

Conceptions of Teaching Held by the Instructors in English Language Teaching Departments

Orkun Canbay

İzmir University, Turkey
orkuncanbay@gmail.com

Sedat Beceren

Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey
sbeceren@yahoo.com

Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the university instructors' conceptions of teaching in ELT departments at two universities in Turkey. The data was collected through qualitative research techniques. The participants were four instructors working in two different institutions in Turkey with doctorate degree on the same major from the same university. The analyses of the data collected through interviews and self-report were conducted through discourse analysis and text analysis by the researchers. The results of the study reveal that the type of the institution where the teachers work is not a strict factor shaping the way how the teachers teach and how they define some of the components of teaching. The results also reveal that having the same background of education does not lead to the same approaches and definitions of teaching.

Keywords: *English language teaching; conception of teaching, university instructor.*

Introduction

There is a consensus in the literature that the teaching is a complex cognitive activity and it is widely accepted that the teachers' conception shapes their instructional decisions in the classrooms (Tilemma, 2000). In other words, what teachers do in their classrooms is oriented by their conception of teaching which are derived from their beliefs including a teacher's prior experiences, school practices, and a teacher's individual personality. Therefore, the topic of teaching conceptions has attracted the interest of scholars. Initially research studies are primarily focused on the primary teachers' teaching conception and then it has been extended to beliefs of secondary teachers, high school teachers, and university instructors.

Even though there is a growing number of a research in the context of the conceptions of teaching, it is often criticized that there is not a clear, agreed upon definition and terminology. A number of terms have been referred to the conceptions of teaching such as conceptions, orientations, beliefs, attitudes, approaches, views, and intentions. Among those terms, the conception of teaching is the most commonly used one. Pratt (1992) defines conceptions as;

"Conceptions are specific meanings attached to phenomena that then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. We form conceptions of virtually every aspect of our perceived world, and in so doing, use those abstract representations to delimit something from, and relate it to, other aspects of our world. In effect, we view the world through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world." (p. 204)

Conceptions and perceptions have been used interchangeably by Kember (1997), another significant researcher in the field. In a more recent study, conceptions and beliefs are stated as different things and it is asserted that conceptions are more accessible, they can be formed consciously, and they carry personal meanings while beliefs are "driven by emotions" (p. 10) and they are at a more intangible and unconscious level (Entwistle, Skinner, Entwistle, & Orr, 2000).

After a review of literature, we would like to add that confusion about terminology still exists. For that reason, the term conceptions of university teaching is viewed as the teaching actions are shaped and influenced by the understanding, thinking, and beliefs about teaching and learning. The present study focuses on the university teachers' conception of teaching, therefore; there is a need to review the studies conducted to define the conceptions in universities.

University Instructors' Conception of Teaching

A great number of the recent research studies have focused on university instructors' conceptions of teaching and the associated implications for student learning. In a review article, Kember (1997) analyzed various independent studies about the conception of teaching and he concluded that there was a high degree of consistency among the categories described although different terminology and diverse research methods were applied. He mentioned that there was an agreement between researchers on the conception of teaching category schemes. Kember (1997) made a comparison between a number of categories, and created a framework considering the relationship between the teacher, student, and content. In his framework, Kember (1997) concludes three level models based on teacher orientation. Those models are 'teacher centered/content oriented' and "student centered/learning-oriented' with an intermediate category, and 'student teacher interaction/apprenticeship'. He also asserts that initial two models have two sub-categories or associated conceptions. The subcategories of the 'teacher centered/content oriented' can be listed as,

- imparting information
- transmitting structured knowledge.

The other subcategories for student-centered/learning-oriented category can be further categorized as,

- facilitating understanding
- conceptual change/intellectual development.

Generally, the researchers label the first two terms as "traditional view" and "constructivist view" (Cheng, Chan, Tang, & Cheng, 2009). These two views lead to a contrast of conceptions of teaching and learning. The ones supporting the traditional view believe that the most efficient and effective learning process and outcomes are achieved through the classroom learning context where the teacher is responsible for the ultimate role in knowledge transmission. In a teacher/content-centered conception of teaching teacher is the only authority who knows his/her subject and conveys that knowledge to her students accurately and clearly. In this conception, as Watkins (1998 cited in Devlin 2006) mentions, it is the responsibility of students to learn satisfactorily and the focus is on the facts

and the skills that the teacher has. However, students are not expected to participate actively in the learning-teaching process and there is no need to consider the prior knowledge of students. Therefore, students are underestimated in the learning process.

