Abstract

The aim of this qualitative case study is to examine the effectiveness of the English Preparatory Education (EPE) at a foundation university in Ankara from the pre-service teachers’ perspectives. The study was conducted in the fall term of 2011-2012 academic year. 52 pre-service teachers attending Turkish education, elementary mathematics education, and elementary school education departments at the faculty of education participated in the study. The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire, and then the content was analyzed. The depth of the responses was limited compared to face-to-face interviews since there was no opportunity to follow up on the participants’ statements with other questions.

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1. Introduction

The incorporation of teaching English into Turkish National Curricula in state schools dates back to 1908. Today, it is a mainstream course subject in Turkish public schools starting from the 4th grade and continuing until the graduation at 12th grade (Dogancay-Aktuna, 1998). The percentage of students who learn English in the primary education in Turkey is 60.8 and when compared to the European Union member states, Turkey is in the 11th place in rank. In the secondary education, the percentage increases to 67% and of the total percentage of students, 6.5% take German and 0.7% take French courses as the second foreign language at school (EEU, 2008). Students at tertiary level are to attend one-year language
preparatory classes provided that they are enrolled in the English medium departments or in the departments of which curricula include 30% English medium courses (CoHE, 2010).

On the evaluation of primary foreign language education in Turkey, Uysal et. al. (2012) indicate that English medium education is hindered by laws. It is also stated that the rapid spread of English is regarded as a threat, therefore it causes “negative attitudes and policy making” (p. 197). On tertiary education, Cengizhan (2010) compares three Departments of Basic English in different universities and finds out that they have three main commonalities; the materials used are in line with communicative teaching methodology, none of them has a curriculum development office, and neither the participating students nor the teachers think that the targeted language learning objectives are achieved. Bektas-Cetinkaya (2009) conducts a qualitative study on Turkish prep-class students’ attitudes towards English and concludes that they consider the English language as a ‘symbol of power’ and they would like to have an access to it, but they question the dominance of English language and have negative attitudes towards learning it.

According to a research study by Demirtaş and Sert (2010), the students reflect back on their language learning experience at the Department of Basic English and indicate that learners from different profiles are placed in the same classrooms, which results in the discrepancies in their language needs. Besides, the classes are conducted in a teacher-centered manner with an extensive emphasis on the teaching of grammar, and the learners are not able to make use of autonomous learning skills satisfactorily. In another study with complementary findings, Tunc (2009) shares prep-class learners’ thoughts on language education and of the total participants, 39% indicate the listening and 60.2% believe the speaking skills are the least focused ones in the classroom. Similarly, Tiryaki (2009) shares the data collected from students and teachers on English teaching at the Department of English and finds out that the speaking and listening skills are the least emphasized and thus the least developed ones. Besides, Toker (1999) investigates students’ attitudes towards Preparatory school curriculum and finds out that 94.2% of the participants (N=120) agree that it needs improvement; 76.7% of all suggest the inclusion of English for specific purposes course into the curriculum.

In a study conducted in Turkey on English teachers’ attitudes towards language teaching and their actual classroom practices, Coskun (2011) finds out that there exists a discrepancy between English teachers’ attitudes and applications in Turkey. The traditional applications of language teaching is found to be based upon the reasons that the classroom populations are high, the examinations are traditional and grammar based, and teachers do not have sufficient time to prepare communicative materials. On teachers’ perceptions of English culture and knowledge, in a comprehensive study by Arikan (2011) with the participation of 412 prospective teachers, it is found out that future teachers find themselves knowledgeable in the English language; nevertheless, not in the target culture. It is also highlighted that teacher perceptions are influenced by attitudes toward “target language, knowledge of target culture, parental use of target language, family income and father’s job” (p. 232). Even though pre-service teachers do not perceive themselves knowledgeable enough on culture, from the perspectives of learners’ of English in Turkey, having knowledge on culture is among the qualities of an effective language teacher (Arikan, Taser and Sarac, 2007). In the complete list of qualities, the items included are:

- having personal strategies to teach,
- maintaining positive teacher-student interaction,
- creating a positive classroom atmosphere,
- being a model,
- being knowledgeable on target cultures,
- possessing positive personal characteristics,
- having correct pronunciation of English,
teaching with effective classroom materials and technology,
giving positive reinforcement, (pp. 43-44).

1.1. Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the English Preparatory Education (EPE) at a foundation university in Ankara from the pre-service teachers’ perspectives.

The following questions were addressed to achieve the aforementioned aim:
1. What do the pre-service teachers think about the effectiveness of the EPE?
2. How effectively do the pre-service teachers use English after the EPE?

