TEACHER KNOWLEDGE ON HOW TO TEACH TURKISH GRAMMAR: FULBRIGHTERS' PERSPECTIVES

TÜRKÇE DİLBİLGİSİ ÖĞRETİMİNE İLİŞKİN ÖĞRETMEN BİLGİSİ: FULBRIGHT BURSİYERLERİNİN BAKIŞ AÇISI

Sezgi SARAÇ SÜZER
Başkent Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü
İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalı
hsarac@baskent.edu.tr

Abstract

Each research on teacher knowledge, regardless of the selected language area, contributes to applied linguistics with complementary findings. Nevertheless, only the teaching of English language takes the largest share within the related literature today (i.e. Ellis, 2006; Borg, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Andrews, 2003; Senior, 2006). Moreover, unfortunately, there is no study focusing on practitioners' insights on the teaching of Turkish as a foreign language. Therefore, in this study the aim is to initialize research into the teaching of Turkish via practitioners' knowledge. The research was designed in line with qualitative research tradition. Five (N=5) alumni Fulbright FLTA (Foreign Language Teaching Assistant) scholars who taught Turkish in the United States took part in the data collection procedure. The participants answered open-ended questions in one-to-one interviews. The findings share teacher knowledge on 'the ideal way' to teach Turkish grammar and the features of 'best' grammar teaching practices, which conclude with a composite of recommendations from teachers' first-hand experience.

Keywords: Teacher knowledge, teaching Turkish as a foreign language, Turkish grammar

Öz

Seçilen dil alanına bakılmaksızın, öğretmen bilgisi üzerine yapılmış her araştırma, uygulamalı dilbilim alanına birbirini bütünleyen bulgular ile katkıda bulunmaktadır. Ancak günümüzde, sadece İngiliz dilinin öğretimi ilgili alanyazında en büyük paya sahiptir (örnek: Ellis, 2006; Borg, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Andrews, 2003; Senior, 2006). Ayrıca, yabancı dil olarak Türkçenin öğretimine ilişkin öğretmen görüşünü araştıran çalışma bulunmamaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, uygulamacıların bilgisi aracılığıyla Türkçenin öğretimi alanında yapılacak araştırmalara ilk adımı atmayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, niteliksel araştırma geleneğine uygun tasarlanmıştır. Veri toplama sürecine, Türkçeyi Amerika Birleşik Devletlerinde Türkçeyi yabancı dil olarak öğreten, beş (N=5) mezun Fulbright FLTA (Yabancı Dil Öğretim Elemanı) bursiyeri katılmıştır. Katılımcılar, bire bir görüşmelerde, açık uçlu sorulara cevap vermiştir. Bulgular, Türkçe dilbilgisinin 'en iyi' öğretim yöntemine ve 'en iyi' dilbilgisi öğretim uygulamalarına ilişkin öğretmen bilgisini paylaşmakta; ayrıca, yine öğretmenlerin ilk elden deneyimlerine dayanan önerileriyle sonuçlandırılmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Öğretmen bilgisi, Türkçenin yabancı dil olarak öğretimi, Türkçe dilbilgisi

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher thinking and knowledge have become an area of interest to researchers since 1980s (Schulman, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Elbaz, 1983; Clark and Peterson, 1986; Calderhead, 1987a, 1987b; Tamir, 1988). Subsequently, researchers in language teaching initiated to focus on teacher knowledge in 1990s (Johnson, 1994; Woods, 1996; Borg, 1998). Teachers' experience-driven and practical knowledge is described as contextual, since it is defined and adapted in accordance with the classroom situation (Borko and Putnam, 1996; Brown, Collings, and Duguid, 1989; Harris and Eggen, 1993). As stated by Ellis (1998), "practicing professionals are primarily concerned with action involving particular cases, and for this reason they draw extensively on practical knowledge in their work" (p. 40). A great advantage of practical knowledge is that as it is based on real instances and tested on real classroom settings, teacher knowledge can function as a great source of reference for the teacher herself in similar cases and for the other teachers, as well.

