ELT Student Teachers' Evaluations of Their Program In Terms of Reflective Teaching*

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Abstract

Reflective teaching has become a central concern in the history of language teacher education in recent years. The central question is whether reflective teaching is implemented in ELT Programs around the globe. This study aimed at investigating ELT student teachers' evaluations of their ELT program with a specific focus on reflective teaching in Turkey. A questionnaire, consisting of 6 themes with 25 questions, was administered to 242 senior ELT student teachers. The findings display that overhelming majority of student teachers believe that their ELT program is implementing a reflective-teaching-based-approach with a view to helping its student teachers to critically reflect their own teaching practices.

Key words: Reflective Teaching, ELT, Student Teachers

İngilizce Öğretmenliği Öğrencilerinin Lisans Programlarını Yansıtıcı Öğretim Açısından Değerlendirmeleri

Özet

Son yıllarda, yansıtıcı öğretim dil öğretmeni yetiştirme programlarında önemli bir yere sahip olmuştur. Bu konudaki temel soru yansıtıcı öğretimin dünya çapında İngiliz Dili Eğitimi programlarında kullanılıp kullanılmadığıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı , özellikle Türkiye'de ki yansıtıcı öğretim göz önüne alındığında, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümlerindeki öğretmen adayı öğrencilerin bölümlerindeki programı nasıl değerlendirdiklerini araştırmaktır. 6 tema çerçevesinde 25 soruyu kapsayan anket 242 adet İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümü öğretmen adayı öğrencilerine verilmiştir. Sonuçlara göre, önemli sayıda öğretmen adayı, bölümlerinde kendi öğretmenlik deneyimlerini eleştirel olarak gözden geçirmelerine yardımcı olmak için yansıtıcı-öğretim-yaklaşımının uygulandığını düşünmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yansıtıcı Öğretim, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi, Öğretmen adayları

Introduction

The concept of learning has gone through various alterations in line with learning-related concepts such as constructivism, cooperative learning and social learning in recent years. These alterations have shifted the concept of learning to "an active process where learners are expected to reflect upon their current and past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas and concepts" (Cunningham, 2001, p. 2). This perspective pinpoints the importance of reflection as an instrument that operates as a catalyst of students' effective learning and achievement. In order for students to experience reflection, their teachers themselves need to be reflective about their own teaching. This refers to the question of how this is achieved during their initial teacher education. Therefore, raising awareness about the use and function of reflection among student teachers is a critical matter in initial teacher education. The present study analyzes the evaluation of an ELT (English Language Teaching) teacher education program from student teachers' perspective.

There is no doubt that reflection is of paramount importance and has received substantial attention in learning contexts. As for language learning settings, reflection has emerged as a very response to call for a substitute for innovative learning approaches. According to Dam (1995), it is teacher's responsibility to enable students to develop their reflective skills. This has led to the idea of empowering teachers as reflective practicioners during their initial teacher education. The idea of empowering student teachers as reflective practicioners has been a concept that is "entrenched in the literature and discourses of teacher education and teachers' professional development" (Ottesen, 2007, p. 31). That is to say, one can come across numerous references to the concept of reflective teaching (Griffiths, 2000; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Cornford, 2002; Vieira & Marques, 2002; Clarke & Otaky, 2006; Akbari, 2007) that address different dimensions and dynamics of the concept.

As opposed to two teacher education approaches namely Applied Science and Craft Model (Wallace, 1991), reflective teaching is claimed to be more effective than preceding approaches to teacher education in that it offers observing, examining, evaluating skills as the process of teacher's thinking critically about what happens in the classroom. As Richards (2002) states, "teachers should not set out to look for a general method of teaching or to master a particular set of teaching skills but should constantly try to discover things that work by discarding old practices and taking on board new ones" (p. 24). According to Pacheco (2005, p. 3), reflection, as an instrument of professional development, "enables ELT professionals to actively react, examine and evaluate their teaching to make decisions on necessary changes to improve attitudes, beliefs and practices".

Considering the critical role of teacher beliefs in practices of teachers and their resistance to change (Pajeras, 1992), it is important to examine whether a teacher education program prepared in line with the theory and practice of reflective approach is able to offer a context in which student teachers are exposed to reflective practices. To this end, this study focuses on the impact of an initial teacher education on student teachers' understanding of reflection and its various educational outputs that relate to educating competent English language teachers. This study may illuminate the approach of teacher educators to design and develop more dynamic and effective programs.

