

## HOW THE SUPERVISORS AT THE ELT DEPARTMENT PERCEIVE EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

(İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Bölümündeki Danışmanlar Etkili Danışmanlığı Nasıl Algılamaktadırlar: Sosyal Yapılandırmacı Bir Perspektif)

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### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in order to provide a general description of how the supervisor teachers of the ELT Department of Çukurova University perceive effective supervision, and how their perceptions influence their practices as supervisors. Six supervisors participated in the study. Their views on effective supervision were elicited by means of Repertory-Grid technique and feedback sessions were recorded. The data gathered were triangulated by interviews to see whether and to what extent their espoused theories were consistent with their theories in action. In addition, the factors that prevented the supervisors from applying their perceived effective supervisory strategies were defined in this study.

**Key Words:** Repertory-Grid Technique, Espoused Theories, Theories in Action, High-Priority Constructs

### ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Çukurova Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Bölümü öğretmenlik uygulaması dönemi danışmanlarının etkili danışmanlığı nasıl algıladıkları ve bunun danışman olarak uygulamalarına nasıl yansıdığına genel bir tanımını yapmaktır. Bu amaçlar doğrultusunda, Çukurova Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Bölümünde görev yapan toplam 6 danışmanın etkin etkin danışmanlıkla ilgili görüşlerine "Repertory-Grid" tekniği ile ulaşılmış, ve dönüt verme görüşmeleri kaydedilmiştir. Böylece bu danışmanların ileri sürdükleri görüşlerin uygulamalarına yansıyor yansımadağı gözlemlenmiştir. Ayrıca danışmanlarla yapılan görüşmelerle danışmanların uygulamalarının daha verimli olmasına engel olan faktörler belirlenmeye çalışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Repertory-Grid Tekniği, Benimsenmiş Kuramlar

### Introduction

Most teacher education programs are organised to provide student-teachers with opportunities to practice teaching. The goal of the practice sessions is to allow student-teachers learn more from practice because wise action is not possible without the knowledge acquired from practice (Carvero, 1992).

The extent to which the teacher education programs and the teaching practice period play a role on the student-teachers' change toward professional growth is disputable. Opposing views the scholars hold on the issue compile in the related literature. For example, student-teachers' ideologies are resistant to change (Zeichner and Liston in Ulla, Peltokallio and Piavi, 2000). Student-teachers' reflection is generally superficial (Cal-

derhead, 1987), teaching practice and supervisors do not influence student-teachers, and feedback sessions has not got a powerful effect as the supervisors wish i to be (Turney et al., in Roberts, 1988). On the other hand, practical experience is the source of student-teachers' knowledge (Calderhead and Miller; Shulman in Richards, 1998). On the other hand, student-teachers are capable of reflecting upon their experiences, which lead to development, when given the opportunity and a supportive environment, prior to extensive classroom experience (Sendan, 1995). In addition, practical experience is vital for people to learn because people change as they learn and this is a cycle of experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Considering Kolb's views, student-teachers are

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in a position to experience, construe over their experiences, conceptualise certain issues, and actively experiment them during the teaching practice period, which may end up with learning and professional change. In order to find evidence on the issue, teachers' thinking should be investigated because it serves to reduce the gap between theory and practice in education (Kelly, in Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

As practice teaching seems to be a period worthwhile investigating, there has been various research in the area. However, the studies conducted to put light on the facts about this period mostly seem to consist of pre and post administration of surveys or questionnaires in the beginning and at the end of the period. Such studies have not examined what actually happens during the experience itself. In fact, the phases and different aspects of teaching practice period may have various impacts on the student-teachers. Field experiences entail a complex set of interactions among program features and people, and thus, these also have to be taken into consideration (Zeichner, Tabachnick, and Densmore, 1987).

Taking the above-mentioned views into account, this study contrary to the previously conducted studies, attempts to draw a general picture of the happenings that take place throughout the practice teaching period. In this respect, the study questions the way the university supervisors perceive effective supervision, and whether or not their espoused theories are consistent with their theories in action. In addition, it aims to find out when and under what circumstances the supervisors can not put their theories into action. Briefly, the questions under consideration within the limits of this paper are as follows:

1. How do the supervisor teachers of ELT Department of Çukurova University Faculty of Education perceive effective supervision?
2. Are the supervisors' espoused theories

consistent with their theories in action during their feedback sessions?