Constructivism or student-centered approach is based on Piagetian theory, referring to the belief that perspectives are constructed by the interpretation of experiences (Kegan, 1982, 1994 cited in Cheng et al, 2009). In this view, it is believed that knowledge is created through the interaction of students with each other, or through the interaction of students and teachers. In this approach, the basic role of the teacher is to facilitate the ongoing teaching to cover such constructions and development (Watkins, 1998 cited in Devlin, 2006). Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne (2007) propose that the employers of this view should adopt a strategy that assists their students in changing their worldviews or conceptions of the subject that they are studying. Students are expected to construct their own knowledge. In addition, students' prior knowledge and conceptions are important in the process of learning and teaching.

In teaching and learning process, the conceptions of teaching that the teachers have play a crucial role. Pajares (1992 cited in Devlin, 2006) states that what the teachers hold as the conceptions shape their judgments, and as a result, affect the way they behave in the classroom setting. Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2002) mention that examining and understanding the conceptions of university teachers about teaching helps to understand what drives these teachers' practices. In addition, in a study conducted by Kember and Kwan (2002), a relationship is obtained between instructors' teaching approaches and their conceptions of good teaching. Teaching approaches are robustly modified by instructors' conception of teaching. Instructors perceiving good teaching as a transmission of knowledge are seen to be using content-centred approaches in teaching. However, instructors perceiving good teaching as a facilitative act integrated more learning-centred approaches into their teaching. In the light of the literature review given above, the present study aims to investigate the ELT instructors' conception of teaching, which they employ in training future English teachers. Since most of the studies focus on the university teachers' conception of teaching with science education, the present study can be considered as unique in the literature with its' focus on ELT instructors' conception of teaching. Within this perspective, the research study seeks to answer the following research question.

- 1) What are the ELT instructors' conceptions of teaching?
- 2) Are there any differences based on the type of institution as private and state university?

Methodology

This study aimed to investigate the conceptions of teaching which belongs to four instructors having a PhD degree on the same major from the same university and working at two different universities; one private and one state university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants by the researchers to determine the conceptions of teaching. In addition to the interviews, open-ended questions were also given to the participant to double check their beliefs about teaching. The interview questions and open-ended questions were given in appendix A.

Participants

Participants were four faculty members working in the ELT departments of two different universities. The participants were the graduates of ELT Ph.D program from the same university with different

background experience. The demographic background of the participants reveals the changing years of experience at different institutions. However, the common points of four participants are that they are the graduate of the same program and that they work in the same field. The participants were informed that their responses would be used with a pseudo name in the study. The four participants were Jack, Jane, Mary and John. Jack and Jane have been working at a private university in ELT department, whereas Mary and John have been working at a state university in ELT department. With different years of experiences, the four participants have Ph.D degree from the same department and university.

Data Collection Procedures

The overall analysis and the data collection methods included in the study have the characteristics of qualitative research. The data in the present study were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants by two researchers working in the same field. Interviews were video recorded, and typically lasted about 20-25 minutes and then they were transcribed. In addition to the interviews, the subjects were given a list of questions to answer in text format.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the interviews and written texts were analyzed qualitatively. The data were read in an iterative manner to capture all variation in teachers' experiences and conceptions. The two researchers coded and categorized the transcribed interviews individually and then rechecked the codes and categories whether there are mismatches between and within the data by discussing. In the initial analysis process, six categories were reached. However, existing similarities among the categories led the researchers to reexamine the data. In the discussion process, the researchers combined initial categories to reduce the number of dimensions. During this process, some categories became subcategories. For example, the category, "the nature of teaching in the classroom" resembles with and covers the same assertions with "the way of teaching and teaching strategies. The researchers united these categories as "teaching approaches". In the end, the researchers had four categories around which they organized the codes in the study. The final list was as follows:

- 1) View of Teaching
- 2) Teaching approaches
- 3) Role of the teacher
- 4) Expected student behaviors

Findings

The four teaching conceptions identified from the above procedure were labeled as: *View of Teaching*, *Teaching Approaches*, *Role of The Teacher*, and *Expected Student Behaviors*. Assertions for each category are discussed in detail below.

View of Teaching

The first category consists of teachers' overall beliefs on teaching. When the data collected through interviews were examined, it was seen that assertions had some common points within each other and it was seen that there were some contradicting claims between the participants.

Assertion 1: Participants' definitions of teaching consist of highly variable personal views. Some of the participants perceive the teaching job as helping people to find their own ways or giving the learners a clear sense of direction.

For example, Mary (a pseudo name) stated that,

"...although I have been doing it for about 20 years, in my opinion it is a very complex concept to define... I believe that teaching is showing way to people, helping people to find their own way; this is what it is to me..."

In contradiction with the excerpt given above, another participant defines the teaching action, as the teaching action should cover a teacher's life. John said that;

"...teaching is giving yourself, all things, and all your possession to the students here; I mean you need to sacrifice your life, most of your life to the students here. This is how I define teaching..."

