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The catalyst role of teacher: from the perspective of prospective teachers

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Abstract

Teachers have a wide range of roles to handle the class in terms of supporting students and accomplishing their own responsibilities. Additionally, the roles of a teacher may also change due to many factors such as methodological development or technological innovations. With the current changes, it seems that teachers play the role of a catalyst by supporting and motivating the students. In this study, the term catalyst teacher is used to describe the teacher's role, and the teacher's role as a catalyst is investigated from the perspective of prospective teachers. In doing so, the prospective teachers of English at a Turkish university were interviewed through semi-structured interview questions to explore their understanding of teacher cognition. The interview has three different dimensions: prospective teachers' previous learning experiences; their recent experiences, and their school practicum experiences -in terms of mentor teachers' roles. The results of the study displayed that the prospective teachers believe that the teacher should be a model and guide- catalyst- in the classroom; however, they declared that their previous teachers implemented traditional teaching techniques for teaching English. Similarly, they also declared that their mentor teachers followed traditional teaching methods.

Keywords: teacher role, catalyst role, foreign language learner.

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Introduction

The role of a teacher has evolved within the recent years due to methodological or technological changes. With the influence of constructive approach to language teaching, the learner and his/her needs and expectations have been placed in the center of educational process. Therefore, the measure of an efficient lesson is on how students take place in the activity, not the performance of the teacher (Harmer, 2007). This change has altered the role of the teacher in the classroom and required teachers to take on different roles according to their teaching atmosphere. Harmer (2007, p.108-100) listed the roles of a teacher as facilitator, controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and observer; however, he suggested that teachers need to be able to make modifications for these roles during their teaching experiences. That's to say, teachers have become not only an instruction giver of a specific subject but also undertaken other roles when necessary. In this respect, teachers should be equipped with required features and skills in teacher training process. As with the previous and recent experiences of prospective teachers, the time interval of the training is also an aide and a prompter for these prospective teachers to observe these catalyst roles of the teacher in the classroom. Thus, the efficacy of the training within a limited time-line is crucial. In this study, driven with the presupposition that previous learning experiences –focusing on the teacher cognition aspect for the most part- have an impact on the prospective teachers' teaching practices, the impressions and perceptions of these prospective teachers were questioned, through depending on specific field-dependent deductions.

According to Borg (2015), the learning experiences of language teachers are shaped by their early assumptions of language learning, and thus, their professional lives may also be influenced by such cognition. Accordingly, Ögeyik (2016) stated that examining prospective teachers' earlier learning experiences has a major effect on finding solutions to the unpredicted troubles in the teacher training program. Thus, such cognition shapes the effectivity of learning and teaching atmosphere –whether in the context of training or real teaching environments-.

It is widely known that the efficiency of learning and teaching atmosphere is influenced by the rapport between teachers and their students. Teachers have a crucial role to influence the learner in a positive role model position (Rogerson & Chomicz, 2014). Rogerson and Chomicz (2014) proposed that catalytic role of the teacher influences the learner's participation in the lesson and increases her/his motivation level as a lifelong learner. In this model, catalyst is defined as the educator who promotes and speeds up the rate of learning within a classroom. Teachers are regarded as the main factors that advance and catalyze education. However, teachers are not fully equipped with their varied roles in the classroom and are not able to take on any role effectively due to some reasons such as teacher training program they received, their beliefs on teacher cognition, overcrowded classrooms, lack of required materials (Davidoff & Lazarus, 1997), inadequate amount of foreign language lesson hours, and insufficient in-service training...etc. Thus, these negative effects might lead to the arousal of deficient or inexact teacher models. Although these effects becloud the proper process, teachers still carry the responsibility of an efficient instruction. In other words, whatever the conditions are, teachers are expected to maximize the benefits of the training they took regarding both the negative and positive sides to develop the quality of their teaching. In this study, determining the teacher cognition of prospective teachers from a holistic perspective -including

previous/recent and school practicum experiences- and offering some possible suggestions for how to construct affective teachers' role in their following teacher professions is aimed.

