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Listening to practising teachers: Implications for teacher training programs

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a small scale preliminary study that sought to explore how practising teachers feel about their university education they received as part of their training as teachers of English. To do this, a web-based self-report survey form was administered to 49 practising Turkish teachers of English (mean length of experience = 6 years) across Turkey. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that participants were fairly satisfied with their program. Qualitative analysis showed that participants often complain that they did not experience real life teaching during their education; that they were unaware of contextual challenges awaiting; and that there was a mismatch between ideals and actuals. Correspondingly, participants suggest that teacher training programs offer more real life teaching experience and help trainee teachers develop skills that will help them overcome real life teaching challenges. This study has demonstrated that listening to practising teachers may help teacher trainers develop more down-to-earth teacher education programs.

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1. Introduction

Teacher education programs have recently gone through a reform movement in Turkey. As such two major reform movements (1998 and 2006) took place. While the first involved a massive restructuring of the whole teacher education program (Council of Higher Education-YÖK, 1998), the latter entailed refining and making adjustments to the 1998 curriculum (YÖK, 2007). For full scale of changes, publications by YÖK (1998 & 2007) can be informative. Changes that took place over the two waves of transformation and amendment in the content of the

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English Language Teacher Education Program (ELTEP) have also been usefully summarized by Seferoğlu (2006) and Yavuz and Topkaya (2013). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine changes that took place in the curriculum. It should suffice to emphasize that the 1998 curriculum reduced the proportion of content knowledge courses which used to be freely chosen by individual departments and introduced a standard program that was composed more of courses that aim at introducing ELT methodology (YÖK, 1998).

The 1998 reform aimed to create a uniformed system for training teachers of English across the country (Seferoğlu, 2006) although many programs at the time of transformation were not well prepared for such a change. I personally believe that many scholars who used to work during the 1998 reform as teacher trainers in ELT departments were caught up unprepared and unequipped to undertake the prescribed curriculum. The 2006 reform, on the other hand, was a refinement program on the 1998 curriculum (YÖK, 2007). Some courses were removed (e.g. School experience I) from the program while new ones were added (e.g. Effective communication skills). Some courses were re-scheduled in the program (e.g. second language acquisition was reprogrammed to be offered in Term 4 instead of Term 3). Some courses were renamed and the content was modified (e.g. Learning and development became Education psychology). For a fuller summary of changes that took place in the 2006 restructuring of ELTEP in Turkey, please see Yavuz and Topkaya (2013).

Radical changes often attract studies that look into the effectiveness of new reforms as evaluation is an integral part of educational change (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Several researchers also investigated how effective the changes were with regards to new curricula for training teachers of English as a foreign language in the Turkish context. Such studies either aimed at evaluating a given course within the ELTEP (Erozan, 2005; Kızıltan, 2011; Seferoğlu, 2006) or the whole ELTEP (Coşgun Ögeyik, 2009; Coşkun & Daloğlu, 2010; Hismanoğlu, 2012; Yavuz & Topkaya, 2013).

Components of the new program were often received well by its stakeholders and considered to be effective. Student teachers were mainly satisfied with individual courses that were evaluated. However, areas and aspects in particular courses were also suggested in both the 1998 and 2006 ELTEPs. For the language specific courses in the 1998 ELTEP, more authentic materials were requested by the student teachers (Erozan, 2006) while more teaching practice and real teaching experience were reported to be the two important missing elements in teaching methodology courses (Seferoğlu, 2006). As for the language acquisition course in the 2006 ELT teacher training curriculum, previous knowledge from courses such as linguistics were suggested to be useful before taking the language acquisition course, highlighting a need for re-sequencing courses for a more effective access to the course content (Kızıltan, 2011).