2. Method

This qualitative case study was conducted at the faculty of education of a foundation university in Ankara. The participants were chosen randomly among 300 pre-service teachers who had taken EPE at the Department of Basic English. 14 of 99 Turkish education students, 18 of 86 elementary school education students and 20 of 115 elementary mathematics education students participated in the study voluntarily. The data were collected through an open ended questionnaire and then the content was analyzed. The questionnaire included the following questions:
1. What are the weak points of the EPE?
2. What are the strong points of the EPE?
3. What do you suggest to improve the effectiveness of the EPE?
4. How effectively do you think you use English after the EPE?

3. Findings

3.1. Weak points of the EPE

The pre-service teachers (N=52) participated in the data collection procedure shared their evaluations on English language education program offered at the tertiary level. Only three participants indicated that they passed in the proficiency exam administered by the Department of Basic English and did not have prep-class education. All the others were future teachers (N=49) (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifications on weaknesses</th>
<th>Frequency (f)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inefficiency in teaching of …</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. speaking skills</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. writing skills</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. listening skills</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much emphasis given on teaching of …</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. grammar</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. vocabulary</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants indicate that the teaching of productive skills; namely speaking and writing, is inefficient. Especially the inefficiency of teaching the speaking skill is the most frequently stated (f=24) item in the collected data. The participants also indicate that teaching of structural features of language is overemphasized (f=26). Three extracts reproduced below explain these views:

Extract 1: “Even primary school students know about English grammar. I applied to a private English teaching institution to improve my English a few days ago. They gave me a placement exam there. I got 95/100 from the grammar exam and 10/100 from the spoken exam. Isn’t it tragicomic?”

Extract 2: “The EPE was very insufficient regarding the teaching of speaking skills. Speaking activities were not done in any circumstances. If only we had been urged to speak English in the class. If only the teacher had spoken English in the class.”

Extract 3: “Although the teachers were very qualified, the EPE was very insufficient. Speaking and listening did not get the value that they deserved. ... We spent a year at the prep school. After all, I cannot still understand and speak English at all.”

3.2. Strong points of the EPE

Most of the students (40) did not answer this question. Some students (5) reported that they tried hard to find something good about the EPE. In fear of being unfair, they said they appreciated the teachers who were caring and kind. Some others (4) said they could not find anything good to say about the EPE. The extract below approves this view:

“This is the system’s fault. The teachers were nice to us. They did their utmost to help us. But you know this is the system. We could not learn English.”

3.3. Suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the EPE

The suggestions below (Table 2) may indicate that the students held different views about how to enhance the EPE. Their suggestions varied from completely dropping the EPE or making it optional to improving it by some adjustments.

Table 2. Suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the EPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestions</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students at Turkish-medium programs should not take prep-class</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. English should be taught according to language needs of departments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Prep-class program can be optional</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Speaking should be tested</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Speaking can be disintegrated</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Program can include preparation for national/international language exams</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Credit load of departmental English courses can be increased</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Program can be included in 4-year-education process</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4. Use of English after the EPE
All of the students claimed that they could not use English in any circumstances. Three extracts below clarify these views:

**Extract 1:** “The prep education at our University was a real fiasco for all of us. I just memorized the subjects whatsoever before the exams and forgot whatever I memorized after the exams. I have been studying at this university for three years, but I still do not know anything for the sake of English. I do not have time to study the departmental courses because of English.”

**Extract 2:** “The most important problem is that the level of the courses is not suitable for all of the students. The students at different levels are placed in the same classes. While some of the students are trying to learn the grammatical rules, the others who have already known them are engaging with different things.”

**Extract 3:** “Ironically, the students who fall below the pass score do not fail although prep education is compulsory. As you understand, the students know that they do not have to succeed in the prep exams to get into their departments. This is the main problem. It causes absenteeism. They do not bother themselves to study. They get into their department and continue to take English courses along with the departmental courses although they do not know English at a basic level.”

4. Conclusion

The findings brought about the practical reasons preventing the EPE from providing effective English education. The most important of all were inefficiency in teaching of communicative language skills and too much emphasis on grammar teaching. Due to these reasons, all of the students remarked that they could not use English in their departments. They held different views about how to enhance the EPE. However, these conclusions can be tentatively interpreted since the study has certain limitations. Firstly, an open ended questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument. Thus, the depth of the responses was limited compared to face to face interviews since there was no opportunity to follow up on the participants’ statements with other questions. Secondly, collecting the data through the open ended questionnaire on its own was another limitation. Some other data collection methods and techniques were required to explore the various levels of the curriculum such as official curriculum documents, operational curriculum offered by the teachers and so forth. And thirdly, the number of the participants was limited. Considerations could have been given to the other stakeholders to reveal the factors that make the EPE inefficient. Keeping these limitations in mind, further research may seek answers to the following questions to improve effectiveness of the EPE:

- Does the theoretical basis of the official curriculum fit the needs of the learners?
- Is the operational curriculum (what is taught in the class) compatible with the official curriculum (what is written on the documents)?
- Is the testing system compatible with what is taught in the class?
- Do the placement exams discriminate between what the students already know and what they ought to know?

References