The current study investigated the prospective teachers' perspectives towards teacher roles and tried to determine their understanding of teacher cognition within an attempt to find whether there are similarities or differences between their previous learning experiences; recent experiences, and their school practicum experiences -in terms of mentor teachers' roles. The main attempt in discovering their beliefs on teacher cognition was centered on the notion that prospective teachers' teaching practice during Teaching Practicum Course has been shaped by their earlier language learning understandings and teacher cognition (Borg, 2003, 2015; Crooks, 20015; Kubanyiova, 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Ögeyik, 2016).

Research questions

In the study, three research questions were proposed, and the answers to the questions were tried to be found through semi-structured interview.

1. What is the prospective teachers' cognition of the teacher?
2. What are the prospective teachers' beliefs about the teacher role as catalyst?
3. In terms of the teacher role, are there any differences between their previous teachers at high school, lecturers at university and mentor teachers at the practicum school?

Methodology

The qualitative method is used in this study since in qualitative research, nonnumerical data are gathered for highlighting the phenomena (Gay, et. al., 2006). A semi-structured interview was implemented as a source of qualitative data collection to explore prospective teachers' understanding of teacher cognition. An interview that provides a valuable way to gather complementary data is a predetermined action through which information is aimed to gather from the interviewee (Gay, et. al., 2006). In addition to the structured and unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews are also suitable for those research settings where participants' perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes are the core units of the research (Švec et al., 1998). Similarly, Cohen et al. (2007) and Gavora (2000) consider that open-ended outset in the semi-structured interview lead the interviewer to gain new and unforeseen knowledge. In this regards, the researcher has to focus on individuality, subjectivity, uniqueness, and spontaneity of response. Besides, s/he needs to understand and interpret the main points of respondents' statements with the use of natural language, avoiding generalizations and focusing primarily on specific topics, ideas, and situations (Cohen et al., 2007; Gavora, 2000).

Participants

10 prospective teachers contributed to the study. The participants were the prospective teachers at the English Language Teaching Department of a Turkish University. They took the Teaching Practicum course in 2016-2017 academic year; they were observed by their mentor teachers at schools and supervisors at the university while they were teaching English in real classroom context. The researcher selected the research participants randomly.

Data collection

In this study, the researcher designed the questions of the interview in accordance with the research questions in order to collect relevant data for the research. Ten open-ended interview questions were prepared by the researcher before the interview session (see App.I). The interview sessions were held at the end of the teaching practicum.

The randomly chosen ten respondents were informed about the interview date and invited to the researcher's office. They were not informed about the research topic, aim or objective beforehand. The semi-structured interview questions were asked to each participant in an order. However, the researcher prepared an outline of guiding questions in advance to obtain detailed data from the respondent. Besides, the researcher tried to avoid misleading or ambiguous questions in order to eliminate the possible misunderstandings by the interviewees. The duration for each interview session changed from respondent to respondent; some spent 8 minutes while some spent 15 minutes for responding the questions. During the interview session, the researcher took notes in order to report and interpret each response easily and correctly. Each participant was coded as P1, P2, P3., etc., and their practicum files were coded accordingly so as to compare their responses and their own reflections on the practicum.

Data analysis

After the interview sessions, the responses were transcribed through content analysis. Kvale (1996) explains that the processing of the rich data developed in the course of a semi-structured interview requires a qualitative content analysis. Therefore, the researcher outlined the content analysis for interpreting the data. According to Cohen et al. (2007, p.283), the analytical process often requires some form of coding or scoring. To enhance the validity of the research, the researcher informed the participants about the main aim of her study after conducting the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of current study were discussed around the three research questions. The answers to the research question 1 and 2 (What is the prospective teachers' cognition of teacher? What are the prospective teachers' beliefs about teacher role as catalyst?) indicated that prospective teachers think that the teacher is a role model and guide in the classroom and they did not use the term catalyst for determining the teacher role although their description of a teacher was equal to the term. After the analysis of the qualitative data, six main categories were obtained with regards to the notion of the teacher as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1*Understanding the notion of the teacher*

