EARLY CAREER EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

(KARİYERLERİNİN BAŞINDAKİ İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENLERİNİN KARŞILAŞTIKLARI ÖĞRETİM ZORLUKLARI)

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ABSTRACT

Although there is an established strand of literature on the ways pre-service EFL teachers are learning to teach, the professional learning experiences of in-service EFL teachers have been underexplored. This study explored the early career EFL teachers' instructional challenges, the ways they cope with those challenges, and the extent to which their pre-service teacher education prepared them to teach in their current context. It relied on qualitative data gleaned from in-depth individual interviews with ten practicing EFL teachers working at an intensive English program at a private university in Turkey. Constant comparative method was utilized to analyze the data. The findings demonstrated that EFL teachers' instructional challenges stemmed from curricular constraints and learners' lack of motivation to learn and use English, both of which are situated within their context. Their collegial interactions with coworkers and autonomous ventures to seek support proved instrumental in handling those challenges. As for their pre-service teacher education, the participants voiced concerns primarily about too much theoretical knowledge in the coursework, which left very little room for practical application, and the content, length, and contexts of clinical experiences. This research contributed to the relevant literature on teachers' challenges in teaching context as part of their ongoing teacher learning, distance of linguistics, SLA, and literature courses from ELT practices, and complex role of teacher candidates' clinical experiences in contributing to their socialization into teaching profession and identity development.

Keywords: EFL teachers' challenges, contextual constraints, theory-practice, field experiences, professional socialization

ÖZ

Bu araştırma kariyerlerinin başındaki İngilizce öğretmenlerinin karşılaştıkları öğretim zorluklarını, bu zorluklarla nasıl başa çıktıklarını, ve öğretmen yetiştirme programlarının bu öğretmenleri mevcut bağlamlarında öğretmenlik yapmaya ne ölçüde hazırladığını incelemektedir. Araştırma verisi, Türkiye'de özel bir üniversitenin İngilizce hazırlık bölümünde çalışan on İngilizce öğretmeniyle yapılan mülakatlardan elde edilmiştir. Yapılan veri analizi, bu on İngilizce öğretmeninin karşılaştıkları zorluklar müfredat sınırlamalarından ve öğrencilerin İngilizce'yi öğrenme ve kullanma konusundaki motivasyon eksikliklerinden kaynaklandığını göstermiştir ki bunların her ikisi de öğretim bağlamıyla ilintilidir. Bu öğretmenlerin zorluklarıyla başa çıkmak maksadıyla, meslektaşları ile olan etkileşimleri ve kendi başlarına çözüm arama çabaları bu zorlukların üstesinden gelmelerine yardımcı olmuştur. Bunun yanında öğretmen yetiştirme programları ile ilgili olarak, katılımcı öğretmenler derslerin çok fazla kuram yüklü olmasının öğretim uygulamasına çok yer bırakmadığını ve klinik alan tecrübesi derslerinin içeriğinin, süresinin, ve de bağlama uyumluluğunun problemli olduğunu dile getirdiler. Sonuç olarak bu araştırma, öğretmenlerin öğretim bağlamındaki zorluklarını onların mesleki öğrenmelerinin bir parçası olduğunu, dilbilimi, ikinci dil edinimi, ve İngiliz edebiyatı derslerinin İngilizce öğretimi uygulamasına uzak olduğunu, ve de öğretmen adaylarının mesleki sosyalleşmelerinde ve kimlik gelişimlerinde, klinik alan tecrübelerinin oynadığı karmaşık rolü inceleyen alan yazınına katkıda bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İngilizce öğretmenlerinin zorlukları, bağlamsal kısıtlamalar, kuram-uygulama, alan tecrübesi, mesleki sosyalleşme

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INTRODUCTION

The enterprise of teacher education has been primarily addressing the issues revolving around teacher learning, teacher knowledge base, and professional preparation within the last three decades. The education of effective teachers is an essential part of every national education system or every education reform initiative, because teachers are indisputably the major actors when it comes to the implementation of existing or reformed curricula. This implementation directly concerns the questions of how they learn to teach in teacher education programs and beyond, what they know about teaching their content, and how they grow as teaching professionals.

Previous research has illustrated that teachers have to continue their professional learning in their teaching settings and EFL teachers are no exception (e.g., Atay, 2008; Ölmezer Öztürk, 2015; Uysal, 2012). Although pre-service teacher education programs introduce them to theoretical aspects of teaching and learning English as a foreign language along with teaching methodologies, they have to engage in further learning activities in the workplace (Meirink, Meijer, Verloop, & Bergen, 2009) when they start their classroom practice as novice teachers. As a key for their professional growth, their further learning involves acclimating to the school setting, establishing rapport with their colleagues and students, participating in the practices of school community, and using the resources available in the context. Prior work in Turkish context has addressed several aspects of practicing teachers' professional development. One strand of studies explored the factors (e.g., curriculum, administrative issues, students, workplace conditions) that lead to teachers' motivation and demotivation in their teaching setting (Aydın, 2012; Ölmezer Öztürk, 2015). Another strand focused on challenges in teachers' learning through teacher research, online and face-to-face professional development programs as well as the affordances and constraints of the programs (Atay, 2008; Mirici, 2006; Uysal, 2012; Vanci-Osam & Akşit, 2000). Some other research studies examined the policies regulating and issues pertaining to the regional and national professional development endeavors in Turkey (Bayrakçı, 2009; Kırkgöz, 2007; Özer, 2004). Further research is needed to investigate and understand the role of pre-service teacher education in practicing teachers' ongoing professional learning and challenges in their context.

Because of the dynamic, complex, and ongoing nature of teacher learning, it is important to understand teachers' preparation as a process which is closely connected with their past experiences and future aspirations. The conglomeration of teacher candidates' experiences, memories, values, and beliefs impact the entire process of teacher learning that is expected to occur throughout pre-service teacher education and beyond (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2009; Olsen, 2008). This is a non-linear, and highly complicated process fraught with uncertainties, ambiguities, and tensions, which bring about various challenges. Particularly during early stages of their career, teachers are likely to encounter many challenges, juggle too many balls at once in their teaching contexts, make strategic decisions, and take

strategic actions (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006). Their decisions and actions rely on the combination of their earlier teaching and learning experiences, their personal pedagogical knowledge, and their instructional beliefs and values (Alsup, 2006; Olsen, 2008).