Tsui (2003) identifies an experienced language teacher's 'rich and integrated knowledge' in four categories: knowledge of the language, language teaching and language learning; knowledge of how to organize learning; knowledge of other curricula; and knowledge of students' interests (p. 200-201). Nevertheless, it is not possible to expect each and every teacher to construct identical knowledge bases in all these categories. Individual differences manifested in teaching styles are explained via practitioners' educational and professional experiences from their own language learning endeavor, teacher education program attended and in-class teaching practices (Borg, 1999a, 1999b, 2003).

To Senior (2006), even though teachers' applications diversify under different or even the same circumstances, there is the "principle of balance" in relation to every educational activity pursued during the class-time allocated for language teaching (p. 271). Through 'balancing', the practitioners accomplish an equally distributed variety of focus on activity types, interaction patterns, macro-skills and pacing. While determining their personal teaching principles and theories, teachers found the knowledge-base onto their personal and practical experiences, which makes practitioner-originated notions much more valuable both in theoretical and practical terms. As highlighted by Kumaravadivelu (2001), only the theories generated through practice can be useful and usable. With such a prerequisite, contemporary studies on foreign language teaching have shifted paradigms in data collection procedures by focusing on practitioners' personal knowledge on pedagogy (Ellis, 2006; Borg, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Andrews, 2003). Even though all the studies on teacher knowledge contribute to applied linguistics with complementary findings, especially the teaching of English takes the larger share within the literature. Besides, unfortunately, there is no study focusing on practitioners' insights on the

teaching of Turkish as a foreign language. Therefore, in this study the aim is to initialize research into Turkish teaching and practitioners' knowledge.

2. METHOD

In this study, it is aimed to gather data on practitioners' knowledge on teaching Turkish as a foreign language. As there are various skills and sub-skills in language teaching and learning, teachers' knowledge on the teaching of Turkish grammar has been identified as the focus and scope of research. The research is designed in line with qualitative research tradition. Five (N=5) alumni Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship (FLTA) scholars who taught Turkish in the United States took part in the data collection procedure. The participants answered open-ended questions in one-to-one interviews. They first answered questions on their personal and professional backgrounds, and then semi-structured questions on the teaching of Turkish grammar were posed. The research questions guiding the study and data collection procedure are as follows:

Research Questions

1. What is the practitioners' pedagogical content knowledge on the "ideal" way/method to teach elementary level Turkish grammar to speakers of the English language?

2. What are the features of "best" grammar teaching practices?

3. What are the experienced teachers' recommendations to prospective Turkish teachers about the teaching of Turkish grammar to speakers of English language?

Data collection and Analysis

Each participant attended a 45-to-60 minute interview in which semi-structured questions were posed and the answers were recorded. In the first 5 minute, the practitioners answered questions on their personal and educational backgrounds. Later on, the teachers proposed their ideas on 'the ideal method to teach elementary level Turkish grammar to speakers of the English language. Besides, they also contributed to the study with their experiential knowledge on the best practices while teaching Turkish. The collected data were the interviewees' voice recordings; so, they were transcribed first. Later, the participants' (N=5) data were analyzed by the researcher via coding in order to identify the major themes. The findings were shared with the participants through a post-conference. The aim was to have the participants review the findings to ensure accuracy and completeness via member-checking. Later, a specialist went through the whole coding process and provided checking. After that, the segmenting and cumulating were analyzed and checked jointly by the researcher and the specialist in

collaboration. Finally, emic and etic perspectives were brought together to analyze the data through interpretational and reflective methods.

Participants

Five alumni Fulbright FLTA scholars participated in the study. They shared data on how old they were when they were teaching Turkish in the States, how long they taught Turkish there, and what their educational qualifications were while teaching Turkish language. Later, they shared the teaching methods they preferred, and the responsibilities they had in addition to teaching the language. While presenting the findings, pseudonyms were employed to protect the participants' anonymity. The summary of data on practitioners is given in the table below:

Table 1. Data on participants

	Age	Period of teaching	Qualification	Methods used	Responsibilities
Aysun	30	1 year	PhD in ELT	GTM Situational Communicative	Teaching beginner, pre-intermediate, upper intermediate levels via a pre-determined syllabus, preparing teaching materials
Seda	29	1 year	MA in ELT	Situational Communicative	Teaching survival skills for beginner level, preparing syllabus and teaching materials, teaching the course 'Turkish Language and Culture'
Yeran	27	2 years	MA in ELT	Situational Communicative	Teaching beginner, pre-intermediate levels, preparing teaching materials and syllabus
Tuncay	26	1 year	MA in ELT	Constructivist Communicative	Teaching upper-intermediate level via videoconferencing, preparing teaching materials and syllabus
Esra	28	2 years	MA (ABD) in ELT	Situational Communicative	Teaching elementary level, preparing syllabus and teaching materials

According to the data gathered, all the participants preferred communicative teaching and four of them stated that they used situational method, as well. Only one teacher mentioned that she used Grammar Translation Method (GTM). However, during the interview, her approach to GTM was not positive and she added that she was supposed to follow a predetermined syllabus and for that reason she had to teach explicitly from time to time, as the syllabus required. Among the participants, one teacher stated that his teaching environment required constructivist teaching as he was supposed to teach via videoconferencing.

Limitations

The first limitation is that only five teachers participated in the study. As face to face interviews were preferred during the data collection procedure, only the practitioners who could attend the meetings were preferred to be included in the research process. As another limitation, the participated teachers' year of experience is restricted to one or two years only. Since the scholarship provided only one year coverage and might be extended one year more with the condition of educational purposes only, all the Fulbright Language Teaching Assistant alumnae have utmost two years of experience. The third limitation is that all the alumnae are the graduates or graduate students of English Language Departments (ELT) in Turkey. As the post required near native like fluency in English and a score in TOEFL exam, the Fulbrighters are not usually graduates of Turkish Language Teaching (TLT) Departments. Further studies with TLT graduates might provide sound findings which can be compared with this study.

3. FINDINGS

The study aimed at answering three research questions, the first of which was about the 'ideal' way to teach Turkish grammar, the second was on the features of 'best' teaching practices and the final one was to compile the participants' suggestions for prospective Turkish teachers. Each research question and its related findings are as follows:

3.1. The 'ideal way' is to teach the 'real' language for communicative purposes: Teach grammar for real

Right after the data coding procedure was finalized; it was striking to see that all the participants indicated one common theme. The theme was that teaching Turkish grammar through 'real' language input and for 'real' language output. So, the participating teachers focused on the importance of using authentic texts with, as Yeran stated, "communicative value" while presenting the language.

Seda indicated that, "They (students) should be using the grammar and vocabulary they learn when they want to speak to a Turkish person. The texts with real communication reflect cultural elements as well and this provides great opportunity for them." Tuncay taught Turkish via videoconferencing and he stated that using diverse media provides 'real' input which can replace the insufficiency of the reference materials. He added that the use of media in teaching enabled "more communicative, constructive classes with much more effective cognitive processing via rich and colorful input provided." Yeran suggested using "authentic contexts, real life situations and activities on four major skills, because interaction should be the goal of instruction … the teacher should also

involve Turkish community in her teaching as it helps a lot." To Aysun, 'ideal' depends on the individual learner and what his/her needs, expectations and strategies are. The teacher is supposed to make use of every source that the students might be interested in, she thinks. She stated that her learners "needed to communicate in the spoken and written form." What is more, Esra indicated that "Turkish language learners' productions should involve effective communication strategies, because the knowledge of grammar can only be meaningful if the student can talk to a Turkish speaker."

3.2. Features of 'best' grammar teaching practices: Four features

During the interviews, the participants were asked to exemplify their 'best' grammar teaching practices. Each proposed different applications with different functional and formal focuses. The features of these practices in terms of methodology can be listed as follows:

- Communicative

- Interactive

- Task based

- Learner-centered

They all preferred 'communicative' applications in which 'authentic contexts' (Yeran) and 'real life situations' (Tuncay) were created and the aim was to 'integrate four skills' (Esra) through 'information-gap' (Seda) activities. Especially, Yeran and Esra emphasized the importance of 'interactive' applications, since the students "want to talk practical, survival Turkish with their Turkish friends around" (Esra). Seda suggested task based teaching just like Aysun. One of the tasks shared by Aysun was as follows:

> "… I drew a very big map of a town. It was really big, on a five meter square recycled paper; I drew streets and lots of drug stores, parks, schools on it. I laid it on the floor for the free practice of giving directions in Turkish. While applying the activity, one student stands on the map and follows the directions given by classmates. He does not know the target address, but if he can follow the directions correctly, he reaches the correct place on the map."