Reflective Teaching in Turkey

In Turkish higher education, the concept of reflective teaching has been seriously taken on board in academic sense. The studies on reflective teaching examined areas of inquiry such as the role of action research in the development of an ELT teacher as a reflective practioner (Atikler, 1997), change in teaching behavior through reflection (Sungurtekin Eröz, 1997), the effect of action research as a teacher development model on becoming reflective in teaching (İskenderoğlu Önel, 1998), effects of a reflective teacher training program on teachers perception of classroom environment and on their attitudes toward teaching profession (Oruç, 2000), reflection and action as a means of initiating change in teacher educators (Öniz, 2001), possible effects of in-service education on EFL teachers' professional development in terms of teacher efficacy and reflective thinking (Özçallı, 2007), reflective foreign language teacher development of teacher educators (Yeşilbursa, 2007), the attitudes of teachers of English as a foreign language towards reflective teaching (Filiz, 2008), the role of keeping journals of preparatory class instructors in teaching paragraph writing within the notion of reflective practice (Tatış, 2010) and the role of electronic portfolios in fostering pre-service teachers' reflective thinking (Ayan & Seferoğlu, 2011). As easily seen above, the concept of reflective has been of importance in teacher education in Turkey. Most of the studies mentioned above conclude that pre-service ELT teachers do not feel ready to display reflective skills mainly because they have not been trained this way.

Certain scholars (Farrell, 2004; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Harford & MacRuairc, 2008) hold the belief that teachers can display more effective teaching skills through a systematic reflection. Whether language teachers become reflective practitioners or not is contingent upon what kind of experiences they go through during their initial teacher education. As Tabachnick and Zeichner (2002) put it, "there is not a single teacher educator who would say that he or she is not concerned about preparing teachers who are reflective" (p, 13). In a similar vein, Brandt (2008) claims that reflection and feedback are at play in the form of reflective conversations between teachers and students, both teachers and students could benefit from the reflective practice. However, is it the real case? In other words, are the actions to promote reflection taken in initial teacher education? In order to answer the questions, this study aimed at investigating how ELT student teachers evaluate reflective teaching in their own contexts.

Methodology

Research Questions

There are two main research questions of this study. While the first research question aims at examining the impact of the initial teacher education program on students' understanding of reflective practice, the second research question analyzes the strengths and weaknesses that emerge from the student teachers' responses.

RQ 1: What are the ELT student teachers' evaluations of reflective practice applied in their initial teacher education program?

RQ 2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program in terms of the application of the reflective practice from the student teachers' perspective?

Setting and Participants

This study was carried out at Gazi University, English Language Teaching program on 242 senior student teachers (female: 182 and male: 60), aged between 22 and 25. The ELT program offers the students a four-year program, which was revised radically in 1997 to include various methodology courses in which student teachers go through a reflective process. The improvement in 1997 excluded the theoretical linguistics and literature courses and suggested new courses such as 'Teaching English to Young Learners', 'Special Teaching Methods', 'Subject-matter Course Book analysis and Evaluation' and many others. The common grounds of all courses were based on offering student teachers courses in which they can actively participate, test their hypotheses on language teaching and learning through micro teaching demonstrations that were shaped by reflection and feedback. Following this innovation in the program, yet another improvement was made in 2005 to include courses like 'Creative Drama', 'Teaching Language skills I and II'. The last modification can be seen as a complimentary attempt, rather than a radical one, aiming at updating the program in parallel with the teacher education policies and requirements of the European Union.

Data Collection and Analysis

ELT student teachers were administered a questionnaire consisting of 25 items. The items were centered on six themes namely (1) reflection through self-evaluation, (2) reflection through formal instruction, (3) reflection through observation, (4) reflection through talking, (5) reflection through practical experience, and (6) reflection through research. The questionnaire developed by Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2010) was employed to survey about the roles, approaches and strategies used by teacher trainers to help the student teachers to reflect on their teaching.

Piloting is an essential part of any quantitative research and "any attempt to shortcut the piloting stage will seriously jeopardize the psychometric quality of the study" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 75). This crucial point led the researchers to plan every single stage of designing, piloting and administrating the study. Hence, the researchers piloted the questionnaire with fifty student-teachers from the same population. As table 1 shows below, the questionnaire was found to be highly reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.81). (See table 1 for detailed analysis of reliability analysis).

