more chaotic atmosphere.* [P8 observing Esin]
>
> *Instead of concentrating to the lesson, students stand up and go to teacher's desk to check how many pluses and minuses they have…* [P23 observing Derya]

4.3.4. Language Skills

Although the curriculum suggests integrating both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) for communicative purposes in meaningful contexts, the results showed that observed teachers are unable to use or integrate the language skills adequately. Almost all of the participants entered comments in their journals about the lack or inappropriateness of writing (64 entries), speaking (52 entries), and listening (50 entries) activities. Most participants agree (38 entries) that reading was the dominating skill during their practicum:

Though skills are integrated in the coursebook, I cannot see the teacher include speaking and writing. [P19 observing Cemile]

Writing means copying the writings on the board to the notebooks, and speaking means reading loudly the sentences on the notebook. [P7 observing Cemile]

Throughout the term there has been no listening or writing. [P24 observing Derya]

Since the cassettes have not arrived (to school from Ministry) *during the whole term, she has had no listening activity.* [P5 observing Derya]

Listening and writing is a rare case…speaking is just while students are answering the controlled practice questions. [P17 observing Merve]

On the other hand, again the best practices were represented by Lale:

She tries to involve all skills, but values listening activities the most…she usually has the children listen to songs or watch cartoon movies. [P29 observing Lale]

Writing during the lesson is a rare event; however, she asks the students to write diaries in English at home. [P30 observing Lale].

4.3.5. Individual differences

A good deal of journal entries (40 entries) was categorized about individual differences, mainly in terms of age, learning styles, and learning strategies. There was a general agreement on inadequacy of teachers to meet the needs resulting from the individual differences:

These young children are taught more or less in the way adults are taught a foreign language:very abstractly and through explanations about rules. [P10 observing Esin]

The method teacher uses is the same all in 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th classes. [P2 observing Esin]

She asks the same questions to every child. She does not take into consideration whether the child learns fast or late, or hard or easily. [P26 observing Derya]

She ignores the students with learning difficulties. [P28 observing Cemile]

She especially meets the needs of visual and auditory students, but kinesthetic students are not considered so much. [P6 observing Lale]

4.3.6. Grouping

Although the curriculum suggests that young learners are cooperative with their friends and can do more group or pair works, the observations (35 entries) proved that group or pair works are not a natural part of English lessons, but the class is taken as a whole or teacher-student interaction is the most common way of interaction. This was partly because of the size of the class and partly because this was not a routine practice:

I have never seen any group activities. Moreover, when I try to group the students in my activities it ends up always with a chaos. Students perceive group work as a chance to cheat. There is no established code of conduct about working in a group or pair. [P26 observing Derya]

Teacher does not ask the students to work in groups. The sitting arrangement and large number of students prevent the physical movement. [P12 observing Merve]

4.3.7. Games and Physical Movement

As an important part of the learning-teaching process, games, especially the ones involving physical movement, were referred to in reflective journals (34 entries). They generally reflect that teachers of young learners sometimes use some game-like activities, but they are either poor in terms of physical movement or not pedagogically appropriate for teaching English:

They play games but I cannot find them educational. [P1 observing Derya]

They are very simple and extremely noisy games. [P26 observing Derya]

She asked each student to write "was" and "were" on the sides of a piece of paper and hold the paper showing the correct auxiliary verb in response to some incomplete sentences. [P9 observing Lale]

Teacher makes the 4ᵗʰ and 5ᵗʰ graders sit for forty minutes without any physical activities. [P18 observing Merve]

4.4. Evaluation

The analysis of the journal entries about the mentor teachers' evaluation practices (120 entries) revealed that almost all of the prospective teachers have reflected about the practices concerning the evaluation of young learners' performances. The systematic coding of the entries yielded three categories: process evaluation, traditional evaluation and feedback organization. The content analysis suggested that a) process evaluation was mainly composed of peer assessment, which was rather informal and kind of unpedagogical practice of peer-assessment as mentioned in *4.33. Emotional Classroom Atmosphere*, and performance assignments, which were based on accuracy rather than communicative fluency and were extravagantly ornamented (52 entries); b) traditional evaluation was composed of classical multiple-choice tests, cloze tests, or tests or quizzes requiring short answers, where again accuracy in terms of vocabulary and grammar was emphasized (40 entries); and lastly c) students were not adequately provided with formative feedback (28 entries).