Seda, Aysun and Yeran stated that their best applications were the activities prepared on the request of students. Seda thinks that if students decide what to learn, they feel more enthusiastic and motivated. Yeran used Turkish songs as her students wanted and that application worked well as the students were all interested. Aysun states that "learners can decide what to learn, especially after they learn the alphabet and some functional expressions in Turkish."

3.3. Recommendations for prospective Turkish teachers: There are hardships

While giving suggestions to prospective teachers, the participants mentioned the hardships they faced while teaching Turkish. To Seda and Tuncay, there are a lot of coursebooks and sources for teaching of Turkish as a 'second' language, but they could not find 'good' sources to teach Turkish as a 'foreign' language. Seda stated that the contexts given in most coursebooks were not appropriate for her students; "we need to start writing coursebooks and materials for students learning Turkish abroad," she says. Tuncay also complained that he could not find 'good enough' reference materials on the Turkish language. "There were some," he says, "but they were appropriate for teaching people living in Turkey or in Turkic countries, not for foreigners and not in English." To him, the ones written in English were difficult for his learners.

Aysun stated that the number of teaching hours was so limited. She taught a fourteen-week-course, but she had only three classes a week. She says, "There is the lack of natural setting, I, as the teacher, have to fight against this and I have only three hours a week. This burden forces the teacher to give structural classes just to save time." During the post conferences with participants, they all agreed with this point and wanted to have at least six hours of teaching.

To Yeran and Esra, the most important hardships are the structural and cultural differences between the native and target language. Turkish syntax and pronunciation can be demanding for students. But, "right after students learn the alphabet, they can read and write and start feeling relaxed in classes," says Yeran. Esra adds to this point and states that students might have some prejudices about Turkey and Turkish culture. "As the time passes, students find the language structure regular and enjoy learning it, but they start asking questions about Turkey and Turkish culture and want to learn if Turkish people are Arabic or European", says Esra. On this point, Seda states that "I named Turkey as a European country; sometimes I called Turkey as Eurasian just to reflect the cultural diversity in our country. It is not different from the United States. We welcome different cultures and backgrounds."

3.4. Recommendations for prospective Turkish teachers: Ways to overcome hindrances

The participants shared some possible problems prospective teachers might face; nevertheless, they also suggested some ways to overcome these difficulties. The table below summarizes the recommendations suggested:

Table 2. **Recommendations from participants**

Recommendations	Participants
Prepare communicative tasks	Seda, Yeran, Tuncay, Esra
Teach four skills	Yeran, Seda
Raise cultural awareness	Yeran, Tuncay, Aysun
Use diverse media, real input	Tuncay, Yeran, Seda
Use short stories and children's books	Esra, Aysun
Know your students well	Aysun, Seda
Involve Turkish community	Esra, Yeran

As the majority of Turkish language learners want to learn the language for communicative purposes, the participated teachers suggested that prospective teachers prepare communicative activities which integrate four basic language skills. The participants highlighted the importance of raising the students' cultural awareness towards Turkey and Turkish people. While achieving the communicative language teaching and cultural awareness, the teachers recommended the use of diverse media to provide real input for learners. Using short stories and children's books found to be effective by two participants who tried such activities in their own teaching. Besides, involving Turkish community in teaching was also suggested, as it provides communication exchange between the native speakers and the learners of Turkish language. As students' needs and learner styles change, the participants recommended that teachers should know their students well and organize the syllabus and teaching activities accordingly.

4. CONCLUSION

In this study, it is aimed to gather practitioners' first-hand experience and knowledge on how to teach Turkish grammar in the foreign language teaching environment. The results suggest that the authentic language use and materials are preferred among the participants, as they are claimed to have 'communicative value'. Since Turkish teachers have very limited class hours in a week to teach the language, instead of dwelling on linguistic details they prefer to emphasize the communicative aspect of language. As it is stated by Tosun (2005) while teaching Turkish with communicative reasons, functional language use such as, inviting, suggesting, requesting and alike are brought together to develop a syllabus.

