

## **ELT STUDENT TEACHERS' COMPETENCE FOR TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION**

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### **Abstract**

As a result of the European integration process of Turkey, there have been radical changes in the education system of the country within the framework of a constructivist approach. Undoubtedly, teachers and teacher competencies play a critical role in these changes. Within this context, in 2006, the Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Teacher Training prepared "Generic Teacher Competencies", which identify task definitions of teachers. Later in 2008, subject-specific competencies were identified for different subjects including English language teaching (ELT). The present qualitative study attempted to explore 21 senior ELT student teachers' competence regarding specifically the teaching of four basic language skills. Field notes, interviews and follow-up focus group interviews comprised the data sources for the study. Findings indicated that student teachers do not possess all the competencies required by the Ministry and that there is still room for improvement. Overall, the results are informative both for future researchers and those currently involved with teacher training in Turkey.

**Key Words:** *ELT student teachers, competencies, language skills*

**JEL Classification:** Education, Z

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In order to make students learn effectively and efficiently, a teacher has to perform a large number of activities inside and outside the classroom. The teacher is expected to possess a certain amount of knowledge, certain attitudes and skills, which is known as teacher competence. In other words, teacher competence includes "the right way of conveying units of knowledge, application and skills to

students” (Bhat, Chaudhary, & Dash, 2008:7). High teacher competence is crucial in that it can lead to positive individual student development and even lessen the aggressive behaviour in the classroom (Çubukçu, 2010).

As in many countries around the world, teacher competencies have been included in the education agenda of Turkey recently. Particularly after the European integration process of Turkey, the Ministry of National Education (MNE) General Directorate of Teacher Training prepared Generic Teacher Competencies (2006), which identify task definitions of teachers. Turkish teachers are expected to have sufficient subject-specific knowledge, to convey this knowledge to their students through a constructivist approach, to have skills for collaboration with colleagues and to efficiently exchange information with families (MNE; 2006). General competencies for teachers consist of 6 main competencies, 31 sub competencies and 233 performance indicators containing knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for teaching as a profession.

Later in 2008, subject-specific competencies were identified by MNE for teachers in primary education level. Different from the generic competencies, the performance indicators of the subject area competencies are formed in three levels; A1 (basic), A2 (medium) and A3 (advanced). Both generic and subject-specific competencies for teachers are expected to have orienting function on teacher education policies, the subjects of pre-service teacher education programs, in-service training of teacher, teacher selection, and performance evaluation.

Yet, few studies have been conducted to explore whether teachers or student teachers really have these competencies required by MNE. In an effort to better understand whether the qualifications determined by MNE are congruent with the competencies provided by education faculties, Arslan and Özpınar (2008) gathered qualitative data through interviews and document analysis. Participants consisted of 5 student teachers from the education faculty of a state university. The authors reported that competencies addressed by MNE, namely personal and professional development, the process of teaching and learning, testing and evaluation of the learning process, and relationships with the school, parents, society, and colleagues, are possessed to a great extent by the student teachers interviewed.

Kök, Çiftçi and Ayık (2011) investigated the pre-school student teacher responses to subject-specific competencies developed by MNE. Findings indicated that the majority of student teachers evaluate the competencies positively. The study concluded that although the competencies required from pre-school teachers on the whole are quite clear and reasonable, there are some subcategories which are rather vague and difficult to understand.

In 2008, MNE prepared subject-specific competencies formed in three levels; A1 (basic), A2 (medium) and A3 (advanced) for primary level ELT teachers as well. Five domains of competence identified are: planning English language teaching processes, helping students develop language skills, monitoring and evaluating language learning, cooperation with the school, families and society, and professional development. Yet, there appears to be no research on the topic of whether ELT teachers or student teachers possess the competencies required by MNE. Consequently, the present study employed qualitative research methodology, which is often the method of choice when exploring terrain where relatively few studies previously have been conducted (Maxwell, 2005). The study focused solely on the competence for teaching language skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing, in order to explore it deeply, as the qualitative tradition suggests.

## **2. METHOD**

Participants for this study consisted of 21 senior ELT student teachers from a comprehensive state university in Turkey. Individuals selected for the study were gleaned from a group of 90 senior student teachers who were about to complete their teaching practice period. Selected participants met this criterion: their teaching practice period took place in a primary school. Seven of the subjects were male and fourteen were female.