Studies on the whole ELTEP, too, report a considerable level of satisfaction with the new ELTEP curriculum. It appears that both lecturers and student teachers were considerably content with the 2006 ELTEP and its components although there were serious criticisms concerning the content and the methodology as well as philosophy behind the undertaking of such significant educational change (Karakas, 2012). Of studies that investigated the effectiveness of ELTEP, for example, Coşkun-Ögeyik (2009) found that her student teachers were pleased with courses that aim at teaching practical language teaching methodologies. However, they felt the need that there should be more culture courses. Similarly, Hişmaoğlu (2012) report that his student teachers were pleased with the content of ELTEP. However, they felt that the program failed to help them gain critical thinking skills. Even though the program in general was found to be effective, such optimism with general content of the current ELTEP is not evident in other studies, where opportunities for ample teaching practice was perceived to be inadequate (Coşkun and Daloğlu, 2010; Seferoğlu, 2006). Seferoğlu (2006) report a perceived mismatch between teaching materials and real life teaching. Her participants also felt that they did not have enough opportunities for micro teaching and teaching practice. Coşkun and Daloğlu (2010) further report that teacher trainers do not believe that the new ELTEP can contribute to the development of linguistic competence of student teachers.

More recently, Yavuz and Topkaya (2013) found that 18 teacher trainers they had as their sample expressed disillusionment about being excluded from the decision making process during the transformation process. Changes made to the program were perceived as a top-down form of change without consulting the opinions of end-users who are ultimately to implement any changes imposed upon them. Their participants were concerned especially about sequencing of courses; ambiguities in content and structure of some courses; lack of clear procedural guidance about courses. They were also not completely convinced about the need for convergence and removal of some courses from the prescribed curriculum.

Program evaluation is a complex process in which informant participants and their qualifications are of significance. Exclusion of various parties in the evaluation of a program can jeopardize the objectivity and validity of the assessment and evaluation. Studies that evaluated ELTEP and its components in the Turkish context often focused merely on the views of student teachers (e.g. Coşkun-Ögeyik, 2009; Seferoğlu, 2006) or only teacher educators (e.g. Yavuz & Topkaya, 2013) or both student-teachers and teacher trainers (e.g. Coşkun & Daloğlu, 2010). However, there are other stakeholders of the ELTEP. These include graduates and practising teachers of English as the outcomes of the ELTEP and thus the end users of knowledge generated and instilled by the ELTEP; high-order policy makers who make the ultimate decisions; and the sector as the employers of teachers trained by the ELTEP. Studies into the effectiveness of ELTEP, then, appear to focus more on stakeholders in the vicinity of the researcher by consulting the views of student teachers and teacher trainers only. Views of other stakeholders can be equally important and informative.

Practising teachers, as graduates of ELTEP, may offer virtuous insights into how effectively we, the teacher trainers, are able to prepare our student teacher for their future career as teachers of English (Seferoğlu, 2006). Yavuz and Topkaya (2013, p. 76) makes this explicit when they argue "... the [effectiveness of] English language teacher education program needs to be further researched with regard to the content, procedures and teaching competencies of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) as outcomes of the ELTEP." Investigating competencies and opinions of NQTs or other practising teachers as outcomes of the ELTEP, therefore, may extend our understanding of the effectiveness of ELTEP. This study therefore aims to explore opinions of graduates of the ELTEP with regards to a) their feelings and satisfaction with the education they received; b) their observations on missing/inefficient aspects; and c) their suggestions for enhancing ELT teacher training system in Turkey.

2. Method

2.1. Setting and participants

Conducted online in September 2014 across various cities in Turkey, this study is a pilot inquiry into opinions of practising teachers. Practising teachers were sampled through a convenience sampling method. Invitations were sent out via social networks (e.g. Facebook). A total of 49 practising teachers (36 female; 13 male) agreed to participate in the study. The participants had a mean length of 6 years of teaching experience. Of participants, 40 were graduates of a state university situated in the North-western part of Turkey.