In the study reported on in this article, the focus is on the exploration of early career English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' challenges in their teaching contexts, the ways in which they handle them, and the extent to which their pre-service teacher education prepared them to teach in their current context. Therefore, the following section provides a brief research background by discussing instructional context as a crucial factor shaping teachers' practice and the outcomes of pre-service teacher education.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Instructional contexts and teachers' challenges

Instructional context has been deemed as an important variable that factors into teachers' practice and professional life. Morgan (2004) is emphatic that all the spaces in schooling are value-laden and ideologically loaded rather than being neutral, and it is impossible to isolate the actors in those spaces from "the social consequences" of their actions (p. 176). Freeman (2002) elaborates on this argument in relation to teacher education, and in his seminal work, he underscores the importance of context by remarking "In teacher education, everything is context" (p. 11). He observes that in the current literature, context has come to be regarded as a more complicated notion than previously, since it is "situated in personal and institutional histories and seen as interactive (or dialogical) with others … in the settings in which [these personal and institutional histories] unfolded" (p. 12). That is, there is a shift from context as a backdrop "like the decor and props in the staging of a theatre play" (Tudor, 2002, p. 1) to context as an interlocutor in the definition of the nature of teaching and learning (Sharkey, 2004), and in teachers' construction and use of their knowledge and competencies (Freeman, 2002). It is imperative to critically explore the sociocultural contexts in which learning to teach processes take place if we want to better document and understand how teachers develop professional knowledge and grow as teachers (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

Teachers' construction and establishment of "their own social reality" in their context is basically comprised of constant attempts to strike the balance between adherence to their personal philosophy of teaching and meeting contextual expectations and demands (Day, 1999, p. 59). As they understand their job, they negotiate their beliefs, values, and priorities in relation to their roles and responsibilities as teachers. This understanding is impacted and molded by how they assert agency aligning with their personal professional vision and respond to the institutional demands and norms governing the instructional context (Flores, 2001; Flore & Day, 2006). They constantly revise and reconsider what roles they are expected to enact, who they are (or can/should be) as a teacher, and who they aspire to become in their context. Emerging from the nexus of personal and

professional, this revision determines, to a large degree, their instructional decisions and actions, participation in the professional community, interaction with their colleagues and students, navigation in the system of activities, and their utilization of the tools and resources available in their contexts.

In their instructional contexts, teachers encounter various challenges which open up spaces for negotiation of their roles in the context and socialization into the profession. Those challenges most of the time concern school curriculum, culture, policies, reforms, and administration, and point to the conflicts, mismatches, and tensions between what they believe should happen and what is possible within the contextual constraints (Pardo, 2006). Teachers need to handle those challenges by using available resources, experimenting with various ways, and maneuvering strategically, while at the same time they need to stay true to their identities as teachers (Flores & Day, 2006). Even if it does not always lead to successful resolution, this handling requires teachers' articulation and externalization of their beliefs and values depending on their theoretical and practical knowledge. Despite its discomfort and uneasiness, this sort of experience with dilemmas and challenges facilitates teachers' "sorting out and understanding the various interconnections between and among the aspects of one's own teaching context" (Pardo, 2006, p. 389). If we conceptualize teacher learning and growth as situated in the context and community (Kortgahen, 2010; Shulman & Shulman, 2004), which is not only a cognitive but also an affective process (Golombek & Doran, 2014), then attending to teachers' challenges is an important research endeavor to better explore teachers' self-efficacy, self-image, and identities in their teaching contexts.

Outcomes of pre-service teacher education

The impact of initial formal teacher education has been a controversial issue in the research on teacher education programs (TEPs). There has long been a critique and questioning about how much difference pre-service teacher education can make in teacher candidates' professional growth and preparedness to teach. Some work has revealed that TEPs actually manage to change or calibrate teacher candidates' beliefs towards research-based progressive pedagogies, but their effects are "washed out" when teacher candidates are socialized into instructional settings where traditional understandings of teaching mostly hinder the implementation of research-supported teaching and learning methods (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Other work has found that the contributions of TEPs are "washed out" because teacher candidates' practices are driven by their preconceptions about teaching, which were shaped through their "apprenticeship of observation" throughout their education biographies (Kennedy, 1991; Lortie, 1975; Singh & Richards, 2009). When they start teaching, their well-entrenched preconceptions they bring into pre-service teacher education reemerge or become stronger than what they have been exposed to in TEPs.

Although there are studies empirically supporting the arguments revolving around the notion of the "washout" effect, other work has pointed out that "the quality and extent of teacher education" have an impact on teachers' effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 166), and teacher qualifications substantially affect student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 168; see also Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002; Firestone, 2014). TEPs hold "the power to shape teachers' beliefs and practices" (Cochran-Smith, Cannady, McEachern, Mitchell, Piazza, Power & Ryan, 2012, p. 26) and make a difference. Despite inconsistency between innovative pedagogies and schools' traditional instructional patterns, TEPs can influence teachers' in-service instructional competence (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005). Moreover, there is a general agreement that teacher educators play major roles in promoting the quality of teachers (Liston, Borko, & Whitcomb, 2008), which is a critical "role in the educational chain" (Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014, p. 1).

One of the major problems that teacher education research points to is the disconnection between theory and practice in the provisions of pre-service teacher preparation (Bullough, 1997; Kessels & Korthagen, 2001). Teacher education courses tend to be considered as theory-heavy and distant from actual teaching practice and the relevance of instructional theories to classroom teaching is not always amongst the central foci of those courses. Teacher candidates could be leaving teacher education courses with the knowledge of instructional theories, yet their theoretical knowledge does not always translate into effective teaching decisions and practices.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of the present study is to gain a better understanding of the challenges that early career EFL teachers encounter in their instructional contexts. This understanding is needed to prepare future teachers to become familiar with potential challenges awaiting them and to learn possible ways to handle those challenges. Also, it can reveal the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education to prepare teacher candidates for their contexts. Therefore, the current study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in their instructional contexts?