Although the competencies determined by MNE guided the data collection process, the interviews were conducted in semi-structured manner. This less structured format allowed respondents to define the world in unique ways and provided the researcher with new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 2009). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. After the analysis of 12 interviews, new themes emerged infrequently, that is, data saturation occurred (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Later, the researcher observed the students teachers during their teaching practice experiences several times so as to learn about their competence for teaching language skills. In accordance with

naturalistic observation approach, the researcher did not manipulate or stimulate the behaviours of student teachers. As the study progressed, the nature of observation changed and sharpened in focus, leading to more selected observations related to language skills (Punch, 2009). Finally, focus group interviews were held with seven participants to encourage them to speak freely and completely about their behaviours and attitudes in class (Berg, 2004).

Data analysis adhered to the mechanics suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). After different types of data (from interviews, field notes and focus-group discussions) were ordered, they were read at least twice. The subject-specific competencies identified by MNE were regarded as pre-assigned coding categories. Then all data were examined and each unit was marked with the appropriate coding category. This involved scrutinizing sentences carefully and judging what codes the materials pertained to.

In order to ensure the study's internal validity or credibility, the researcher instituted member checks (Merriam, 2009) among various participants. This involves soliciting feedback on the emerging findings from some of the participants of the study. Each of the individuals generally concurred with the findings. Obviously, the names used are pseudonyms.

### **3. FINDINGS**

Findings related to each language skill are discussed below with illustrative support, supplying voice to various student teachers in the sample. This traditional division of language skills has the sole purpose of easing the reader's navigation through the article's contents.

#### **3.1. Teaching listening**

The interview data indicated that student teachers seemed to have the basic competencies in relation to teaching listening. They generally reported that the teaching of listening was an essential part of language teaching and that it should be integrated with speaking practice. Participants indicated that listening and speaking skills are closely intertwined and that the interaction between the two is a prerequisite to successful communication. They seemed to be aware of integrating these two skills that can reinforce each other. Participants in the sample repeatedly shared the importance of listening skills as a necessary component of effective communication. They all placed a concerted emphasis on listening comprehension. Additionally, they explained that they could use songs,

dialogues, poems, tales or other texts to facilitate the development of their students' aural abilities.

However, participants did not seem to have the medium or advanced levels of competencies suggested by MNE. For example, they did not mention the teaching of meta-cognitive or cognitive strategies for listening comprehension. Nor did they ever plan to prepare various teaching materials that might appeal to the lives of their learners. On the whole, participants were aware of the significance of teaching listening, yet they seemed to lack a repertoire of different activities that could specifically be used with young learners.

During their teaching practice, student teachers did not even attempt to focus on teaching listening skills. None of them used the tape, the computer or the CDs available in class. When asked about their reluctance about teaching listening, student teachers stated that they were "incompetent" and even "fearful" about using listening activities with young learners. Aykut, for example, described the sentiments of most participants as he explained why he hardly touched on listening practice:

Listening activities are one of the *nightmares* of practising teachers. Nobody wants to teach listening because we are almost sure that students will have comprehension problems. We are also afraid that students' lack of comprehension may lead to a chaos that will make class management much more difficult for us.

### **3. 2. Teaching speaking**

Participants described speaking as the basic language skill and the key indicator of competence in a foreign language. They were all aware of the core competencies necessary for helping students to improve their speaking skills. For example student teachers explained that they would present meaningful language activities and real purposes to learners so that they can use the language in real life situations. They also highlighted the importance of presenting language input that is clear and also relevant to the lives and interests of learners, as Işıl illustrated: "Helping learners improve their listening and speaking skills in English is our main goal as practice teachers. For that reason, we prefer to focus on meaning rather grammar rules merely."

Interview data described that participants did not possess the medium or advanced levels of competencies suggested by MNE. To illustrate, they made no mention of the various components of spoken language such as body language, stress, intonation or pronunciation. Student teachers did not seem to be aware of the necessity of helping learners develop their speaking skills beyond the level of utterance. Emel, referring to teaching pronunciation, said: “I believe pronunciation often gets ignored over grammar and vocabulary in many ELT classes just because teachers are not sure how to teach it.”