3. If not, what are the influential factors?

### **Participants**

Two parties of people participated in this study: the first party consisted of six supervisor teachers of the above-mentioned department. In selection of the teachers, a stratified random sampling method was used. That is, while selecting the participating supervisors, the teachers of the department were divided into two categories in order to represent the characteristics of the teacher population. The first group of teachers consisted of instructors who taught methodology classes and held doctorate degrees in this area. Such a classification was made since supervision seems to require more concern with methodological issues.

The second group of teachers consisted of experienced instructors either without doctorate degrees or still conducting their doctorate studies. A randomly selected member of each group was assigned to work in practice schools. Three different school types were considered in the study. In other words, the study was conducted in three different types of schools: a state high school (Erkek Lisesi - Super High School), a private high school (Özel Gönen Lisesi), and finally an Anatolian high school (Kurttepe Anatolian High School). Thus, the ecological conditions of schools and the probable impacts of these conditions were also taken into account. For each school, a representative sample for methodology instructors with doctorate degrees, and one representative sample for experienced instructors without a doctorate degree were selected to participate in the study (totally 6 instructors).

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in this study were Repertory-Grids (Rep-Grid Manual, 1993), the recordings of the feedback sessions and interviews with the supervisors.

## Repertory Grids

In this study, repertory-grids were used to elicit the supervisors' constructs on effective supervision. This technique, as Shaw defines it, is:

A two-way classification of data interlaced with abstractions in such a way to express part of a person's system of cross-references between his personal observations or experience of the world (*elements*), and his personal classifications or abstractions of that experience (*constructs*). (in Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p.59).

In addition, this technique facilitates the elicitation of constructs and responses from participants without influencing them by means of questions, as may be the case in the interviews and questionnaires. Repertory-grid technique also enables the researcher to retrieve the participants' cognition through their own conceptions, and finally produces valid and reliable data.

In this study, all the supervisors were informed about the aim and the procedures involved in repertory-grid elicitation in individual sessions. For those who were already familiar with the procedure, these sessions served to explain the aim and contribution of the grids to the general aim of the study.

## The Recording of Feedback Sessions

The recordings of the feedback sessions were another means to triangulate the data obtained from the participants. In addition, these recordings contributed to the validation of the interpretation of the data collected.

In order to obtain information on how feedback sessions were held, the supervisors were asked to record their feedback sessions for further reference. The researcher did not join the feedback sessions so as not to disturb the participants with the presence of an outsider.

The recordings of the feedback sessions

helped to find out whether or not the supervisors' espoused theories were consistent with their theories in action during their sessions. In addition, they were then referred to during the interviews with the supervisors to gain insight for the instances when they were not able to practice them in their sessions.

## Interviews with the Supervisors

Following Sendan (1995) and Yumru (2000), the supervisor teachers were interviewed after they completed their repertory grids, also taking the feedback they provided into account. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an emergent design. They were conducted referring to the recordings of the feedback sessions. The supervisors were asked:

1. to elaborate on the meaning they attached to their constructs in their grids,
2. to comment on the rationale behind their way of giving feedback,
3. to explain the instances their constructs for effective supervision does not apply,
4. to suggest ways they believe to make teaching practice period more beneficial on behalf of both themselves and the student-teachers.

## Procedure

In this study, the supervisors' views on effective supervision were elicited by means of Repertory-Grid technique. In addition, the supervisors' feedback sessions were recorded. The teachers were not asked to do anything special for the sake of the study such as providing pre or post feedback. On the contrary, the way they handled the job was followed and observed. Not requiring the supervisors to act uniformly enabled the researcher to investigate whether or not their supervisory behaviours were in agreement with the views they held regarding effective supervision. Moreover, it helped to understand how these behaviours varied, if any, with different student-teachers. During the

interviews, stimulated recall technique (Nunan, 1989) was used to go back to the instances under consideration.