(2) How do they handle those challenges?

(3) To what extent did their pre-service teacher education prepare them for their instructional contexts?

Participants

Ten practicing EFL teachers (3 male, 7 female) were recruited for this study. They are all graduates of an English language TEP at a large state university in Ankara, Turkey. They work as English instructors at the intensive English program (IEP) of a private university in Ankara. They have been working in the same position at this institution since they graduated from the teacher education program. Five of them have four years of teaching experience and the other five have five years of teaching experience. In their institution, there are two types of English

instructors: the first type are *main course* teachers who are responsible for teaching grammar, reading, listening, speaking and the second type are *writing composition* teachers. All 10 participants in this study are *main course* teachers. They work with English learners at varying proficiency levels throughout the academic year and teach at least 19 hours per week.

All participants hold English language teacher certification. Additionally, one of the participants holds Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) endorsed by Cambridge University. One other participant holds Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) also endorsed by Cambridge University. One of them completed an M.A. degree in English Literature. The other seven participants are pursuing their M.A. degrees in English language teaching.

Setting

The IEP offers English classes for all students in their first year at the university. It is designed to support the development of their English language skills to learn academic content in English in their majors. Students who are placed in majors at this university through national exam are required to pass an English proficiency test before they are allowed to proceed to become freshmen. Those who cannot pass the exam (i.e., scoring below 60%) take a placement test to determine their level of English proficiency. Then, according to their score in this test, they are placed in one of three levels: beginner, intermediate, and upper-intermediate. At the end of each term, they can move to the upper level only if they can earn the required composite score in the midterm exams, writing exams, project and quizzes (60%). If they cannot, they have to repeat the same level of instruction for another term.

Beginner and intermediate level learners are offered a nine-month language instruction, and if they can move to the upper-intermediate level by the end of the year, they are allowed to take a proficiency test. Upper-intermediate level learners are taught English for three months, and then they can take a proficiency test. Provided that they can earn 60 (or above) out of 100 in that test, they can start receiving academic content courses in their majors. The proficiency exam involves four sections: use of English (30%), reading (35%), vocabulary (20%), and writing (15%). The first three sections include multiple-choice questions. In the writing section, test takers are expected to select one of the given three topics and write a five-paragraph essay on it.

In this IEP, there is a separate curriculum development team who prepares the curriculum to be followed by the teachers and a separate assessment team who is solely responsible for preparing weekly quizzes, midterm tests, and proficiency tests according to the curriculum. Those who are part of those two units do not have teaching responsibilities, but they are former experienced or veteran English language instructors who worked in the same or similar contexts.

Data collection and analysis

The data set of this study was gathered through in-depth individual interviews conducted with the ten participating EFL teachers. Interviews are a critical instrument in qualitative data collection when researchers want to learn about the things which they cannot observe such as behavior, thoughts, feelings, intentions, people's interpretations about the world around them, and past events that are impossible to replicate (Merriam, 1998). Interviewing allows researchers "to enter into other person's perspective" (Patton, 1990, p. 196). In the current study, the interview data helped me gain insights about my participants' challenges working at the IEP, the ways they deal with those challenges, and their evaluation of their pre-service teacher education in preparing them for their current context.

The interviews took approximately 45 to 55 minutes which included the participants' responses to the interview questions. I voice-recorded each interview and transcribed them verbatim. While transcribing the interviews, I also started organizing the data with respect to the research questions and assigning codes. This simultaneity is because qualitative data analysis starts as soon as researchers begin gathering data from the study respondents (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). However, my data analysis became more intense when all the data was collected and organized.

Doing a careful read of the transcriptions of individual interviews, I had to do some interpretations or draw inferences from my participants' comments, and the experiences they shared upon my questions. In order to develop tentative themes gleaned from my data, I used the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) by "identifying incidents, events, and activities and constantly comparing them to an emerging category to develop and saturate the category" (Creswell, 2007, p. 238). Drawing from those sharpened and saturated categories, I started formulating finding statements to construct the "story line" (Creswell, 2007, p. 67) that explicated the challenges of EFL teachers, the ways they handle them, and their evaluations of pre-service teacher education. So as to make sure that those interpretations were valid and reflective of the truth in my participants' situations, I shared the transcriptions and emerging themes with my participants before proceeding with this write-up.

To provide a more detailed description of my data analysis methods, I started with open coding. I scanned, read, and re-read what my participants shared in their in-depth individual interviews. While doing this reading, my main goal was to "assign some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of data so [as to] … retrieve specific pieces of data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 164). For example, some of those codes were "lack of administrative responsiveness," "students' demotivation," "producing in the target language," "collegial interaction," "collegial support," "handling challenges," "use of students' first language," "implementation of curriculum," "lack of teacher involvement in curriculum development," "theory in teacher education courses," "lack of practice in teacher education courses," "culture in English literature courses," "teaching English culture," "classroom teaching during internship," "variety in internship schools," and "length of internship." Then,

second round of analysis included axial coding in which I made clusters of codes, that is, I placed coded data into categories. My categories were (a) teachers' curricular constraints, (b) students' low motivation to learn and use English, (c) flexing curriculum and constructing supportive classroom environment, (d) seeking support from colleagues and ELT literature, (e) limited opportunity to apply theory to practice in teacher education courses, and (f) inadequate field experience in teacher education curriculum. I also matched those categories with my research questions to demonstrate how findings helped me address the three research questions. Categories (a) and (b) addressed research question one "What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in their instructional contexts?", categories (c) and (d) pertained to research question two "How do they handle those challenges?", and categories (e) and (f) responded to research question three "To what extent did their pre-service teacher education prepare them for their instructional contexts?"

