Practicum Stress and Coping Strategies of Pre-service English Language Teachers

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Abstract

As the leading position of English as the world’s primary language for international communication has evidently been continuing for several decades, English language teacher education is getting more and more important. One of the most major components of teacher education programs is the practicum course that requires senior English pre-service teachers to observe classes and do practice teaching before actual teaching profession. Recently, there has been increasing research focusing on identifying stress and coping with this stress at practicum in order to maximize the efficiency of practicum. This study investigated the sources of 16 pre-service language teachers’ stress and the strategies that they used to cope with this stress at practicum. The data of the study was gained via classroom observation and face-to-face interviews. The qualitative data was analyzed through content analysis and the sources of stress and the coping strategies were discussed under four categories: supervisors and mentors, classroom management, school-related issues, and affective factors. The highest source of stress was associated with supervisors and mentors. In coping with practicum stress, the participants mostly utilized Web.2 tools in ELT context. It is suggested that stress generating factors and the strategies that pre-service language teachers employ should be discussed and reflected upon in pre-service language teacher education programs.

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1. Introduction

It is important to pay special attention to teachers and their practice teaching (practicum) in teacher education programs. As Slick (1998) and Intrator (2006) describe, practicum gives pre-service language teachers an opportunity...
to become aware of the realistic nature of the teaching profession. However, teaching is placed among the professions which cause a lot of stress compared to other professions. According to MacDonald (1993), practicum is a source of considerable stress and pre-service language teachers encounter a range of stressful experience during this period. Though, successful practicum application entitles a stress free atmosphere (Coskun, 2013). According to Gupta (1981) sources of stress may be classified as individual, organizational, and outside of organization. Regarding this classification, Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1999) explained that it is possible to divide them into two groups as individual and organizational stress. Organizational stress also called professional stress is defined as the interaction between working circumstances and the working person in situations in which the work demand surpasses the skills of the worker. The main factors of stress in organization are organizational policies, the structure and the atmosphere of the organization, physical conditions, and process (Luthans, 1994). Typical stressors consist of serious demands on pre-service language teachers’ time and energy, carrying out written requirements, conforming to mistrusted practices, understanding the cooperating teachers’ expectations, being evaluated, fear of not satisfying self-expectations, establishing a positive relationship with the cooperating teacher and university advisor, and managing difficult behavior in the classroom.

Taking teachers’ stress into consideration from different perspectives, different definitions have been proposed. Kyriacou (2010) defines teacher stress as the experience by the teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, dissatisfaction or depression that result from some aspect of their work as a teacher. In Wisniewski and Gargiulo’s (1997) view, stress is the outcome of how well teachers are able to meet the demands required in their professional roles. According to Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1979), stress is a reaction to a negative affect usually accompanied by potentially pathogenic physiological and biochemical changes because of some aspects of the teacher’s job and mediated by the view that the demands made upon the teacher make up a threat to his-esteem and well-being and by coping mechanisms activated to decrease the perceived threat.

Although teacher stress is an extensively recognized problem, only a little attention is given in teacher education programs for pre-service language teachers (Greer & Greer, 1997). According to Jelinek (1986), excessive or extended stress can have negative impact on professional performance and role satisfaction of teacher learners. In this regard, developing different strategies for controlling stress associated with practicum can help teacher learners to develop in their future profession. Also it shouldn’t be forgotten that whether or not pre-service language teachers perceive control over different stressors in practicum, complexities occur as stressors and perceived control interact with each other (Brown & Nagel, 2012). For example, teachers may have control in the overall management of the classroom, but as systems undergo a variety of changes and reforms at the legislative level, teachers have a limited voice in a process that propagates stress. Teachers have major roles in the establishment of relationships among colleagues, but school leadership influences the climate of the school that can potentially mediate stress levels of teachers (Pahnos, 1990).