Categories	N
The teacher is a...	
role model	10
guide	9
leader	5
prompter	3
a catalyst	2
manager	2

As displayed in the table, most of the participants reflected their general understanding of a teacher as role model or guide. P1 stated that “I think, teacher is a role model in the classroom”. P2 and P8 stated that “My teachers are like role models for me. I learn from them how to be a good teacher and I try to imitate them”. In this sense, teachers have a crucial role in determining the students own belief about their future profession. Therefore, teachers should pay attention what behavioral and social expectations will be in their classroom since they role model this behavior for their students in order to adopt both the in classroom and in later life (Hallinan, 2008; Shein & Chiou, 2011, Sinagatullin, 2009). P9 stated that “Teacher role is being a guide for students who facilitates learning”. P7 mentioned that “The teacher is like a guide. Not only he teaches but also he shows the ways of learning”. More surprisingly, two of them stated the role of a teacher in classroom as a catalyst or a manager. This was interpreted by the researcher that participants were not aware of the term “catalyst”. Although they used implicit definition of a catalytic teacher in the interview sessions, they did not use the term catalyst explicitly to define the teacher role. This may be due to the lack of the term in the content of the course they studied in the program. Also, none of them mentioned the roles like assessor, observer, organizer or controller. This was interpreted by the researcher that participants regarded the teacher in the classroom, in a more generalized sense, as an enabler and organizer for the students since the teacher is the giver of the knowledge and the one responsible for encouraging autonomous learning. Harmer (2001) suggests the term ‘facilitator’ as the teacher’s role in learner-centered lessons and also adds other roles such as prompter, resource or tutor; in one sense, all roles aim to facilitate the students’ progress in some way or other.

With regard to the research question 3 (Are there any differences between their previous teachers at high school, lecturers at university and mentor teachers at the practicum school?) the perspectives of prospective teachers' teacher cognition in terms of their previous teacher, lecturer and mentor were presented in Table 2. In the table, the reflections of participants about their previous teacher, lecturer and mentor in terms of teacher cognition were classified separately as teacher profession and teacher characteristics.

Table 2*Prospective teachers' cognition of teacher*

Category	Teacher cognition	Previous teacher N	Lecturer N	Mentor N
teacher profession	traditional	9	2	6
	explicit teaching	9	1	9
	implicit teaching	1	-----	2
	student-centered	2	8	5
	teacher-centered	8	2	9
	practical	1	10	2
	proficient	4	6	6
	dominant	9	8	8
	planned	2	6	6
	responsible	9	8	8
teacher characteristics	tolerant	8	5	4
	patient	8	-----	6
	eager	9	10	7
	aggressive	3	2	5
	friendly	9	9	8
	Kind	10	9	9

N=Number communication units

As shown in the table, most of the participants' previous teachers used traditional way of teaching and they mostly taught explicitly. The classroom atmosphere was teacher-centered and teachers were dominant in the classroom. P9 and P4 similarly stated that "My teacher followed the coursebook all the time, he was so traditional. He rarely spoke English". Besides, P10 stated that "My high school teacher did not use any lively or interesting activity. The lessons were traditional and boring". Skosana and Monyai (2013) claim that today's teachers seem to fail to benefit from the relevant resources like charts, newspaper or concrete objects to facilitate teaching and learning in the classrooms which is one of the requirements of catalytic