FINDINGS

This section will present the findings yielded from the analysis of qualitative data gleaned from individual interviews with ten practicing EFL teachers. The findings are grouped into three categories corresponding to research questions, namely, (1) What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in their instructional contexts?, (2) How do they handle those challenges?, and (3) To what extent did their pre-service teacher education prepare them for their instructional contexts? This study revealed that early career EFL teachers in this case face instructional challenges stemming from curricular constraints and English language learners' low motivation. It also found that the ten EFL teachers deal with those challenges by flexing curriculum and constructing a supportive classroom environment and seeking support from colleagues and relevant English language teaching (ELT) literature. Lastly, the participants' responses pointed out that teaching culture is a missing component in the language TEP they completed, there are limited opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to practice in the teacher education courses, and clinical field experience is inadequate in the teacher education curriculum in terms of its content, length, and contextual variety.

1.1. Curricular constraints

The early career EFL teachers in this inquiry find restrictive the curriculum that the administration expects them to implement in their classes. The participants believe that this curriculum (including the textbook and assessment methods, as well) leads to most of the instructional challenges they encounter in their classes. For example, one participant remarks how her teaching is shaped by the tests and she is forced to teach almost exclusively to the test. She notes:

> … one of the challenges is the washback effect of the exams on my teaching, although I don't want them to. Because, erm, although I try to facilitate their learning, after some point, level, I mean, in the upper levels, they [students]

become more test-oriented, since they start worrying too much about the test. Again, for the purpose of preparing students for the test, I can't teach all language skills and critical thinking. The program is too loaded, I agree, but they prepare the program based on the midterms or quizzes. Like, we skip a lot of things in the textbook just to prepare students for those. Or I give some things very superficially.

Her students' success in English language learning is reliant on their performance in the tests which naturally becomes main focus in her classes. When she adjusts her teaching to promote her students' test success, she feels like her teaching does not fit her vision of how English language teaching should look like.

Another participant is really concerned about the fast pace of the curriculum and she sees herself rushing through the curriculum without being able to have her students produce some output in English. She expounds:

After presenting a grammar point or a vocab item, I have difficulties in making students produce sentences by using what I just presented. Why? To make them produce requires to find activities or tasks in which they are gonna produce. I had difficulties in finding these sorts of tasks or activities. I don't have time preparing and planning those tasks or activities and implementing those in the class because of the time limitations. This is also because of the test-oriented curriculum. They [students] want to learn about what they are gonna be asked in the test, so I cannot have them produce in the target language. Also, they need some time to internalize and produce the new [grammar] points. We don't have time for that. We teach something and immediately want them to produce it, but the normal life language use is not like that.

She thinks that she should afford her students the opportunity to use the language in the classroom, but this is not possible because she feels the pressure to complete the assigned content before the testing comes around. She observes that her students are rushed towards language production by using newly-presented grammar, although they have not entirely internalized it. What is more, since oral language production is not part of the tests and written production is *writing composition* teachers' responsibility, students demand more teaching primarily geared towards successfully responding to the test questions.

Additionally, another participant cannot have her students speak in English and they tend to speak in Turkish, which is the common first language (L1), although the IEP has an English-only policy. She attributes this to the fact that the curriculum has no grade or assessment of speaking integrated in the tests. She explains:

Also, the second one is that I can't prevent students' use of L1. When I ask in English, my students reply in Turkish. When I ask them to reply in

> English, they don't answer at all. The reason is that we don't have speaking activities. Students are not used to that. The curriculum is problematic. No testing of speaking. If we graded their speaking, students would talk more. But that's not the case.

She implies that her students do not tend to pay attention to anything which is not graded and not going to help them promote to the next level through testing. In relation to that, she points to the inconsistency between administration's in-class English-only policy and curriculum which neglects oral production. She claims that students speak in Turkish and avoid speaking in English, because their oral language competence is not part of the assessment.

Lastly, the participants' responses problematize the reading passages on which students are supposed to work. Because the curriculum is heavily dependent on the textbook imported from the UK and there is limited number of extra reading texts provided, sometimes the teachers' challenge is their students' reluctance to read the texts which are uninteresting to them. For instance, one teacher observes:

> They constantly tell that the topics are boring. They ask, "why would I read this? This is something silly." The passages are so dependent on the textbook. We don't have rich materials. The materials in the textbook might be uninteresting to them. They must read what they can see in their textbooks. They don't read in English for pleasure. They don't find it appealing. When, sometimes, you give them something they're interested, they read it.

The reading activities in the textbooks seem to be virtually the only opportunity for written input for those language learners. However, the teachers find themselves forcing their students to read some passages in their textbooks, although they are not always interesting to the students. This challenge basically concerns whether or not the textbook has been selected by considering the common interests of the student population in this context.

1.2. Students' low motivation to learn and use English

The teachers in this study also attribute their instructional challenges to their students' low motivation to learn and speak in English. Their students have to demonstrate proficiency in English in the test so that they can proceed to content classes in their majors. This fact makes most of them extrinsically motivated to pass this test requirement only and move on by overcoming this stumbling block. For instance, one teacher underscores student motivation as the most important challenge for him. He shares:

> The most important challenge that I face is students' lack of motivation. I mean, most of them are not willing enough to learn English. They just follow the lessons to be able to pass the course with the minimum points possible. I

> mean, that is why every single activity becomes a great burden in the class. We can't do any communicative activities for their authentic language use.

He appears to expect his students to be intrinsically motivated to learn English in his classes, because they will be using it in their English medium university courses. However, he observes that most of the students have the mere goal of passing the tests just to complete the IEP requirements so that they start taking the university courses, which seems to be their primary immediate goal.

Some participants see students' lack of motivation as a consequence of the inconsistency between the English content prescribed in the IEP curriculum and the potential use of English in content university courses. One participant comments:

> Making students understand the importance of learning a foreign language is a huge challenge. They are just motivated towards the test. They perceive it as a course not as a language. Some of them [students] think that learning English is not relevant to their undergraduate education. They might have a point here. All we teach might not be related to what they are gonna do in their profession. Also, what we teach here is quite simplified in preparing them for the undergrad level. The English level we help them reach here is not enough. That's also a problem.