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

Factors	Cronbach Alpha
Factor I- Reflection through self-evaluation	0.85
Factor II- Reflection through formal instruction	0.82
Factor III- Reflection through observation	0.84
Factor IV- Reflection through talking	0.81
Factor V- Reflection through practical experience	0.80
Factor VI- Reflection through research	0.79

Findings and Discussion

As mentioned in the methodology section, the questionnaire is composed of six themes. Thus, this section focuses on how ELT student teachers evaluate these six themes in their own contexts. As one can see in table 2, most of the items have centered around the options either "agree" or "strongly agree". However, we discuss only salient findings of the research below.

Table 2: Student Teachers' Evaluations of Reflective Teaching in Their Program

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
S1	2,1417	,98776	,06376
S2	2,2218	1,00262	,06485
S3	1,6250	,85386	,05512
S4	2,5435	1,43403	,09276
S5	1,6033	,86403	,05554
S6	1,5625	,85095	,05493
S7	2,4473	1,12482	,07306
S8	2,3760	1,10971	,07133
S9	2,1983	1,04758	,06734
S10	1,7647	,76535	,04961
S11	1,5462	,79818	,05174

S12	2,3417	1,07459	,06936
S13	2,3306	1,08852	,06997
S14	1,5750	,73368	,04736
S15	1,4132	,63988	,04113
S16	1,4440	,68767	,04430
S17	1,8695	1,08023	,07032
S18	2,7179	1,05103	,06871
S19	1,7229	,85024	,05594
S20	1,7009	,77808	,05086
S21	1,5660	1,45257	,09475
S22	1,5720	,90806	,05911
S23	2,2458	,99733	,06492
S24	2,1780	2,14826	,13984
S25	1,8970	,90384	,05921

Strongly Agree (1.00-1.80), Agree (1.80-2.60), Not Sure (2.60-3.40), Disagree (3.40-4.20), Strongly Disagree (4.20-5.00)

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 1

Statement 1	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean
Ask us to complete *evaluation forms* about our teaching.	2,1417	,98776	,06376

As table 3 shows above, most of the student teachers in the ELT department believe that their teacher trainers tend to ask them to complete evaluation forms about their teaching. These forms, also called lesson reports by Richards and Lockhart (1994, p. 9), give the teacher "a quick and simple procedure for regularly monitoring what happened during a lesson, how much time was spent on different parts of a lesson, and how effective the lesson was". According to Ur (1999), the first and most important basis for professional progress is simply the teacher's own reflection on daily classroom events, which stimulate reflection. It was clear that the majority of the student teachers were able to reflect on their own teaching procedures through the evaluation forms distributed by their trainers. This being done is critical as these evaluation forms enable student teachers to consider their teaching skills more critically.

Table 4: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 2

Statement 2	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Ask us to *keep notes, a diary, journal, or portfolio* about our teaching practice experience.	2,2218	1,00262	,06485

Reflective tools such as notes, diaries, journals or portfolios have been found to be very useful in enhancing reflective thinking skills of language teachers in a variety of studies thus far (Lee, 2004; Park, 2003). More specifically, tools mentioned above help student teachers in two ways. First, they stimulate student teachers' thinking and help them "to make connections between issues, explore ideas, generate new ideas, and discover meaning during the learning process" (Lee, 2004, p. 74). Second, they enable student teachers to construct knowledge of practice based on their own beliefs, ideas, and experiences. Like table 4 displays above, the student teachers agree that reflective tools are employed in their program to develop reflective thinking habits.

Table 5: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 7

Statement 7	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Encourage us to *visit each other's classes* during	2,4473	1,12482	,07306

According to Richards and Farrell (2005), peer coaching is a procedure in which two teachers collaborate to help one or both teachers improve some aspect of their teaching. There are several ways in which peer coaching can take place. First, it can be collaboration between two teachers on the preparation of teaching materials. Second, it can take place through the visits to each other's lessons and make observations about teaching processes. Third, there can be two teachers who can co-teach lessons. Finally, peer coaching can take place by means of videos where a teacher can videotape some of his or her lessons and later watch them together with the coach. These specific actions are influential in developing reflective practice among pre-service English language teachers. As is easily seen in Table 5, most of the student teachers are encouraged to visit each other's classes during their teaching practice.

Table 6: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 10

Statement 10	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Conduct *pre-lesson conferencing* to discuss what I am going to teach in	1,7647	,76535	,04961

According to Farrell (1999), pre-lesson conferencing, as he calls it "co-operative talk" played during group meetings in assisting EFL teachers to reflect on their professional

practice, is very influential in a variety of ways. First, it may help teachers to express their ideas more concretely, to exchange their insights and to make practical suggestions as to how they teach more effectively. Second, it may facilitate reflection through being critical to teaching practices. ELT student teachers strongly agree that their trainers conduct pre-lesson conferencing to teach what teacher trainees   teach in class as table 6 displays above. Likewise, "reflective teaching and personal and professional fulfillment is enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues" (Polard & Triggs, 1997: p. 9). This is highly important for student teachers to make a plan of what they are going to do during their teaching practice so they can securely conduct their teaching.