### Findings and Discussion

One of the major inquiries of this study was to find out how the supervisors at the ELT Department perceived effective supervision. Repertory-Grids served to this purpose. Analysis of the grids revealed inconsistent views the supervisors held regarding the issue. In other words, almost no similarities in the supervisors' perceptions were observed after the analysis. Regarding this finding, we may suggest that among the supervisors of the department, there is not a scientifically based culture established for the practices of supervisory duties. That is, the aspects each supervisor values and mainly focuses on during the teaching practice period and the way they hold their feedback sessions are different from each other. Thus, the student-teachers are supervised depending on how their supervisors perceive the issue.

For example, in Supervisor 1's grid, the constructs are mainly related with leading the student-teachers to reflection and awareness

of their personal theories (constructs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 11 in Figure 1).

This supervisor encourages reflection and in order for the student-teachers to involve in a reflection process, s/he informs them that the ones who discuss about their practices will be given higher evaluations. S/he rationalises his/her view during the interview:

#### Extract 1:

Sometimes the student-teachers' mentors ask them to behave in a certain way but they may do just the opposite or what their mentors favour may not correspond with their supervisors' views. At such instances, I advise my students to discuss the issue not only with the mentors and the supervisors but also with their peers. There are instances when the student-teachers may not approve of the way their mentors teach, then I tell them that teaching practice is a period of ex-change of knowledge and all their experiences, good or bad will lead to professional development. In addition, this supervisor views student teaching as a professional learning experience (construct 5). S/he also emphasises the importance of collaboration between the su-

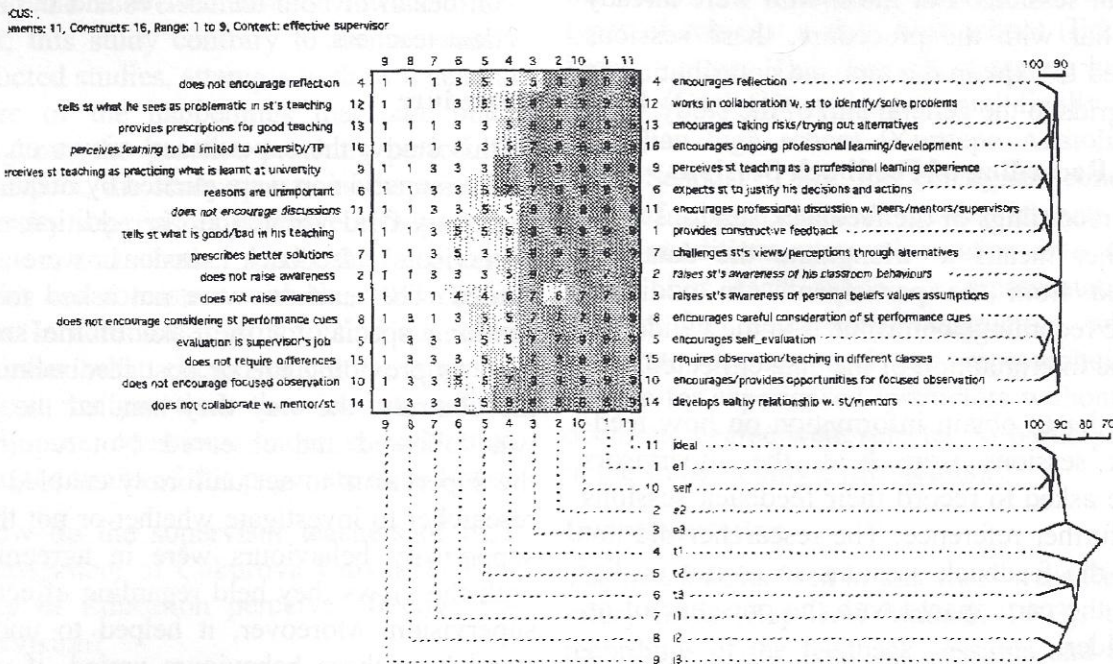


Figure 1. Supervisor 1's Grid

supervisor and the student-teacher (construct 12).