Some of her students are not motivated in her classes since they do not believe that the English instruction provided for the students at the IEP within one year is adequately preparing them for entirely English medium instruction university courses. They are not convinced about the instrumental use of learning English in a way that is going to make them better students in their majors. The participant seems to agree with those students to some extent.

Finally, the teachers' responses evince that students' low motivation to learn and use English is tied to the realities of Turkish EFL context. The fact that there is no immediate need to use English in daily life, in "authentic" environment is considered as the reason why their students are not as motivated as they should be. One participant depicts:

> When I teach something, even a vocab or a grammar structure, I plan to teach it with all its context, but they [students] take it as bits and piece. They cannot think it in a context. The context seems to be artificial for them. They don't use it in their daily life. Most of them don't think it is important. As a teacher, you try to teach them something which they don't consider important or they just see as a course, consider just as a preparation for an exam. You try to make them understand the importance of learning a language. Actually it stems from being in Turkey, learning English as a foreign language, not using it or not having to use it.

She thinks that her students view instructional context as an artificial setting to learn and use English. Therefore, they tend to regard English just as a course that needs to be passed and it becomes really hard for them to see English as an important asset and need for their life. She feels like she is trying to swim against the stream.

2.1. Flexing curriculum and constructing supportive classroom environment

When they handle the challenges stemming from the curricular constraints and students' low motivation, the teachers in this study see their classes as more flexible implementations of the IEP curriculum and create supportive classroom environment. Despite the time pressure, they try to find a space for supplementary activities to the ones in the textbook by making extra preparation. For example, one participant deems flexibility as his main strategy and he states:

> I use flexibility. All I'm doing is try to balance between the pressure coming from the administration and curriculum, and my responsibilities or what I believe as a teacher. Sometimes, I skip some points that are pressed by the administration, I exchange them with some other things. I'm basically taking my initiative and doing what I think should happen.

He is cognizant of the pressure of the administration on the teachers in terms of the exact implementation of the curriculum, yet he also feels obliged to stay true to what he believes language teaching should look like. Therefore, his solution is to play around the curriculum, that is, to incorporate additional activities or remove the ones he thinks are not helpful for his students. He asserts agency and clings to his own instructional priorities that determine his decisions by decreasing the restrictive influence of the curriculum on his classroom practice.

Another teacher notices that her students are overwhelmed by the long term, ultimate goal of becoming fluent in English which could be leading to their lack of motivation in her classes. The fast pacing of the tight IEP curriculum does not allow them to see themselves succeed. Therefore, she views herself responsible as a teacher for boosting their motivation by showing them that they can succeed. She expounds:

> You have to show, or put them [students] in a situation so they can see that they can learn, or they can be successful. They have to be successful somehow. They need to be successful. To make this, maybe exams and quizzes do not motivate them, they might be more difficult than they expect. As a teacher, you can prepare some realist objectives, if you want them to do what they can do. This helps them feel the emotion of success. For example, I give them more writing homework about what they like. Paragraphs in which they can write about what they like. What they are familiar with. I want to help them like reading and listening, with simpler texts which they

> can understand. They say "yeah, I can *actually* understand when I listen." I want them to get this feeling.

The tests or other assessment tools embedded in the curriculum should have the function of giving feedback to English language learners about their progress as well as providing data for administration to decide their promotion to next levels. However, most of the time the latter dominates in the contexts of language teaching. When language learners do not ever emotionally experience what it feels like to succeed, it becomes pretty hard to keep their motivation to pursue in the winding path of language learning. In her comment above, the teacher seems aware of that and she wants to keep her students motivated enough in her classes.

Lastly, when handling the challenges of the curriculum and lack of learner motivation, the participants in this study see value in maintaining a good relationship with their students. She describes her strategy:

> I always want to have a good rapport with my students. I want them to see me truly invested or dedicated to their learning so they think they need to take it seriously. I created a good supportive atmosphere with my class. I monitor them closely, which is the key, I think, from experience. For example, when I return their weekly quizzes, I devote a class hour for feedback on this quiz, we have one-on-one feedback sessions with each of them, we go over their mistakes, and they see their mistakes, and they say they're going to be more careful next time, I think this is good. They know that I'm spending time checking their mistakes. When I monitor their progress, they feel like they need to take it seriously. Also, I ask them why they were absent when they miss classes. I am questioning them. Monitoring them closely is a good strategy.

She believes that her students need continuous feedback, support, and guidance regarding their progress and that the close relationship between her and her students helps their concentration and investment as learners. She also considers her formative, informal assessment and monitoring as a significant tool to keep them on track and responsible for their own learning.

2.2. Seeking support from colleagues and literature

The teachers in this study seek support from their coworkers and turn to the ELT literature when they are looking for ways to cope with the challenges emerging from curricular constraints and learners' low motivation. They do not have access to any professional learning communities formally organized by the IEP administration. However, they informally turn to their coworkers for collegial support or incidentally learn techniques from them during lounge conversations. For example, one participant depicts:

> I get support from my colleagues. I talk to those who have more practical knowledge and experience than me. I've talked to a lot of colleagues when I have had challenges. Sometimes, it is not a direct support. While chatting in the lounge, we talk about our problems. I get some ideas from them. … Sometimes, somebody prepares an activity and shares in our office, … I borrow it. You like it and you think it will be effective in your teaching. Sometimes, you see something on the board from the previous hour, you might use it as well. … This is a kind of support, though it is not professional. It is not systematic. More natural. Peer to peer.

The fact that there are experienced teachers in the IEP has been an asset for her to receive support. She also specifically highlights that the support she receives is natural, incidental, and informal. Her constant learning in the context is mediated through her interactions with her colleagues, which exemplifies the social and situated nature of teachers' professional learning.