Moreover, participants’ reflections did not include the use of narratives or short stories in order to teach extended talk or discourse functions. Classroom observations supported the interview results. Instead of teaching units of talk as conversational phrases, student teachers tended to focus on asking and answering questions as part of students’ language practice. Although they were careful in choosing topics that would be of interest to young learners, the activities were rather meaningless and merely form-focused.

### **3. 3. Teaching reading**

Interview data suggested that student teachers possessed the core competencies in relation to teaching reading, some of which included focusing on different sub-skills of reading, using authentic texts or word games. Participants also agreed that they would make use of different sources or materials that would take learners’ interest, which is considered a medium competency by the Ministry.

Classroom observations of teaching practices confirmed that student teachers were quite competent at teaching reading. The texts they used aroused interest in learners and fit their language level. They discussed new words and concepts before or after reading the text, which helped to activate prior knowledge and improve comprehension. They spent some time introducing the topic, encouraging skimming, scanning, predicting and activating schemata. In teaching text comprehension, they generally used the combination of asking and answering questions, and focusing on vocabulary. However, they did not use co-operative or group learning, or graphic organizers such as flow charts to improve comprehension. Nor did they steer students towards a follow-up writing exercise that can reinforce the connection between reading and writing.

### **3. 4. Teaching writing**

It is noteworthy that student teachers considered writing as the most difficult skill to teach. In the interviews, they expressed that they were unsure as to how to enable learners, especially primary school children, to become actively involved in the writing process. Many student teachers admitted to being uncomfortable teaching writing in the first place and some said they had no preparation for this work at all, as Ufuk stated:

“It’s is not realistic at all to expect learners to write anything in English. They are not good at writing skills and are still trying to master the intricacies of the Turkish written language. That is why I neglected writing practice in class.”

Let alone possess the medium or advanced skills in relation to teaching writing, student teachers in the sample did not even demonstrate the basic levels of competence. Some of these core competencies are giving learners simple writing tasks through fun or play, introducing different types of genres, and using some visual materials to stimulate writing. Yet, in the lessons taught by participants, aspects of written language have not been addressed at all. Although it was obvious that students in their classes had serious difficulty in simply writing down English letters, words or sentences, student teachers seemed to ignore this situation. None of them used the forms of dictation, for example, to help students learn the conventions of the orthographic code of the English language.

### **4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Overall, the participants placed too much emphasis on the teaching of speaking and listening. The majority wholeheartedly embraced the idea that meaning-focused, interactional activities and the impact of fun and creativity will encourage young learners to speak more freely in class. Yet, this commonly-held belief failed to shape their performance as teachers in class. The participants prioritized the teaching of speaking in their lessons, but most of the activities were teacher-centred and rather mechanical, as supported by the research literature (e.g., Ozdemir & Usun, 2009). Particularly, the student teachers refrained from using the computer and CDs in their classrooms, as explored by Arıkan (2011).

It is also noteworthy that the participants did not adopt a “whole language approach” (Brown, 2001) which emphasizes the integration of the language skills. Particularly, they ignored the interaction between the listening and speaking skills. The participants seemed to have a natural tendency to look at speaking as the

major index of language proficiency, avoiding teaching listening for several reasons.

Similarly, the student teachers in the sample did not focus on the possible connection between reading and writing. They repeatedly shared that development of writing in young learners is a challenging task. They also reported that they were unsure as to how to enable students to become actively involved in the writing process. Therefore, they did not even use writing to enhance and reinforce emerging phonological and word analysis skills. Nor did they view writing as a means to reinforce and demonstrate students' knowledge of phonics.

Viewing the study's participants holistically, it is possible to note that they were particularly ineffective in the teaching of the listening and writing skills. Moreover, they failed to adopt a holistic approach to the teaching of language skills. It is therefore important that student teachers be made aware of the importance of "integrated and multi-skill instruction" (Hinkel, 2006) to make language learning as realistic as possible. Such integration, as Brown (2001) puts it, can give students a chance to diversify their efforts in more meaningful ways. Naturally, it is also essential that teacher competencies in relation to the language skills be updated accordingly to avoid this traditional distinction of language skills.

Finally, it might also be useful if student teachers could be informed about teacher competencies before they begin their teaching practice, as suggested by Aydogdu (2007). The knowledge of competencies updated regularly by MNE can contribute to student teachers' development of effective teaching behaviours. This awareness can also help them identify and prioritize their professional development needs.

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