Another example for the supervisors' different perceptions on effective supervision may be illustrated by Supervisor 6's constructs. S/he regards supervision as more related with helping the student-teachers (constructs 1, 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, 22), and mostly concerned with clinical supervision (constructs 4, 8, 9, 15, 21, 23, 29). During the interview, his/her views regarding the issue becomes clearer:

**Extract 2:**

What we should focus on during this period of time is the classroom performances of the students. We, as professional supervisors, should be able to do this. We should talk about both the positive and the negative aspects of our students' performances. We do not talk about their personal qualities, but only consider their professional pluses and minuses.

Moreover, s/he points out that a supervisor should be consistent in what s/he says and

what s/he does. His/her views are apparent also during the interview:

**Extract 3:**

As a supervisor, we have to follow the latest technological developments, and in addition, we should be able to use them in the classroom. If we insist that the student-teachers should use technology but we never do this in your own classes, then, we can not be very convincing. On the other hand, when we observe how Supervisor 4 views supervision, as his/her constructs reveal, his/her main concern appears to be showing, demonstrating, warning and teaching the student-teachers and correcting their mistakes (constructs 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11).

During the interview, s/he was able to explicitly state the rationale behind his/her views:

**Extract 4:**

The student-teachers are inexperienced. They make mistakes and most of the time, they are not even aware of these mistakes. As super-

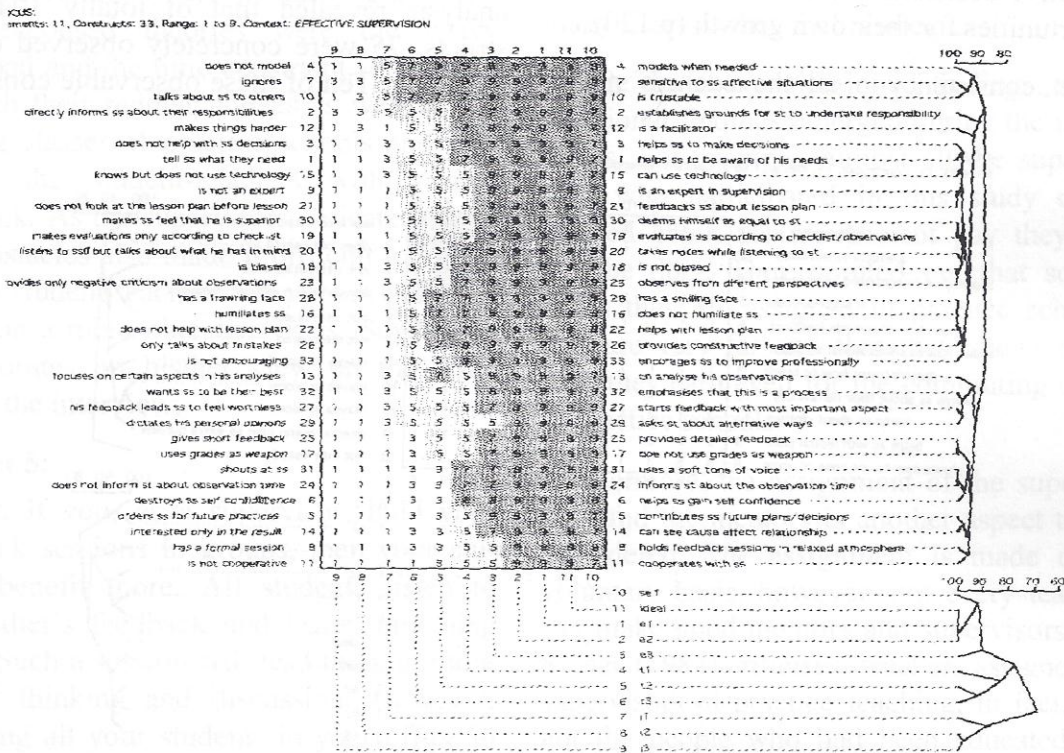


Figure 2. Supervisor 6's Grid

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visors, it is our duty to warn them and show them the right way of doing things. If we do not do this, they may continue doing the wrong things in the future.