In addition to learning from their colleagues, the participants note that they turn to the ELT literature to look for ideas when dealing with their instructional challenges. They try the ideas that they have learned from journal articles. One participant shares:

> I go to the literature when I come across an issue. I have many times looked for articles in academic journals to find solutions for my teaching challenges. Just to learn what is the best way to do that. I think, I go back to the literature to see if what I'm doing is right or wrong or what research says about it.

She wants her classroom practice to be aligned with or stay true to what research-based ELT literature views effective. Therefore, along with her colleagues' help, she tries to locate instructional strategies, "the best way" in her words, or some research basis for her classroom techniques.

3.1. Limited opportunities to apply theory to practice in teacher education courses

Relying on the teachers' responses, this study reveals that the courses in their English language TEP were mostly theoretical and did not afford them opportunities to apply their growing theoretical knowledge into practical situations. They do not think that their pre-service teacher education prepared them for their current teaching. They have had to figure out how to translate theoretical knowledge into practical application in their classroom teaching by taking contextual factors into account. They do not deny the instrumentality of *all* the courses, but even the most helpful ones prepared them for the ideal situations only. For example, one participant comments:

> They [teacher education courses] didn't teach us how to deal with the problems. I mean, they just taught us how to, say, teach present perfect tense, just how to present the content, but they did not teach us about how to respond to students' issues … Our professors could have given us some cases. Because we come across many different situations, about classroom management, students language learning, and it's not only students, there are other problems coming from the top, which you have no influence on, say, the fact that the program is really tight and fast-paced … there are really many unexpected situations emerging in work life.

She believes that the TEP prepared her only for the delivery of the language content and that it did not provide her with any theoretical or practical preparation regarding how to address the situations that might come up before and after instructional delivery. Although it is unlikely to become prepared for all possible "unexpected" situations, she thinks that teacher educators could have enriched or enhanced their preparation by exposing them to potential cases or simulations of practical challenges. Teacher candidates' responses to those cases could facilitate the way they link theory to practice and prepare them as better decision makers.

The participants find ELT methodology courses and general pedagogy courses very useful for their current practice, although they think those courses could have been better orchestrated to support the development of teachers' practical knowledge. However, they note they had to take linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and literature courses that, they believe, proved very distanced from teaching in general and ELT in particular. For example, one teacher voices her concern:

> Some linguistics and [language] acquisition courses were too theoretical. I mean, there are lots of things that we don't use now. They should be designed to be more, erm, supportive of English language teaching. … There are lots of things that I don't even remember let alone use in the classroom. They are not directly related to classroom practice, but should be. If it is an English language teaching program, the courses should be about preparing teachers rather than preparing academics. They are not relevant to what we do in the class. They can be more realistic, and give us more knowledge that can be used in classroom setting.

She stresses the missing link between her linguistics and SLA courses, and her current practice. Their theoretical content made her think that those courses were geared towards preparing second language academics, not teachers. As for teacher preparation, she seems to see no value in providing teacher candidates with the knowledge that is not going to contribute to their classroom practice directly.

The participants had similar experiences with the English literature courses that are expected to introduce teacher candidates to the culture associated with the

English language, although their main goal is not entirely clear. They do not consider those courses relevant to their teaching practice. One participant shares:

> Literature courses as culture courses, they are not helpful directly for language teaching. They enriched our language, more vocabulary, thinking more profoundly. They help you learn about the language you are teaching. That's it. No more. So literature courses shouldn't be just literature courses. They should be connected to the [ELT] methodology, must be integrated into methodology. I don't use what I learnt in literature courses, and I don't know how to use them. Teachers should be taught how to use a short story in a class. Literature and methods courses should be integrated.

Although she believes that the literature courses did not support her current classroom practice, she implies that their content could be useful class material for language teachers only if guided by ELT teaching methods. She argues those exclusive literature courses should be turned into courses that prepare teacher candidates to teach English through literary works.

3.2. Inadequate field experience in teacher education curriculum

The teachers' responses in this study demonstrate that the clinical field experience provided in their pre-service TEP was not adequate in terms of their preparation for language teaching in their current context. Their concerns revolve around three aspects of their student-teaching courses, namely, length, content, and contextual diversity. To further explicate, they believe that teacher candidates should spend more time student-teaching in the schools; teacher candidates should be given more opportunities to teach actual lessons; teacher candidates should complete their student-teaching in different teaching settings working with students from various age groups, socio-economic status (SES), and language proficiency levels. For example, one participant reflects:

> In the first year, there are some courses for classroom observation, like student-teaching, you go and observe other teachers and write reports, those observations should continue in the second year, and third and fourth years should include student teaching throughout. I'm not sure if it's feasible, but we learn it in the field, so the more field experience, the better. Also, I know most of the graduates work at K-12 levels in public schools, but there is another group of graduates who work at tertiary levels, so it could be added to the internship options. Because they need to learn how to deal with the college level students, I mean, what issues they have.

She maintains that teacher candidates should spend more hours observing and actually teaching in the schools, because she conceives field experience as a key to learning to teach. She also argues for variety of context options from which teacher

candidates can pick depending on their aspired teaching job. However, she acknowledges the potential feasibility issues of integrating additional internship courses.

Another participating teacher underscores the significance of field experience for learning to teach, and she believes teacher candidates should be more active in their internship schools. She describes:

> We had two courses, not enough, and they are mostly dependent on observation, student teachers just observe, I think they should depend more on practice. Student teachers should prepare lessons, teach really, and prepare materials. It should be much longer, should be designed in a way that future teachers teach whole year. Just observing does not work. You watch it like a guest. You should be in it as a participant. You should live it. If there is a problem about teaching or management, you can learn it being in the process as an agent.

She prioritizes teacher candidates' involvement in teaching activities in their internship schools. She values classroom observations, but they should be followed by teaching in actual classroom, executing one's own lesson plans, and using own materials. Teacher preparation in her understanding should include experiencing what a practicing teacher normally experiences in the classroom setting.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the early career EFL teachers' instructional challenges, the ways they handled those challenges, and the extent to which their pre-service teacher education prepared them to teach in their current context. In light of the findings presented above, this section engages in a discussion of three main points: (1) contextual challenges as part of teachers' learning in the profession, (2) the distance between teacher education courses and future teaching practice, and (3) clinical preparation as the black box of teacher education.