Other participant defines teaching as an educational process and the contribution to the students learning. Jane asserts that;

"...teaching is based on discovering how to learn and reaching the students to ..."

Besides Jane believes that learning takes place rather than teaching and she asserts that,

"...especially I don't think that there usually happens teaching but there is learning...the most important change I am trying to aim at is to help the students discover how they learn..."

The other participant Jack defines his view of teaching as the process of contribution to students' learning. He affirms that;

"...providing the process of the contribution to the students' learning ... in the guidance of teacher but forming up the intended and permanent changes in the behavior and knowledge of the students...the process of creating the suitable environment for the learner..."

As stated in assertion 1, participants define teaching in a different way. When the interview excerpts are considered, we see that difference obviously.

Teaching Approaches

Another category of teaching is related with teaching approaches. The participants describe the ways that use in teaching. In other words, this category involves the teaching strategies, methods, and activities that are employed in the classrooms during the teaching process.

Assertion 2: The participants emphasized teaching approaches that make teachers passive but the students active. The excerpts belonging to Jane demonstrate that she employs strategies to keep the students active during the classes. The following excerpts confirm that she uses discussions during the classes. She also mentions the reasons for using that strategy.

"...the students love discussions..."(Jane)

"...when the students are active, they do not sleep..." (Jane)

Another excerpt from Jane reveals that she expects her students to discover the rules on their own in grammar courses. She asserts that she finds herself passive while teaching, whereas she expects her students to be active as much as possible and makes her students practice through pair work.

"...In grammar I expect them to discover the rules on their own..."

"... as much as possible, I try to make them practice; I try to keep them active...I want them to have pair workI am, as a teacher, passive..."

For the category, most of the participants assert that they use inductive approaches and the activities that this approach requires such as pair work, group work role-play and discussions. The following excerpts support their claims about the topic. Mary said,

"...I put learners in pairs and groups so that they can learn collaboratively...I do not want to spoon-feed them all the time..." (Mary)

John adds on the approaches of teaching and continues;

"...I just don't want to write something on the board and teach them but I expect them to guess what I'm going to teach"... I use student-based strategies that assist students to be active and critical and discover rules for themselves... like a researcher..." (John)

On the other hand, some of the participants affirm that their teaching approaches depend on the course they teach or due to the time constraint. In the following excerpt John says,

"... my teaching styles can vary situation to situation or student to student ... "(John)

Mary also mentions that she uses teacher-centered approaches sometimes due to lack of time and she concludes,

"... since I have limited time I generally prefer deductive approaches..." (Mary)

Contrary to the conceptions mentioned above by most of the participants, Jack mentions that it is the teacher's responsibility to transmit the knowledge and make the input comprehensible for the students. Moreover, he considers his own way of learning as a way of teaching. The following excerpts support his views.

"...Teacher is responsible for learning and ...for making the input comprehensible..."

"...My priority is the way I learn..."(Jack)

However, Jack admits learning as a longitudinal process. He also says in his excerpts,

"...I desire to show the overall picture..."

"...students will make use of what they learn in their life...". (Jack)

These excerpts tell us that Jack considers learning as a longitudinal process which students should make use of it in their life. Furthermore, these contradict with the previous excerpts of other participants. While Jack sees the teacher responsible for teaching, the other participants claim that the teacher is passive during teaching.

As mentioned in assertion two, the university instructors again implement different teaching approaches due to the type and the length of the course. In general, 3 out of 4 participants affirm that they employ student-centred approaches

Role of the Teacher

The role of the teacher was another category derived from the interviews with the participants. When the category, which is based on the role of teacher, is examined through the transcripts of interview, we see that participants define their roles in the teaching process in a variety of ways.

Assertion 3: Most of the participant defines the role of the teacher as dominant in the overall process.

Jack claims that the teacher is the leader, the knower and the role model in the classroom. He asserts his views as in the following sentence.

“...the teacher is the one who is responsible for the overall process in teaching as being the leader who leads the students, as being the knower who helps the learners reach the knowledge, and also as being the role model, the orchestra chief conductor in the classroom...” (Jack)

The following excerpt from Mary also supports Jack’s view.

“...I am just somebody who happens to know something better than my learners...being knowledgeable...”(Mary)

On the other hand, some of the other participants affirm that they mostly act out as facilitators, initiators, and real models. They mention that they know their responsibilities in their students learning process. Mary says,

“... I do have an active role in the professional development of my students and I should establish rapport...” (Mary)

John contributes this view by saying;

“... I am a facilitator, and initiator... I should first initiate something as a teacher then my students will expand this. I feel that I should prepare my students for instance to convey their expressions to participate in my courses...” (John)

As it is understood from assertion 3, participants perceive themselves different in their roles such as a leader and facilitator.

Expected student behaviors

In this category, participants define the student model that they would like to see in their classes.