The examples above indicate that there is not a commonly agreed upon, scientifically based framework for supervision in the department. In such a circumstance, it appears highly improbable to talk about an overall effectiveness of the supervision of the student-teachers. A solution to such a situation is offered in Liberman and Miller (1990) where they emphasise the importance of collaboration of the colleagues to trigger professional development of both the teachers and the student-teachers:

Teachers, long isolated from each other, need to create and work in collaborative structures. The isolated teacher must give way to a genuine collegueship, as the insulated school must expand to include the whole community. ... we know that teacher development involves teachers in learning about how to work together ??—how to make collective decisions and structure continuous opportunities for their own growth (p.120).

In fact, consistency in all the teachers' prac-

tices in a certain school may not be easily achieved nor is the ideal.

However, reflecting on personal experiences with colleagues may contribute not only to an awareness of teachers' personal theories and bring about change toward a professional development but also contribute to the establishment of a school culture. Brousseau, Book and Byers (1988) write about the issue:

Teachers differ in age, experience, social and cultural background, gender, marital status, subject matter, wisdom and ability... however, a clear description of the educational beliefs of a school's staff would be an important contribution in any effort to understand that school's teaching culture (p.34).

One of the other concerns of this study was to explore whether or not the supervisors' personal theories regarding effective supervision were consistent with their theories in action. Although the majority of the supervisors stated that they were able to put almost all their perceived effective strategies into practice during their feedback sessions, the analysis revealed that of totally 104 constructs, 75 were concretely observed during the study. Ten of these observable constructs

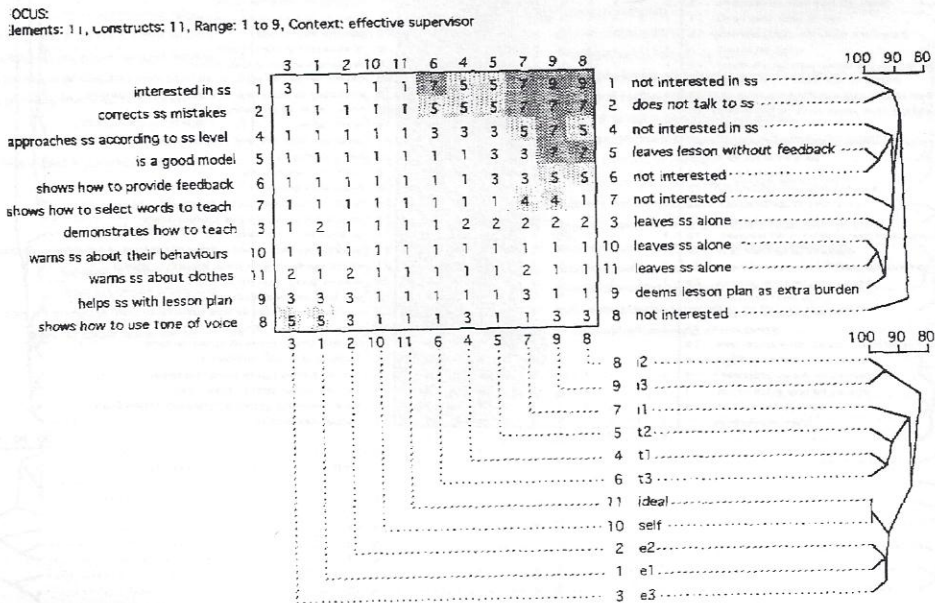


Figure 3. Supervisor 4's Grid

structs, 75 were concretely observed during the study. Ten of these observable constructs were rank ordered as one of the five high-priority constructs in their grids. In other words, the supervisors ranked ordered these ten constructs as one of the five highly important constructs in their grids. The results, thus, indicate that awareness raising activities that would lead the supervisors to rethink about their espoused and explicit theories may be quite beneficial.

Regarding the circumstances under which the supervisors are not able to put into practice their perceived effective supervisory strategies, as they indicated, we see that personalities and the attitudes of the student-teachers play an important role. According to the supervisors, student-teachers who are over self-confident, resistant to feedback, who are not open to new ideas and change, and finally very shy or/and uninterested students may become obstacles for them to successfully put their theories in action.