Challenges in the context: part of learning to teach?

The findings of this research highlight the telling influences that teaching contexts have on teachers' practice. The participants expressed their discomfort dealing with instructional challenges primarily because they were required to implement a very tight, fast-paced curriculum with students, most of whom are not motivated enough to learn English as a foreign language (Mede & Akyel, 2014; Ölmezer Öztürk, 2015). The participants had to negotiate their instructional priorities by considering all contextual factors at the IEP which, like any school, maintains its socializing powers, cultures, and norms (Freeman, 2002). Teachers' professional learning in a context necessitates understanding those powers, cultures, and norms and adapting their behaviors and instructional decisions. This adaptation is a sociocultural process shaped by their participation in professional activities and their interactions with peers and students, and it is an essential part of their

professional socialization and identity development (Flores & Day, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 2001; Yazan, 2014).

Teachers' professional socialization or enculturation into the community (Korthagen, 2010; Üzüm, 2015) is not a smooth process. On the contrary, it is fraught with hurdles and roadblocks to clear, which entails constant strategic decision-making and maneuvering (Pardo, 2006). The participants' challenges in this study could be considered as the manifestations of an unstable teaching context that makes teachers' socialization a thorny process. Their challenges are primarily stemming from curriculum and student population, which are two significant aspects of their teaching context. Those aspects compelled them to adapt their understanding of success in language learning. That is, because of the emphasis on students' test scores as the indication of their achievement, the teachers focused their instructional attention on students' preparation for weekly quizzes, midterm exams, and proficiency test. In other words, the IEP culture and norms required teachers to view test scores as actual indicator or measure of language learning, although they just represent proxy values. This does not mean that the teachers' instructional beliefs and priorities have permanently changed that way, but they feel obliged to respond to the growing external pressure (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009) emerging from tight curriculum and testing which is all that administration and students value most. This strongly resonates with Johnson's (2009) sociocultural rendition of learning to teach which accentuates powerful impact of context:

> educational policies, high-stakes tests, and the norms of schooling embedded in instructional contexts are powerful macro-structures that affect the ways in which L2 [second language] teachers and their L2 students are positioned, how L2 teachers enact their teaching practices, and most importantly, the kinds of learning environments they are willing and able to create for their L2 students (p. 77).

Johnson (2009) situates teachers' professional learning and practice in a complex web of surrounding factors.

Despite their restrictive aspects, contextual challenges were instrumental in leading the teachers in this study to seek support from their colleagues and ELT literature. Teachers develop their experiential knowledge as they respond to the demands and expectations of their contexts (Golombek, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 2001). Their responses could either reflect collegiality, like consulting coworkers for advice or support, or autonomy, like turning to the research literature for advice (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000). Although it would be too simplistic to assume that teachers' collegiality automatically brings about their professional learning (Little, 2002), their interactions with their colleagues, particularly when seeking support are part of their learning to teach in the context. Besides, although autonomy is considered to increase teachers' reliance on their beliefs about teaching and learning shaped throughout their educational trajectories, it could lead to teachers' "creativity, personal study, reflection, the elaboration of new orientations,

and as a consequence for professional development" (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000, p. 85). In this study, the participating teachers were engaged in collegiality and autonomy, which makes the process of handling challenges an integral part of their professional development in the context.

Teacher education coursework: distant from practice?

The findings of this research point out that some courses the teachers took in their pre-service TEP did not contribute to their teaching practice. They voiced their dissatisfaction with the instrumentality of the linguistics, SLA theory, and literature courses in their preparation as English language practitioners. This finding resonates with Büyükyavuz and İnal's (2008) study in which participants find linguistics, SLA theory, and literature courses as the most undesirable courses to take if they were back in the pre-service education again. However, especially the relevance of linguistics and SLA theories courses to language teaching has been a contested issue in the field of ELT and there is an ongoing debate about it. Although Freeman and Johnson (1998) suggest that language teacher knowledge base should not be defined by linguistics and SLA theories, other scholarship contends that teacher candidates' exposure to those theories support their professional practices (Andrews & McNeill, 2005; Bartels, 2005; LaFond & Doğançay-Aktuna, 2009).

The findings of this study are supportive of the argument that language teachers do not directly benefit from the theoretical knowledge about linguistics and SLA. Research in the fields of linguistics and SLA "per se does not articulate easily and cogently into classroom practice, much current knowledge in SLA may be of limited use and applicability to practicing teachers" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 411). In the same vein, Johnston and Goettsch (2000) observe that the notion the academics in this field used to hold "as an article of faith [was] that what language teachers need most is training in linguistics," which is an influential misconception hard to demolish (p. 439). The main justification of this line of research is that "language teaching is first and foremost an educational enterprise, not a linguistic one" (Johnston & Goettsch, 2000, p. 439). Therefore, language teachers' preparation should be focused more on language teaching, rather than the language.

The English literature courses, on the other hand, are supposed to promote the development of teacher candidates' cultural knowledge. However, relying on the participants' responses, those courses are highly questionable in their learning to integrate culture in their language classes and to improve their students' cultural competence in English. First, those courses include only the analysis of British and American literary works, but do not take a further step to design ways to utilize those works of literature in English instruction in their future classes. Second, defining language teachers' cultural knowledge through knowledge of literature assumes a very limited definition of culture. Although literary works present the cultural milieu of the time they were written, literature is merely one aspect of the culture associated with the English language. Lastly, learning (to teach) a foreign language requires not only learning about the culture but also learning to communicatively function in the target culture (Bayyurt, 2006; Devrim & Bayyurt,

2010; Luk, 2012). Now that English has become an international language used by people coming from numerous cultural backgrounds in various contexts (Selvi & Yazan, 2013), teaching intercultural competence should definitely be part of the English language pedagogy. English language teachers should be prepared to integrate culture of learners, culture of English speaking countries, and international culture so that their students become successful language users in cross-cultural encounters (McKay, 2002).