2.2. Instruments

The data were collected through an online survey form through Google Documents. The survey form included only one item measuring an overall satisfaction level of participants about ELTEP on a five-point Likert scale, anchors ranging from 1 (totally unsatisfied) to 5 (totally satisfied). There were also open-ended questions where practising teachers were requested to express professional and social challenges they faced when they officially started teaching; any missing aspects in their initial teacher education; and suggestions they would like to make for the improvement of ELTEP. Within the scope of this study, only participants' opinion with regards to missing aspects and suggestions for any possible improvement were analysed.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

Emergent data were first analyzed quantitatively to calculate the level of satisfaction practising teachers have with the ELTEP. Simple descriptive statistics were tabulated to find out how satisfied the teachers were. The qualitative data generated by open ended questions were later content analyzed, constantly comparing emerging themes to one another. Emerging themes and categories were then represented in frequencies and percentages. Inter-coder reliability was checked through comparison of the original themes identified by the researcher against the categorization undertaken by an independent researcher. The two raters were highly consistent with each other (Holsti coefficient = .85).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Level of satisfaction with the ELTEP

Participants appeared to be moderately content with the education they received during their initial teacher education program. They manifested a fairly positive evaluation of the ELTEP (mean = 3.6, SD = 1.07). Magnitude of the standard deviation as compared to the mean score implies that participants did not have unanimous opinions about the effectiveness of the education offered to them during the university years. Such a finding was congruent with an overall satisfaction student teachers and teacher trainers as stakeholders feel about the current ELTEP (Coşkun-Ögeyik, 2009; Hişmanoğlu, 2012; Yavuz & Topkaya, 2013).

3.2. Missing aspects in the ELTEP

The participants reported a total of 56 tokens of missing points which were neatly summarized into 10 thematic categories. These can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 1: Missing elements in ELTEP

Missing aspects	f	% of participants
Lack of real life teaching experience	15	31
Insufficient contextual awareness	11	22
Mismatch between the ideal and the actual	10	20
Language proficiency	5	10
Teaching methodology	5	10
Lack of good role models (trainers)	5	10
Training practice on materials development	2	4
Career guidance	1	2
Training on public relations	1	2
Training on special education	1	2
Total	56	

A closer examination of the table above reveals that the most frequently reported shortcoming of the ELTEP was an apparent *lack of real life like teaching experience*. Over 30% of the participants thought that they did not have enough experience teaching in real classes with real students before they became teachers. Ahmet (Teacher Number 29, male, 6 years of experience, works at a state school) makes this clear when he says

“Micro-teachings can be done with real students in state schools...” (Ahmet)

Such a finding was in keeping with findings from other studies (e.g. Seferoğlu, 2006; Coşkun & Daloğlu, 2010). Practising teachers must have felt that they had started teaching without insufficient experience in teaching and a lack of knowledge about what awaits them in real life. Although the number of practicum periods and hours were increased after the 1998 reform, nothing much appears to have changed in term of amount and quality of teaching practice (Seferoğlu, 2006).

Another frequently reported problem and shortcoming concerned preparing student teachers for the context of actual teaching as an occupation. Participants of this study stated that the ELTEP graduated them with an *insufficient*

contextual awareness. Of 49, 11 participants (22% of all participants) thought that their initial teacher education program failed to prepare them for challenges in the real life of a teacher. One such challenge is about coping with regulations of the education system. This was explicit in a statement by Ufuk (Teacher Number 4, male, 4 years of experience, works at a state school) who claims

“I was well prepared for teaching English but being a teacher in a state school is more than teaching English. Candidate teachers should be well aware of regulations and laws about education.” (Ufuk)

Such a lack of readiness for the real life context may even cause some form of culture shock and a sense of burn-out. This was clear in Kadriye’s case (Teacher Number 22, female, 8 years of experience, works at a state school) who openly was disillusioned with what the education system has got to offer. She says

“I wish you [teacher trainers] had mentioned all about the system of national education. I started my job as a successful teacher but I nearly hated it just because of the managers...” (Kadriye)