Table 7: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 11

Statement 11	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Hold *feedback session* during the same day	1,5462	,79818	,05174

Feedback is very critical especially for pre-service teachers because it gives them a lot of opportunities to revise their own teaching understanding and processes. Pre-service teachers meet a lot of challenges during their teaching practices, which can only be achieved and solved through communication. Gebhard (2005) believes that solutions to problems can be found through telling and sharing stories and communicating problems about one's own teaching or the observed teaching of others to colleagues and friends in teachers' forums and teachers groups. It appears that the student teachers are of the opinion that feedback sessions to enable them to make necessary changes for teaching practices to be better are conducted in their programs.

Table 8: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 13

Statement 13	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Hold group *feedback session* rather than	2,3306	1,08852	,06997

According to Farrell (1999), collaborative talk is used to get student teachers to learn through each others' ideas and opinions and offering advice to each other in a more meaningful way. This way student teachers are encouraged to think reflectively because they can have more opportunities to revise their own ideas as well. As easily observed in table 8 above, most of EFL student teachers consider that their teacher trainers hold group feedback session rather than individual ones. This is one of the things that are encouraged because group feedback sessions are believed to mostly contribute to the effectiveness of the student teachers, according to research conducted by James (1996), teachers who become together in a group can become more confident agents of social change.

Table 9: Mean and standard deviation values of the student teachers belonging to statement 22

Statement 22	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Encourage us to find solutions and alternatives for our teaching practice *weaknesses and mistakes.*	1,5720	,90806	,05911

Since Flavell (1976, p. 232) defined metacognition as "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them, e.g. the learning-relevant properties of information or data", there have been a great number of attempts to conceptualize the construct of metacognition. One of the most important characteristics of metacognition, according to Schraw and Dennison (1994), is to know one's weaknesses and strengths about their own learning proces. As this aspect is closely related to teacher autonomy (Çakır and Balçıkanlı, 2011), student teachers are given opportunities to find solutions and alternative for their teaching practice weaknesses and mistakes in the program. As table 9 displays, there is a general consensus that teacher trainers in the program encourage their student teachers to evaluate themselves about their teaching practices.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Studies

This study examined ELT student teachers' evaluations of their undergraduate program in terms of reflective practice. It focused heavily on how these student teachers perceive their program with a specific reference to reflective teaching. It contributes to the understanding of student teachers' understanding of reflective practice in their own teaching contexts.

One major finding of this research was that most of 242 ELT student teachers are of the opinion that their ELT programs adopts a reflective program. On the whole, they agreed with the idea that their teacher trainers used such reflective tools as evaluation forms, portfolios and etc to encourage their student teachers to reflect critically about their teaching practices. The results indicated a strong acceptance of reflective teaching by the program itself. The findings of the current study are in line with those of Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi's research (2010) in terms of several components. More specifically, evaluation forms, keeping notes, diaries, journals and portfolios were commonly used actions by both teacher trainer groups. Furthermore, encouraging each other's classes during teaching practice, conducting pre-lesson conferencing and holding feedback session during the observation day were observed a lot in Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi's research (2010), as the current study suggests. That is to say, they believe that their teacher trainers are implementing a reflective approach in their program with a specific view to encouraging the idea of reflection in their initial teacher training.

One important conclusion that could be drawn from this study was that none of the participating student teachers did not mention any weaknesses in relation to reflective practice

in their program. As their responses to the statements clearly state, the ELT program is implementing a reflective approach that seeks opportunities for its student teachers to look for a general method of teaching or to master a particular set of teaching skills but should constantly try to discover things that work by discarding old practices and taking on board new ones (Richards, 2002). Since this is the case for ELT program, it is expected that student teachers develop higher reflective skills that help them develop more oppurtunities to seek weaknesses and strengths about their own teaching practices.

Obviously, there are several studies that need to be carried out in light of the findings of the current research. First, there is a need for a study that investigates both student teachers and teacher trainers' evaluations of reflective practice in their own contexts. More specifically, the further study should look for a mismatch between what student teachers and teacher trainers see their actions regarding reflective practice. Second, a longitudinal study that follows the student teachers into their teaching experiences to see whether their claimed to be reflective-based ELT program make them reflective enough.

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