Clinical preparation of teacher candidates: the black box?

The findings of this research stress the significance of student-teaching experiences that teacher candidates are provided in their pre-service TEPs. Looking back to their student-teaching, the participating teachers think that clinical courses could have been designed differently to best cater to their needs as future teachers at that time. This finding brings about questions concerning one of the most complicated phenomena to explore in pre-service teacher education research, as well as one of the most crucial one (Atay, 2007; Bailey, 2006; Crookes, 2003; Farrell, 2001; Gebhard, 2009; Selvi, 2012; Yazan, 2015). It is not easy to answer the questions of how and what teacher candidates learn from their internship experiences (Crookes, 2003). Therefore, it has been called as "the black box of the teacher education program" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 303), or "an alien element among university courses" (Schocker-v. Ditfurth & Legutke, 2007, p. 513). However, its crucial importance is unquestionable: "if the literature and folklore of teacher education agree on one point, it is that the student teaching experience or practicum is important" (Clark, 1988, p. 1).

The EFL teachers' concerns in this study point to very important aspects of clinical preparation, namely, its content, length, and contextual diversity. In terms of the content of clinical preparation, teacher candidates are usually expected to go through two-layered process of engagement in teaching. First, they should have "opportunities to observe teaching, to prepare for teaching, to teach, to reflect on it, to analyze it, and thus to learn it from it" (Graves, 2009, p.118). Second, teacher candidates should experience being active participants in "communities of practice because teaching is an activity situated in complex cultural, social and political contexts" (p. 118). This entire clinical experience should be viewed as initial part of teacher candidates' apprenticeship, socialization into teaching profession and development of teacher identities (Yazan, 2014; Üzüm, 2015). Their socialization and identity development is shaped by their observations of language teaching from teacher's perspective, preparing lesson plans, teaching and co-teaching lesson plans, engaging in critical reflection on their teaching, building rapport with students, and talking back to theory (Sharkey, 2004), and revising and externalizing their implicit personal theories (Peercy, 2012).

Although it is safe to state that clinical experiences are part of every TEP, its length could drastically vary across different programs and it concerns the policies and standards of teacher education. Valuing the practice most, the EFL teachers in

this study believe the longer student-teaching is, the more conducive it is to teacher candidates' professional preparation. Earlier work reveals that those teachers who had sufficient and meaningful field experience in a powerful pre-service teacher education program are more likely to adapt to their teaching context in their first year of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006). However, the developers of teacher education curriculum could be wrestling with school bureaucracies and policies and strained material and human resources.

Lastly, if the goal of the clinical preparation is to prepare teacher candidates for the context of their future job, it needs to be diversified as much as possible to better cater to their post-programmatic needs and goals (Selvi, 2012). This need for diversity concerns two main issues. First, the schools with which teacher education programs are working for teacher candidates' clinical placements are most of the time exemplary schools with selected teaching staff and student body in high SES neighborhoods. The realities of teaching context are different for many first year teachers than this ideal environment. Second, due to the requirements of Higher Education Council in Turkey, EFL teacher education programs housed in the universities are preparing teachers for K-12 settings, which is why teacher candidates are placed in K-12 schools for their clinical experiences. However, in fact, the graduates of those programs are also employed at IEP settings in public and private universities across Turkey. Therefore, granted those two issues are fairly important for EFL teachers' preparation, diversification of clinical placements could enhance their professional learning in pre-service teacher education.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This inquiry investigated the early career EFL teachers' instructional challenges, the ways they handled those challenges, and the degree to which their pre-service teacher education prepared them to teach in their current context. The findings revealed that their instructional challenges stemmed from curricular constraints and learners' lack of motivation to learn and use English, both of which are situated within their context (Flores, 2001). Their collegial interactions with coworkers and autonomous ventures to seek support (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Little, 2002) proved instrumental in coping with those challenges. Taking a retrospective look at their pre-service teacher education, they voiced concerns primarily about too much theoretical knowledge provided in the courses which left very little room for practical application (Graves, 2009) and the content, length, and contexts of clinical experiences (Gebhard, 2009). Through those findings, this research connected and contributed to the earlier research on teachers' challenges in teaching context as part of their ongoing teacher learning (Pardo, 2006), distance of linguistics, SLA, and literature courses from ELT practices (Büyükyavuz & İnal, 2008), and complex nature of teacher candidates' clinical experiences in contributing to their socialization into teaching profession and teacher identity development (Yazan, 2014).

The research findings in this study present implications for both pre-service and in-service teacher education practices. Dealing with the challenges in their

teaching contexts, early career EFL teachers continue their professional learning which occurs at the intersection of their knowledge-base constructed during pre-service education and contextual demands. EFL teacher educators can prepare teacher candidates for those challenges by providing more opportunities for practical experiences in various contexts where they can observe similar challenges and experiment handling them as fledgling teachers. This requires incorporating more field-based experiences in EFL teacher education curriculum as well as the examination of some relevant case studies in light of the theoretical knowledge. Additionally, novice EFL teachers should be provided assistance and support by their experienced colleagues and administrators to handle those challenges, because preparing pre-service EFL teachers for everything that teaching involves in every context is obviously implausible. Therefore, the institutions hold responsibility for EFL teachers' induction into the profession and ongoing learning. Institutional support can strengthen their motivation and promote resilience in the events of encountering challenges.

Moreover, pre-service EFL teacher education should focus on applicable aspects of linguistics and SLA theories so that teacher candidates can internalize them as part of their growing knowledge base. At the time of the design and delivery of linguistics and SLA courses, teacher educators should always be reminded that teacher candidates should be able to see the relevance and connection of the course content and activities to their future classroom teaching practice. Besides, pre-service EFL teacher education should infuse its curriculum a broader conceptualization of culture associated with the international English language use and should offer courses, which are directly related to incorporation of culture into English language classes. Along with the target culture, EFL teacher candidates should also learn and practice the ways to integrate Turkish culture into EFL classes since their students will (be expected to) share their own culture while communicating in English.

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