Assertion 4: Participants claim that an excellent student should be aware his/her responsibilities and be curious in the learning process. The following excerpts define the perfect student model.

"... an excellent student has inner drive to excel and the rest will follow... he should be passionate..." (Mary)

"... an excellent student should be an active and a creative user of the information presented by the teacher. He should be open to new experiences and new developments..." (John)

Participants propose that teaching process is incomplete without an effective participation of students. In addition, one of the participants emphasizes that a student should attend the classes regularly not only physically but also mentally and he says,

"...an excellent student should be a critical thinker; he has to question the teachers' statements rather than accepting them as total truth." (Jack).

As stated in assertion 4, the data collected through interviews on the role of students revealed that the teachers expect their students to participate in the learning and teaching process.

Limitations and Suggestions

All things considered, the study had some limitations in relation to its scope, its participants and data collection. First of all, the study could have been carried out with more participants which could increase its validity. In addition to this, the study could have included the instructors' conceptions of learning, rather than focusing only teaching, as there could be some connections with the teaching and learning. As the study included interviews and reports, including observations and retrospective examinations would provide some data through which further analysis and comparison could be done. Any further study which will include an alternative design in the light of the limitations aforementioned could come up with more fruitful results to define the conceptions of ELT instructors.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the conceptions of teachers on teaching. The study used qualitative data collection methods and used interviews. The interviews were analyzed and four categories were found in the definition of teachers' conceptions on teaching.

Discussing individually the categories, the first category was "*the view of teaching*". Teachers claimed different views on the view of teaching. However, most of the participants united in the common idea that teaching is to help people in order to find their own way of learning. In other words, the students should be taught in a way that they would be able to find their own way of learning in their professional and daily life.

In the light of the interviews, another category was "*the teaching approaches*". The teachers claimed that the approach they use should make the learners active in which, to some extent, they discover the rules on their own. Another view related to the teaching approaches was that the teachers think

that students should be able to make use of what they already learn. The excerpts revealed that the participants use inductive approaches and the activities that this approach requires such as pair work, group work role-play and discussions.

The study also revealed the *role of the teacher*. The participants defined role of the teacher in the overall process of learning and teaching. There were contradicting ideas on the role of the teacher. However, the participants found the teacher who facilitates the learning process. Nevertheless, one of the participants claimed that the teacher being responsible for the process in the learning.

The last category that came out of the interviews was the "*expected student behaviour*". The participants put forward not only the importance of the participation of the students in the courses but also being a critical thinker in terms of the acceptance of the truth.

The study tried to answer two questions through a qualitative research. The research questions are based on the conceptions of the teachers and on whether there are any differences between the type of the institution in which the participants worked.

The results revealed that the teachers do not share common conceptions on the categories, whether they work at the state or private university. In terms of "*the view of teaching*", some of the participants think that teaching is a teacher dominated process whereas some believe the importance of student-centered approach. When we examine "*the teaching approaches*", we see that the teachers expect the learners to find their own way of learning. Another category, "*the role of the teacher*", leads to contradicting ideas between the participants. Some of the participant claim that the teacher is responsible for the overall process but some claim that the teacher should act out as facilitator, initiator and real model.

For the last category, "*the expected student behaviors*", the participants have different ideas about the role of the students.

As a result, this study revealed how the teachers define the conceptions of teaching. The results indicated that although the teachers with same background have some common ideas on their conceptions of teaching, there are some contradicting ideas. Having same background of education does not lead to the same approaches and definitions of teaching. On the other hand, the second research question was whether the teachers working at private university or state university have different view of teaching. As an answer to this question, teachers' conceptions of teaching are not shaped according to the institution where they work. The type of the institution is not a strict factor shaping the way in which the teachers teach and how they define some of the components of teaching.

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Appendix A

Interview Question

Icebreakers

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What levels have you taught?
3. How do you feel about being an English teacher?
4. How do you feel about being an instructor in English Language Teaching at university?

Questions

1. What is your view of teaching? (Gow and Kember 1993, p.23).
 - a. How do you define your way of teaching in the classroom?
 - b. What are your personal beliefs about the nature of teaching?
2. What metaphor would you use to describe teaching?
3. What would you describe as your main role as a teacher?" (Murray and Mac Donald 1997).
 - a. How do you define the role of teacher in the learning process?
 - b. What metaphor would you use to describe a good language teacher?
4. What are your aims in teaching?" (Johnston 1996, p. 216).
 - a. What are the expected outcomes of your teaching?
5. How would you describe your teaching style?
6. What are most common strategies that you employ in teaching?
 - a. What are your reasons for choosing these strategies?
 - b. Which ones are the best?
7. What is the image of an excellent student in your mind?
 - a. What metaphor would you use to describe excellent student?