The term “teacher stress” had appeared in the topic of an essay in 1977 when Kyriacou published a review of a research based on his own experiences as a teacher in the United Kingdom. Until that time it was difficult to find the term “stress” in teaching context (Kyriacou, 2001). Only a few researchers (Borg, 1990; Kyriacou, 1987) explored the field until the early 1980s. Studies conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Malta showed not only cross-cultural interest in this phenomenon, but recognized internationally the severity of the problem as well (Borg & Riding, 1991). Nowadays, stress and stress generating factors associated with teacher education programs have been the center of attention in the world as well as in Turkey (Bowers, Eichner & Sacks, 1993; Celik, 2010; D’Rozario & Wong, 1996; Gan, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2004; Korkucu, 1996; MacDonald, 1993; Merc, 2004, 2011; Morton, Vesco, Williams, & Awender, 1997; Murray-Harvey, 1999,2010; Murray-Harvey, Silins, & Saebel, 1999; Numrich, 1996; Ong’ondo & Jwan, 2009; Paker, 2011; Reupert & Woodcook, 2010). Most of these studies investigated the reasons of teacher learners’ stress as the practicum is designed to train them for their future profession. Kim and Kim (2004) reported that teacher learners are stressful while speaking English in the classroom, teaching speaking and listening skills, having classes with unmotivated and uninterested learners, being disable of managing their classes properly, and when they are being observed. In another study, Reupert and Woodcook (2010) revealed that classroom management is the most serious cause of stress for pre-service language teachers. Poor coordination between schools and universities and lack of cooperation between the teacher learners and the mentors is another stress generating reason for pre-service language teachers (Ong’ondo & Jwan, 2009).
Stress generating factors for teacher learners are listed by Paker (2011) as follows: staff relationships, class management, pedagogy and assessment, way of teacher learners’ evaluations, different expectations of mentors and supervisors also poor quality of feedback that is received from them. On the other hand, Numrich (1996) explained that some stress generating factors are those that relate to time management, giving obvious directions, answering to pupils’ various needs, teaching grammar and assessing learners’ learning. MacDonald (1993) sought the pre-service language teachers’ perspective on ways they coped with practicum stresses. In that study pre-service language teachers reported that they coped by using strategies that MacDonald categorizes as: communication; conformity; showing initiative; goal-setting; and relaxation techniques.

In a cross-cultural study done by Murray-Harvey, Silins, and Saebel (1999) regarding Australian and Singaporean pre-service language teachers’ stress in the teaching practicum, it was revealed that significant difference between the stresses experienced by Singaporean and Australian learners point to the need to understand pre-service language teachers stress within a cultural context. Celik (2008) says that further researches should be done on stress generating problems in practicum. Managed properly, stress can increase motivation; therefore it can lead to professional growth and development (Jelink, 1986). There is less research on how pre-service language teachers cope with stress. Very little studies searched information directly from teachers on the strategies used to cope with the stresses they encountered during the practicum. Some researches (Benmansour, 1998; Bole & Falzon, 1990) on how teachers cope with stress revealed that the most commonly used coping strategies used by teachers are:

- Try to keep problems in perspective;
- Avoid confrontation;
- Try to relax after work;
- Take action to deal with problems;
- Keeping feelings under control;
- Devote more time to particular tasks;
- Discuss problems and express feelings to others;
- Have a healthy home life;
- Plan ahead and priorities;
- Recognize one’s own limitations.

Although pre-service language teachers view the teaching practicum as a precious part of their teaching education program, they also consider it to be the most stressful (MacDonald, 1993; D’Rozario & Wong, 1996). According to Bowers, Eichner, and Sacks (1982), in practicum the attention is paid more on methodology and less on preparing pre-service language teachers to cope with the inevitable anxieties and stresses related to learners’ roles, relationships, and responsibilities of teaching. It is generally recognized that low level of stress can increase job performance. Luthans (1995) explains that performance usually drops off when there is high level of stress. Therefore, there should be some strategies to limit the harmful effects of stress. According to Rosenfeld and Wilson, (1999) recent studies focus on two strategies for coping with the individual stress: (1) physical and (2) psychological strategies. Physical ones include exercises and good diet. Psychological ones include developing networks or social support within the organization, planning ahead, being appeared with alternative proposals, taking holidays, trying meditation and relaxing training.