The other obstacles that appeared to prevent the supervisors to act in consistence with their espoused theories were the heavy workload and the time constraint. They have to teach their regular classes as well as observing classes at practice schools and providing the student-teachers with related feedback. As the supervisors indicated, these two obstacles also made it difficult to evaluate the student-teachers' classroom performances on a more objective basis. Supervisor 1 elaborates on his/her view on the issue during the interview:

**Extract 5:**

In fact, if you, as a supervisor, hold your feedback sessions in groups, then your students benefit more. All students listen to each other's feedback and learn something more. Such a session will lead them to more critical thinking and discussion. However, gathering all your students in your office in the same minute may be problematic. If you

do this during the breaks, the time is too short. Not all of them may wish to spend their breaks in their friend's feedback session. As a teacher, you may be rushing from one class to another and may not be feeling very willing to do this in your break. I mean, everything is dependent on adequate time and this is what we do not have.

Our study findings imply that in order for the supervisors to fully meet the requirements of their duties, during the second semester the teachers who also work as supervisors should be loaded with less class hours. Parallel to this view, Hanes and Mitchell (1985), suggest that mentors who play a critical role in the staff development process, may be released from their duties one half day or so each month to work with new teachers. Likewise, a similar solution can be proposed for the supervisors as they experience the same constraint. Moreover, another solution to this problem may be requiring the supervisors to work with fewer student-teachers. Such an organisation may enable the supervisors to observe their student-teachers as many times as they feel is adequate.

Beside the above mentioned findings, some additional findings emerged during the interviews. For example, almost all the supervisors who participated in this study complained about the insufficient pay they get for the duty. They pointed out that sometimes they are assigned in practice schools that are very far and that they spend more than they earn even for the commuting costs to practice schools.

Furthermore, the assignment of the supervisors and the mentors is another aspect to be considered. The assignment is made on a voluntary basis, however, not every teacher can make good mentors and supervisors. As Stones (1984) criticises, teachers assigned as supervisors of practice teaching, in fact, are not the people who had been educated for such a purpose. The only experience they

have about supervision is the period they had been exposed to supervision as student-teachers. However, supervising and being supervised are not the same thing and this previous experience does not mean that they are also competent as teachers. To sum up, he claims that being familiar with pedagogy is a must for a teacher in order to decide on what steps to take during supervision of student-teachers.

Another problematic issue appeared to be the undeniable gap between what some of the mentors and the supervisors expect from the student-teachers during practice teaching. To illustrate, while their mentors expect them to follow the course book and the syllabus on a day to day basis, the university supervisors wish to see the applications of the methods and techniques taught at the university. Whichever party the student-teachers try to please, in the end inevitably they receive negative criticism. Regarding this finding, we propose holding meetings with the supervisors, mentors, student-teachers and even the school principles on the principles and the rationale of practice teaching period at the beginning of the term.

### Conclusion

This study explored how the supervisors of ELT Department of Çukurova University perceived effective supervision and whether their espoused theories on the issue were consistent with their theories in action.

At the end of the study, we come to the con-

clusion that the six supervisors who participated in the study did not hold similar views on the effectiveness of supervision. The aspects they deemed as important and consequently emphasise during the teaching practice teaching were not consistent. As a result, an overall effectiveness of the supervision provided in the department cannot be mentioned. In addition, we see that these supervisors were able to put only 75 of totally 104 constructs they cited in their grids at the time of the study. These findings imply that there may be a need to some awareness raising activities on their personal theories such as seminars, workshops, discussion and reflection meetings. On the other hand, for those who are not familiar with pedagogical issues, these meetings may serve to both awareness for and questioning of their practices during this period.

Besides, we may conclude that in order for all the involving parties, that is, the supervisors, mentors, the student-teachers as well as the school principles should work in collaboration to come to a better understanding of the period and outcome of this period.

Finally, we suggest that the university supervisors should be loaded with less workload, or with fewer student-teachers in order to fully meet the requirements of this duty. This may help the supervisors to experience fewer difficulties regarding time constraint that will eventually enable them to construe over their practices in a more critical and reflective point of view.

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