teacher. Essentially, there is a mismatch between the requirements of the policy and the real classroom atmospheres where the teachers' focus is on transmission of the knowledge. P6 stated that "I was taught English in a traditional way; I memorized many rules or vocabulary. My teacher used translation technique mostly". P5 stated that "My teachers followed rule-based teaching. He did not let us practice the language". P3 stated that "My teacher used LYS (university entrance exam) grammar books most of the time. He focused on grammar and we studied multiple choice questions". 9 participants mentioned that their teachers were dominant in the classroom and they were responsible for teaching. Likewise, most of them stated that they were eager to teach and tolerant to the students. Rogerson and Chomicz (2014) in their study mention the identified characteristics of the teacher by the students are: passion for teaching, strong knowledge of content and conveyance of belief that every student can achieve and will be encouraged to do so. On the other hand, P2 stated that "My teacher was friendly towards us and he behaved respectfully". P9 stated that "He was kind and nice person; however I cannot say that he was a good teacher". In this sense, being eager to teach is not adequate for being catalytic teacher, instead teachers are required to be proficient enough and they need to cater for the individual needs of their students (Horsley, 2012). Only 1 participant stated that "My teacher was not friendly in order not to spoil classroom management and his authority". As understood from the table, the participants' previous teachers shared common roles and characteristics although they taught in different schools and had different teaching experiences. Harmer (2007) mentions that the role of the teacher is dependent on the teacher's aim to achieve. There may be times that the teacher needs to act as a prompter or a resource. He suggests (2007) that the teacher needs to be able to change her/his role in each phase of lesson plan or during the semester. In this study; however, the prospective teachers assumed the teachers to be overwhelmingly dominant on one particular role in classroom and they were not flexible in their role.

As for the participants' understanding of teacher cognition about their lecturers, findings revealed nearly the opposite of teacher profession. Among the participants, only two participants stated that their lecturers were traditional. All of them stated that their lecturers were more practical in the classroom than their previous teachers. P8 stated that "Instead of giving knowledge merely or just instructing, he integrated theory and practice. This helped me understand the content better". Similarly, P6 stated that "My lecturers at university put the learners in the center and made us be active in the classroom". P5 stated that "Our lecturers are like a guide that lighten and brighten our way". Similarly, P7 stated that "Our lecturers are more practical. They are not product-oriented like our high school teachers. On the contrary, they are process-oriented; they focused on methodology and the ways of being a good teacher". Such positive statements about the lecturers are encouraging for prospective teachers' well-being, since teachers can improve the emotional well-being and happiness of the students by constructing positive teacher-student relationships within the classroom (MacLeod & Napoles, 2012; Pickett & Fraser, 2010). In this sense, good relationship between the teacher and students may also increase the academic achievement in the classroom and motivate students with a sense of fully enjoyment of the class atmosphere.

On the other hand, the findings about the participants' beliefs about their mentor teachers and their previous school teachers displayed similarity in most of the categories: the

lessons were filled with traditional grammar-based drills, reading and answering comprehension questions, multiple choice items and studying of vocabulary and grammatical rules... etc. As regards the data, it can be presumed that most of the mentor teachers applied explicit teaching in a teacher-centered classroom. Among the described attitude of the mentors, only two mentors and one teacher were assumed to be practical; that is, they taught implicitly in order to assist learners to discover by themselves.

As for the characteristics of the teacher, most of the participants stated that their mentor teachers were very helpful during the practicum and guided them in every aspect. P6 and P10 stated that “She gave me feedback and helped me a lot about gaining classroom management strategies.” P5 stated that “My mentor teacher shared his own teaching experiences with us and this made me more enthusiastic”. P8 stated that “I received some clues about how to manage timing and classroom. Her ideas are very precious for me”. Similarly, P1 stated that “He gave me some interesting ideas to catch the students”. P2 stated that “My mentor was very interested in the students’ interests and she was following the trend topics in order to take their attention. So, she was managing the classroom easily”. As Cohen et al. (2010) stated knowing each student’s interest and their learning history in order to design the way of supporting each student within their classroom. In this respect, teachers have an opportunity to plan the way they want from their students to learn. Cohen et al (2010) and Gagne (2007) suggest that teachers should design their lesson plans to present content through an integration of technology or a selection of metacognitive strategies to ensure that all students are interested in learning. Among the participants, more interestingly, P7 studied with two different teachers during the practicum and stated that “One of the mentor teachers was helpful and friendly towards me and guided me in each stage; however, the other mentor was not that much helpful and responsible about his duty”.