Hence the purpose of this study is to investigate the stresses of teacher learners at practicum. More specifically, this study refers to using strategies that pre-service language teachers employ to manage their stresses related to practicum.

2. Method

2.1. Design and participants

As for the design of the study, explorative case study was adopted. Data for the study came from semi-structured interviews and classroom observation notes.
Participants of this study were sixteen fourth grade pre-service language teachers attending English Language Teaching Department at the Faculty of Education of Cukurova University, Adana, Turkey. They were chosen by convenience sampling. Methods included semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews were administered following the pre-service language teachers’ second practicum. Researchers developed four open-ended questions about the pre-service language teachers’ stresses, the techniques that they employ to cope with their stresses, the support or training that they receive in order to cope with their stresses, and finally the similarities and differences of their stresses with their friends who take part in English teacher education program. Two researchers interviewed pre-service language teachers one by one and they all were video-audio recorded. Each interview lasted twenty minutes, during which the researcher asked their opinions about the stress causing factors and their coping strategies.

3. Results

The qualitative data comprised of interview data and observation notes were analyzed using inductive analysis procedures. There were 32 hours of classroom observations. Each participant has two macro-presentations in their practicum school.

All interview data were transcribed verbatim, and these transcriptions were reviewed by the researchers for accuracy. The recurring themes were identified and then analyzed. These themes were listed and grouped into similar categories. These represented pre-service language teachers stress types and how to cope with such stress mentioned in the data. Data from classroom observation also enabled to compare and increase the reliability of the interview data.

3.1. Semi-structured interview

Content analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 16 pre-service language teachers showed the results as follows:

The first question of the interview was organized as “What stress experiences did you have in school as teacher-learner and what were their sources?” In response to this question, the research findings reveal that supervisors and mentors generated the highest level of stress in pre-service language teachers. Classroom management and school sources had also high level of stress among pre-service language teachers. In addition, communication breakdown with learners, time controlling, not having enough self-confidence, and delivering lessons were the other sources of stress among pre-service language teachers. Some of them expressed their stress experiences as follows:

“Small children were very noisy and moved all the time in the classroom. They only wanted to play games and did not pay attention to the lesson. As a teacher I could not control the class and communicate with them” (Participant, 2).

“Most of the time my mentor did not allow me to teach the lesson or have a role during class. Also, I never received feedback from her about my teaching” (Participant, 3).

“Learners did not accept me as a real teacher because they knew their own teacher as an authority in the classroom. Therefore, during my teaching they did not pay attention to the lesson and I could not do anything” (Participant, 5).

“Being a pre-service language teacher at high quality private schools is very difficult task. They want you to be the best especially during teaching. I had to use smart board which I never used before. Also, the mentor teacher’s attendance in the class always bothered me. She always assumed me as an experienced teacher and gave me negative feedbacks” (Participant, 8).

“Not using educational technology in the classroom by mentor teacher was a great loss. I had no chance to be acquainted with these instruments and the way of using them” (Participant, 11).

“My supervisor teacher never gave feedback about my teaching and my class management” (Participant, 13).

“My class was very crowded and this had a great impact on my teaching and using English in the classroom. Sometimes, I could not control the class and it was only the loss of time. Therefore, I could not control the time and my lessons were unfinished most of the times” (Participant, 14).
“I never had enough self-confidence about my speaking English. As I spent my practicum at high school, it stressed me a lot. Sometimes, I forgot words during teaching or I used wrong grammar in my speaking. Therefore, I had low self-confidence than before” (Participant, 16).