Two students in each class are checking the assignments. Teacher says she will use their assessment results as extra marks. [P10 observing Esin]

Teacher charges a student to assess their friends' answers to teacher's question by noting down pluses and minuses. [P14 observing Derya]

Teacher generally asks the students to prepare performance assignments which are ornamented with visuals and includes definitions about the language item they study. [P19 observing Cemile]

Teacher chose one of the assignments she liked very much and hung it on the bulletin board. The work was eye-catching and ornamented with colored papers and decorated shorthand. But unfortunately a serious grammar mistake was repeated throughout the work, which I think was overlooked by the teacher as its appearance was the priority. [P6 observing Lale]

I have not seen any formative evaluation in which communicative fluency was more important than accuracy. [P10 observing Esin]

The quizzes or exams are testing the students' vocabulary and grammar knowledge only. [P12 and P17 observing Merve]

Formative evaluation is based on vocabulary tests and grammar-based fill-in-blanks tests. [P19 observing Cemile].

She rarely gives feedback about the most common mistakes made by the students in exams or quizzes. The most common feedback practice is to announce students' scores. [P4 observing Esin]

Teacher couldn't find time to check the assignments and give feedback. [P20 observing Lale]

She scolded one child after a wrong answer: "Why are you raising your hand if you don't know the answer?" I realized that the boy didn't raise his hand anymore. [P19 observing Cemile]

She was not giving any hints or help after wrong or incomplete answers, and just passing to another student, thus demotivating most of the students. [P26 observing Derya]

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As a result of this qualitative study, it was seen that actual practices in terms of teaching English to young learners are not generally consistent with the theory and curriculum, although there were optimistic results to some extent. These findings reveal a theory-practice dictomy from the perspectives of the prospective teachers. Although the present study does not intent to generalize the results, it should be noted that mentor teachers were selected as they were found eligible for mentoring the prospective teachers.

This finding of the study is in agreement with the relevant literature as quoted by Ersen-Yanık (2008), who reported that "research on the curriculum of fourth and fifth grades have shown that the specified goals and objectives of the curriculum were not achieved at the desired level." Kırkgöz (2007) attributes this failure to actualize the curricular ends, especially the communicative ones, to teachers' use of traditional language teaching methods, lack of time and sources, and large classes. To Zincir (2006) teachers let the coursebooks dominate the lessons.

Er (2006) also points to the problems about achieving these goals; however, unlike the present study, his findings, which were based on teachers' and superintendents' views, refer to some problems inherent in the curriculum itself. Similarly, Büyükduman (2005) found that the curriculum needed some modifications based on teachers' views. Especially she recommended addition of detailed explanations about instructional strategies for those teachers who graduated from departments other than ELT. On the other hand, although the current curriculum, launched as of 2006-2007 school year, is supposedly well designed with such explanations guiding teachers (Kırkgöz, 2007), still the results are not satisfactory.

The present study also emphasizes the fact that no matter if they are graduates of ELT department, participating mentor teachers observed did not generally meet the requirements of the teaching pedagogy they had in ELT departments. Teachers' poor performance in terms of teaching English to young learners can be a result of the fact that curriculum for teaching English to young learners, i.e. at 4th and 5th grades, is a recent one and most teachers have not been offered a special course about teaching English to young learners at the faculty of education (İşpınar, 2005). But as a matter of fact, their instructional performance in this study was not also found in consistency with the principles of teaching English to older age groups, either. On the other hand, several studies (Kırkgöz, 2007, 2009) advocate that the curriculum and the coursebooks are favorable for young learners. Given the results from this study and the former ones, it can be suggested that teachers of young language learners need to raise awareness about the special requirements of that age group. Although formal in-service training is a must for professional development, teachers of young learners are also able to develop themselves reading the curricular materials and the relevant literature themselves. As İşpınar (2005) found in her study that teaching young learners is both difficult and tiring as the teachers need to be more active and creative in finding different ways to capture the students' attention; thus, teachers of young learners should be selected very carefully and granted with extra privileges including higher salary. Most importantly the teachers of young

learners should be given ongoing in-service training about and monitored in terms of "teaching English to young learners."

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