Suggestions

In this study, the visible data from teaching experiences in the Teaching Practicum course enhanced the researcher to find the unnoticed effect of participants’ language learning histories and the impact of the teacher cognition on their teaching. Although they were given methodological knowledge and current trends in foreign language teaching, it is observed that most of them were influenced by their prior teachers while they were doing teaching practicum. Thus, the educators in teacher training process have utmost importance in the configuration of the cognition in the individuals and have a responsibility on being decent and helpful role models to raise awareness on the exact teacher cognition. Similarly, the data obtained from the research displayed that most of the participants think that teacher’s role in the classroom is being a role model or a guide. They describe some of their teachers without using the term catalyst although they define the catalytic teacher. This may be the result of not knowing the exact definition of the term. As for the differences among their learning experiences, the data revealed that the prospective teachers’ prior teachers generally show similarity to their mentors in terms of using explicit instruction and being traditional, whereas their lecturers are mostly more practical and they are not traditional. For the teacher characteristics, each group share common features like being helpful, kind, tolerant...etc. That is to say, a positive approach of educators should be encouraged by explaining them the impacts of their teaching on the prospective teachers.

As for the catalyst role of the teacher, the findings indicated that apart from the common teacher roles, catalyst role needs to be studied more in the teacher training programs in order to increase the awareness. Besides, Skosana and Monyai (2013) stressed the importance of the role of the teacher as a catalyst and stated that teachers need to be trained practically during in-service training for being effective catalyst and for building the quality of education. Therefore, teachers need to master many new teaching competencies and strategies in order to be catalytic agents in the education. The 21st century requires teachers to be able to effectively teach learning areas, manage class, and organize extra-curricular activities additional to the daily classroom activities (Cohen et al, 2010). If prospective teachers are well-equipped with trend issues, current innovations in the field of methodology, and not influenced by their undesirable previous learning experiences, they will be catalyst teachers. In order to enable such learning and teaching atmosphere, the gap among the institutions such as the ministry of education, universities and teacher unions or associations should be filled; thus, the required needs for teacher development might be met. The staff of teacher training can gather in seminars, in-service training programs of school meetings to share their thoughts, and examine their implementations in the classroom.

Limitation

In this study, small size participants took place; further studies can be designed with large groups. Comparative studies for international institutions can also be planned. In this current study, interview as a research tool was used; other studies can be conducted by means of various research tools. In this study, the perspectives of prospective teachers were examined through qualitative method; in further studies, both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used for data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

In the field of foreign language teaching, besides gaining the required skills on how to teach, it is also important to learn the attributed roles of being a teacher. Starting from the infancy and continuing through her/his entire life, an individual takes the people around her/him as a role model in doing several tasks, and in the context of education, teachers are the role models who are more or less responsible for demonstrating a proper guide for their students. In a similar vein, the findings of this study which aimed to display the significance of the previous or recent experiences in figuring out the perceptions of the prospective teachers have revealed that the teacher cognition of prospective teachers whether they regard the teachers as catalyst or not is closely linked with their previous life experiences. The overall results indicated that the prospective teachers believe that the teacher must behave as a catalyst in the classroom and they declared that their previous teachers and mentors were mostly traditional in this respect and instructed explicitly without forcing the learner to be autonomous. This basically represents the need in mastering new teaching competencies and strategies in order to be catalytic agents in the field of education. In doing this, both the educational content of the foreign languages teaching departments and teachers who are actively teaching should follow the current tendencies and developments in this area to raise and maintain a catalytic approach for educational settings to obtain more effective learning and teaching environments. The catalyst

attitude of the lecturers during the teacher training process might influence their teaching behavior positively.

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Appendix I.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How can you describe your previous English teachers' teaching strategies in the classroom?
2. What kind of teaching method/s did they use? What kind of roles did they have?
3. How did they behave towards you as a learner? How did they assist you in learning English?
4. Can you talk about their teacher roles in general?
5. What about your lecturer's role in the teacher training program?
6. If you compare both previous teachers and current lecturers, what are the differences?
7. Can you talk about your recent mentor teacher/s at the practicum school?
8. How did the mentors assist you? In what ways did they contribute you?
9. What comes to your mind when I say teacher roles as a catalyst?
10. If you are asked to complete this sentence how would you complete it?
A teacher is like a..... because.....