Regarding the content analysis of second question in order to investigate “What techniques do you employ in order to cope with your mentioned stresses?” it was found that using technology in the classroom was the most effective way of coping with stress during the practicum. Also using games, songs, pictures, rewards, preparing different activities and giving scores, preparing lesson plans, asking feedback from mentor and supervisor teacher, and observing experienced teachers’ classes are the other ways that pre-service language teachers used in order to deal with their stresses. Some parts of the interviews with pre-service language teachers are mentioned as follows:

“I threatened learners by giving low scores in order to be able to control the whole class and teach the lesson” (Participant, 1).

“I always suffered from the lack of time in my class. So, I decided to prepare a good lesson plan and prepare appropriate activities for them every session” “I threatened learners by giving low scores in order to be able to control the whole class and teach the lesson” (Participant, 4).

“At first, I had a communication breakdown with learners. They did not pay attention to the lesson because they did not accept me as a real teacher in their class. I started using games and songs. Also, I brought some videos about our lessons per session and it worked” (Participant, 5).

“As I was attending in private school, there were all kinds of educational technologies such as language labs and smart boards. Unfortunately, I did not be acquainted with these high tech instruments and even I did not know how to use them in my class. I decided to practice using them in my free times at school with one of teachers. Therefore, little by little I could use educational technologies appropriately” (Participant, 8).

“I could not control my crowded class. They were moving all the time and were unmotivated and uninterested to the lesson. I decided to use rewards for being quiet and answering questions during lesson” (Participant, 11).

“The school that I was spending my practicum did not benefit from any educational technologies. I always downloaded some videos from internet about our lesson and took my laptop in order to show those videos to the learners to motivate them about learning English” (Participant, 12).

“I never received feedback from my mentor teacher. Therefore, I talked with my supervisor teacher and he warned my mentor about it” (Participant, 13).

“I had problems in managing the class and I could not cope with my stress about it. The techniques that I used did not work” (Participant, 15).

“I had low self-confidence but my supervisor teacher’s advices and my mentor teacher’s beneficial feedbacks helped me to cope with this problem” (Participant, 16).

With respect to the third question as “Have you ever received any support from the expert or any training in order to cope with stress?” only four of sixteen pre-service language teachers said that they received expert support about coping with their stresses during the practicum. On the other hand, only three of them had training about dealing with these stresses in their four years of studying at the university. Below, some of the pre-service language teachers express their answers to this issue:

“Both my supervisor and mentor teacher showed me the way of coping with my stresses about class management and communicating with learners” (Participant, 7).

“My supervisor teacher’s advice and feedback helped me a lot to deal with the stresses generated from low self-confidence” (Participant, 16).

The final question of the interview asked “Compare your stress experiences with your friends and explain the similarities and differences:” Content analysis of this question reveals that class management was the most similar reason of stress among pre-service language teachers. Another source of stress that they had in common with their friends was supervisor teacher, and then school sources. One of the pre-service language teachers mentioned that her sources of stress were different from her friends.
3.2. Classroom observation

Data from classroom observations enabled the researchers to compare and increase the reliability of the interview data. They observed each pre-service language teacher’s performance two times during the second practicum. Also, the researchers took descriptive notes in order to understand what was happening in the class during each class period and the way pre-service language teachers performed in the lessons. After every lesson, two researchers took their notes and then compared them to the interview data. The comparison of semi-structured interview data and classroom observation data showed that some of the pre-service language teachers were successful in choosing and using strategies in order to cope with their stresses and some were unsuccessful. For example, one of pre-service language teachers in her interview mentioned that she used rewards to control her crowded and noisy class in order to teach the lesson without losing time and also to motivate the learners to learn English. By comparing the data from the interview and observation the researchers found out that she chose a good strategy for making the lesson more interesting and motivating learners, but it was not effective in managing the class as well as controlling the time. Another pre-service language teacher also used reward strategy and again it did not work in class management and it became worse than before because after every right answer the learners expected to receive a reward; otherwise, they started to complain and make noise. In another comparison of data the researchers understood that integrating technology into teaching such as using videos downloaded from the Internet or listening to the songs in the classroom had a positive impact on coping with stresses about class management, controlling the time, and motivating learners. As mentioned before, this strategy was useful for most of pre-service language teachers.