Another problematic area that emerged from participants’ responses was the *link between theory and practice*, or the ideal and the actual. Ten participants (20%) thought that what was taught to them was hardly applicable or valid in teaching context. It appears that there is a mismatch between what happens in real language classes and what is taught about how to teach a foreign language. Seferoğlu concludes that her participants thought “a close connection between the course materials and practical application in real classrooms was sometimes absent in the methodology and practice...” (2006, p. 376). Similarly, Funda (Teacher Number 37, female, 1 year of experience, works at a state school) believes that her education was not at all realistic. She claims

“What is taught to us in the university is in the ideal level, it's mostly utopic as long as I can see now. The real life is not like that...” (Funda)

Funda’s opinion is supported by Arzu (Teacher Number 41, female, 7 years of experience, works at a state school). The following excerpt from Arzu signifies that teaching English is not only about teaching a foreign language. The profession transcends teaching a language and frequently entails responsibilities about educating students in the classroom. Unfortunately, the ELTEP, according to Arzu, does not fully prepare student teachers for such commitments. She claims

“What you teach us and what ministry of education forces us to do [are] totally different. We are not teaching English; We are teaching [educating] students...” (Arzu)

Participants also identified other areas that need to be improved. They (5-10%) thought the ELTEP did not improve their language proficiency or they did not feel proficient enough when they graduated. This was in keeping with Coşkun and Daloğlu’s (2010) concern that the new ELTEP is unlikely to contribute to student teachers’ linguistic competence. Some (5-10%) thought their knowledge of ELT methodology did not improve much; that there was a lack of efficient role models (teacher trainers) for them to follow (5-10%); or they lacked skills on materials development (2-4%). Other problematic areas included career guidance (1-2%); training on public relations (1-2%); and training on special education (1-2%).

3.2.1. *Suggestions for a more efficient ELTEP*

Participants made a total of 51 suggestions they thought could make a contribution to the quality and effectiveness of the ELTEP. These appear to represent 12 different themes. These are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Suggestions for improvement in ELTEP

Suggestions	f	% of participants
More & longer real life teaching experience	25	51
Better match between courses and real life teaching	12	24
Training more autonomous researcher-teachers	3	6
Need for lecturers with real teaching experience	2	4
Overseas experience	2	4
Cooperation with Ministry of National Education	1	2
More support to graduates	1	2
Better career guidance	1	2
Courses on special education	1	2
State of the art knowledge on educational technologies	1	2
Teaching methodology: state of the art methodologies	1	2
Voice training (vocal coaching)	1	2
Total	51	

It was interesting to note that half of the practising teachers (25, 51%) who participated in this study thought that they would enjoy more real life like teaching experience and they recommend longer periods of such teaching practice. Such a finding, as reported above, echoed the perceived lack of real life teaching experience as the most frequently cited missing element in current ELTEP. Participants thought that addition of longer periods of practice may better prepare student teachers for the challenges of real life teaching.

A second important suggestion by the participants concerned forming a better link between the teacher education system and the real life teaching. As related to a perceived lack of such an efficient connection, one-fourth of the participants (12, 24%) report that due attention needs to be paid to what really happens in real life before prescribing how to teach English. Related to this issue, two teachers suggested that teacher trainers need to possess and be informed about real life teaching experience. This was clearly expressed by Ulaş (Teacher Number 48, male, 12 years of experience, works at a state school) when he stated:

“Those who give lectures in ELT departments, should also teach in primary, secondary or high schools one day a week. Most of the academic staff in the faculties of education are unaware of the schools because they become an academic without experience in teaching.” (Ulaş)

It is now acknowledged that teachers need to become generators of knowledge rather than remaining as mere consumers of what is produced by others working in the field (Burns, 2010), which may lead to be better equipped for further professional development (Dikilitaş, 2015). Such a belief was also articulated by 3 practising teachers (6%) displaying a perceived need for further investment in instilling future teachers better research skills and a critical view point for reflective practice.

Related to professional development, two practising teachers thought that sending student teachers abroad may contribute to their professional and language development. This was congruent with a perceived missing element that pertains to general language proficiency levels of graduates of the ELTEP as shown above.