Sis (2007) suggests a framework to design a syllabus for the teaching of Turkish as a foreign language. In her study, the features suggested to enable efficient teaching are the teaching of surface structure, attracting student attention, including the general rules of language and providing clear and comprehensible content. The participants in this study contribute to these features with communicative,

interactive, task based and learner-centered teaching. Therefore, it can be stated that their suggestions provide us with the main features of the ideal syllabus for the teaching of Turkish, as well.

In his comprehensive study, Arıkan (2006) suggests that contemporary approach to foreign language teaching leads us to have new assumptions on teaching practices, such as that the language teacher discovers the most effective teaching strategies and techniques on her own. Hence, the participants' recommendations can only provide guidance for prospective teachers, and individual and context-specific 'best' practices will definitely vary. Within the study, the recommendations provided to foster the teaching of Turkish can be listed as preparing communicative tasks, integration of four skills, teaching of culture, using diverse media and real input, using literary texts, knowing the students well and involving Turkish community.

Even though research in the related area is rather limited in number, it is for sure that in the following years the teaching of Turkish as a foreign language will gain popularity, and researchers will have more studies in the related literature. Therefore, reaching for more Turkish teachers in number and comparing the results among groups of participants, which is lacking and the main limitation in this study, will be compensated owing to further research. Especially the data collected from the practitioners graduated from TLT departments can be compared with the findings of present research.

REFERENCES

Andrews, S. (2003). Teacher language awareness and the professional knowledge base of the L2 teacher. *Language Awareness*. 12(2), 81-95.

Arıkan, A. (2006). Postmethod condition and its implications for English language teacher education. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*. (2) 1. 1-11

Borg, S. (1998). Teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching: A Qualitative Study. *TESOL Quarterly*. (32) 1. 9-38.

Borg, S. (1999a). Studying teacher cognition in second language grammar teaching. *System, 27,* 19–31.

Borg, S. (1999b). Teachers' theories in grammar teaching. *ELT Journal. (*53) 3, 157-167.

Borg, S. (2001). Self-perception and practice in teaching grammar. *ELT Journal. (*55) 1, 21-29.

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in grammar teaching: A literature review. *Language Awareness.* 12, 96-108.

Borko, H. & Putnam, R. T. (1996). Learning to teach. In R. C. Calfee and D. Berliner (Eds.), *Handbook on Educational Psychology* (pp. 673-708). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Brown, J.S.; Collings, A. & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher.* 18 (1), pp. 32-42.

Calderhead, J. (ed.) (1987a) *Exploring Teachers' Thinking*. London: Cassell.

Calderhead, J. (1987b). Developing a framework for the elicitation and analysis of teachers' verbal reports. *Oxford Review of Education,* 13, 183–189.

Clark, C. M. &. Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teacher's thought processes. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research in teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 255–296). New York: Macmillan.

Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher Thinking: A Study of Practical Knowledge*. London: Croom Helm.

Ellis, R. (1998). Teaching and research: Options in grammar teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (1), 39-60.

Ellis, E. M. (2006). Language learning experience as a contributor to ESOL teacher cognition. *TESL-EJ: Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. (10) 1.

Johnson, K. E. (1994). The emerging beliefs and instructional practices of preservice English as a second language teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10, 439-452.

Harris, D., & Eggen, P. (1993). The Impact of Experience on Conceptions of Expertise: A Comparison of the Thinking of Veteran, First-year, and Preservice Teachers. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2001). Towards a postmodern pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35 (4). 537-560.

Senior, R. M. (2006). *The Experience of Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shulman, L. S. (1986a). Paradigms and research programs in the study of teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.) *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd edition). Macmillian.

Shulman, L. S. (1986b). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*. (15) 2. 4-14.

Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, (57) 1. 1-22.

Sis, N. (2007). Preparing syllabus at teaching Turkish as a foreign language: Some considerations. *Turkish Studies*. (2)2. 565-569.

Tamir, P. (1988). Subject matter and related pedagogical knowledge in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 4. 99-110.

Tosun, C. (2005). Türkçe'nin yabancı dil olarak öğretilmesi. *Journal of Language and Linguistics.* 1/1. 22-28.

Tsui, A.B.M. (2003). *Understanding Expertise in Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.