Comparing the data obtained from interviews and observations of some of the pre-service language teachers also revealed that preparing lesson plans and appropriate activities for each session were two beneficial strategies for coping with stresses generated from low self-confidence, controlling the time, and class management. On the other hand, the pre-service language teacher who threatened learners with low scores failed in controlling the class. Classroom observation data also made it clear that most of pre-service language teachers had deficiency in speaking English. They used wrong grammar and forgot words because of the psychological pressure of being observed and failing the practicum. As they said in their interviews, most of them did not receive any support from the expert as well as any training about coping with their practicum stress.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The first research question of this study was organized as “Explain your stress experiences that you had as pre-service language teacher and their sources?” Based on the results of this study, it was revealed that the most stress generating source of stress during the practicum was supervisor and mentor teacher. Not providing appropriate feedback or giving no feedback, not allowing pre-service language teacher to have a role in class, demanding more tasks such as preparing extra activities, having more expectations from pre-service language teacher while they were delivering the lesson, and not having a good relationship with pre-service language teachers were some reasons that pre-service language teachers described as problems that they had with their supervisors and mentors. Classroom management and school sources had also high level of stress among pre-service language teachers. They declared that attending in crowded young learners’ classes, not having any experience in lesson planning and preparing activities, not being accepted as an authority in the classroom by learners, and not knowing the characteristic of learners caused problems in controlling and managing their classes. They also explained that lack of educational-technological instruments at schools, not using appropriate books, and using high technology educational tools such as smart boards especially at private schools were some sources of stress in schools. In addition, communication breakdown with learners, time controlling, not having enough self-confidence, and delivering lessons were the other sources of stress among pre-service language teachers.

The second research question of this study asked about the strategies that pre-service language teachers used in their classes to cope with their mentioned stresses. All of pre-service language teachers explained that stress had a negative impact on their performance. They also declared that they used some strategies to deal with their stresses.

The results obtained from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations revealed that only some of the pre-service language teachers were successful in choosing and using strategies in coping with their stresses. Most of
them said that manipulating technology in the classroom is the most useful way to cope with stress during the practicum. In addition, using games, songs, pictures, rewards, preparing different activities and giving scores, preparing lesson plans, asking feedback from supervisor teacher, asking help from mentor teacher, and observing experienced teachers’ classes are the other ways that pre-service language teachers used in order to deal with their stresses. They added that these strategies were helpful in managing classroom, controlling the time, delivering a lesson, motivating learners to learn English, and so on.

Our study is consistent with MacDonald’s (1993) study in which he explored the pre-service teachers’ perspective on ways they coped with practicum stresses. In his research, he recognized that sources of stress were mainly generated by inconsistencies in the way pre-service teachers were evaluated by their mentors, varying expectations of pre-service teachers’ performance, and the quality of feedback given to pre-service teachers by supervising teachers. According to Gebhard and Oprandy (1999) both mentor and supervisor teachers should be aware of different types of supervision, “from directive to collaborative” to guide pre-service teachers in practicum.

Our study is also in line with the study of Weiss (1999). He suggested that teachers in their early years of teaching experience are more vulnerable to stress if the working conditions are poor. Also, in our study pre-service language teachers expressed school sources as one of stress generating factors. Lee (2002) also reported that teacher stress was highest in large schools which are over-crowded. In our current study pre-service language teachers explained that managing crowded classes was very difficult and they had stress about controlling the class and time in these classes.

The results of this study show that, stress negatively affects pre-service language teachers’ performance. If it is not removed, it can also have negative impact in their future profession as a language teacher. By identifying stress generating factors and giving appropriate instruction to pre-service language teachers in initial teacher education program we can solve this problem to some extent. On the other hand, we should recognize the strategies that pre-service language teachers use to cope with their stresses. We should give opportunities to them to use and develop these strategies in their classes during practicum. Teacher education programs at universities should put emphasis on more practical side of practicum.

References