Other suggestions that were mentioned only once in the data included provision of more support for graduates; offering better career guidance before and after university education; extra courses on special needs education; offering state of the art knowledge about language teaching methods and educational technologies.

4. Conclusion & implications

This study is by no means a complete evaluation of the effectiveness of the current ELTEP. Nor does it argue to present overly generalizable findings. Rather, this study aims to highlight the fact that, in addition to existing student teachers and teacher trainers, practising teachers can also be informative for us to better understand how efficient our ELTEP is (Seferoğlu, 2006; Yavuz & Topkaya, 2013). As ultimate outcomes of our teacher education system, what they have got to share with us may as well prove valuable and thus is worth taking into consideration. Another point that needs to be remembered while interpreting the results of this study is that this study did not start out to appreciate strengths of the current ELTEP. More than that, this study sought to explore areas of concern for the graduates of the ELTEP. Therefore, what is presented here need not be taken as mere criticisms but suggestions for possible improvement. With such caveats in mind, findings of this study, however, still allow the researcher to draw some tentative conclusions.

What became clear in this study is that the teaching practice provided in the ELTEP is unfortunately not sufficient. In its current form, two courses exist for teaching practice (School experience in Term 7 and Teaching practice in Term 8). Although the 1998 reform aimed at fostering school-faculty relationships, in practice, the quality and control over what happens in schools during those two courses are often vague. Renewed attention may be necessary as to find out whether teaching practice serves the needs of student teachers and what precautions need to be taken to improve the current situation.

One contributing factor to possible problems during the teaching practice in pre-service teacher education may be related to overpopulated/understaffed ELT departments, resulting in poor student ratios per lecturer. This may have severe consequences. Firstly, students of overpopulated ELT departments may not be effectively accommodated at practice schools due to limited number of teachers of English. Currently, students are allocated to practice schools in groups of 6-7. These students are to be distributed to other available teachers of English so that the classes should not be over populated by student teachers. However, there are not always available extra teachers of English, under which case student teachers are obliged to follow the time table of one single teacher. This in turn is likely to reduce the number of contact hours student teachers can have with students. The situation can further deteriorate given the fact that now faculties of education in Turkey offer teaching certificate programs to current and/or graduates of related departments such English/American Language and Literature and Translation and Interpretation. With more students from these source departments to do their teaching practice, the situation is unquestionably a bleak one and needs immediate action. Secondly, we may be sacrificing the quality at the expense of the quantity. With high numbers of students on their teaching practice programs, it is utopic to expect limited number of teacher trainers to provide decent supervision and guidance. Many student teachers are very likely to complete their teaching practice without even being observed by their advisors. Such a situation calls for one single solution: number of the students enrolled in ELT departments and other teacher certificate programs urgently needs to be reduced.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the findings echoes Seferoğlu's (2006) observation that there seems to be a mismatch between how we teach student teachers to teach English and what happens in real life classes. It may therefore be useful if we, teacher trainers, can revise and align our teaching methodologies according to what awaits student teachers in real life. It is only then we can equip them with down-to-earth applicable teacher knowledge. The lack of link does not always seem to be merely pedagogic; student teachers appear to have problems with administrative and social demands imposed upon them. It may also be worth investing time to raise student teachers' awareness of such challenges and commitments once they are in the profession in real life as teachers of English. We need to find ways of delivering such knowledge.

Finally, teachers need to develop a new identity as teachers-researchers. This may often be a prerequisite for teacher autonomy and professional development (Dikilitaş, 2015). Although there are courses that aim at promoting research skills of student teachers, sequencing of courses in the curriculum may not be appropriate. It may be necessary to delay research skills course (Coşkun-Ögeyik, 2009) until they build some teacher knowledge. Moreover, research skills course is offered only two hours a week. It may be worth restructuring the course by adding extra weekly credit hours and/or extending the course over a couple of terms instead of one term only. This may provide students with ample time to try out skills they learn with regards to conducting research for generating knowledge for their own use.

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