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Every Challenge Is An Opportunity To Learn: Student-Teachers' Learning Experiences

Her Zorluk Öğrenme Fırsatıdır: Öğrenci Öğretmenlerinin Öğrenme Deneyimleri

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Abstract

Field experience or practicum is an important milestone in the lives of prospective teachers. During this time, they will decide whether they want to embark on the teaching journey or never start the journey. The present study explored third year TEFL student teachers' experiences of teaching young learners for the first time. In particular, the focus was on the challenges they faced and the solutions they found to their own challenges. In order to identify student teachers' problems and their solutions, they were asked to keep reflective journals for six weeks while doing their voluntary teaching at their placement schools. The findings indicated that student teachers' experiences in young learners' classes were generally positive and the experience was found to be fruitful. Moreover, the main problems faced by student teachers were related with classroom management; namely, getting students' attention and the level of noise during the lesson. The study highlighted the importance of teaching experience in real classrooms, and how such experiences contributed to student teachers' professional learning.

Key words: *student teachers, young learners, real teaching experience*

Öz

Eğitim fakültelerinde genellikle dördüncü yılda verilen Okul Deneyimi ve Öğretmenlik Uygulaması dersleri öğretmen adaylarının tecrübeli öğretmenleri gözlemleme olanağını sağlama yanı sıra, gerçek sınıf ortamında deneyim kazanmasını da sağlamaktadır. Bu süreç öğretmen adaylarına öğretmenlik mesleğine başlayıp başlamama konusunda da yardımcı olmaktadır. Bu kapsamda bu dersler öğretmen adaylarının öğretmenlik mesleğine başlamadan önce, okulu, öğrencileri, işlenen dersleri ve öğretmenleri tanımlarında önemli bir yeri vardır. Çalışmalar da göstermektedir ki bu süreç, öğretmen adayının gelişimine katkı koymaktadır. Bu düşünce ile, bu çalışma, İngilizce Öğretmenliği programında Çocuklara Yabancı Dil

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Öğretimi dersi alan üçüncü sınıf öğretmen adaylarının gönüllü olarak okul öncesi ve ilkokullardaki gözlem ve deneyimlerini araştırmaktadır. Çalışmada özellikle öğretmen adaylarının karşılaşıkları zorluklar ve bu zorluklara çözüm önerileri üzerinde duruldu. Araştırmanın örneklemi 24 öğretmen adayından oluşmaktadır. Araştırma verilerinin toplanması amacıyla öğretmen adayları altı hafta boyunca yansıtıcı günlükler tutulmuştur. Bunlara ek, dönem sonunda öğretmen adaylarına açık uçlu anket soruları verilmiştir. Toplanan veriler içerik analiz yöntemiyle analiz edilmiş ve temalar altında incelenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgulara göre öğretmen adayları Çocuklara Yabancı Dil Öğretimi dersi kapsamı altında yapılan bu uygulamaya karşı olumlu bir bakış açısına sahip oldukları görülmüştür. Öğretmen adaylarının başlica karşılaşıkları sorunlar sınıf yönetimi ile ilgili sorunlar olmuştur. Bunlar, çocukların ilgilerini derse toplama ve ders esnasında yaptıkları ses veya gürültü olmuştur. Her öğretmen adayı metodoloji ve sınıf yöntemi derslerinde gördükleri yöntemlerden faydalarak karşılaşıkları sorunlarla başaçıkmayı başarmışlardır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmada yer alan öğretmenler teoriyi практикे döküp içselleştirebilmislerdir. Bunlara ek olarak, kendi yöntemlerini geliştirerek sorunları başarıyla çözebilmişlerdir. Sonuç olarak, çalışma gerçek sınıflardaki öğretim deneyiminin önemini ve bu deneyimlerin öğretmen adaylarının mesleki öğrenimlerine nasıl katkıda bulunduğu vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: öğretmen adayları, çocuklara yabancı dil öğretimi, gerçek öğretim deneyimi

Introduction

Research into teaching English to young learners at primary and pre-primary schools has developed rapidly in the past twenty years. This development has occurred due to the consensus of the value of early language learning. As a result of the growing demand for English across the world, families now want their children to be able to speak English fluently and coherently. Although official year of starting English as a foreign language in general is Year 1 at primary school, many private and even state pre-school institutions are introducing English to young learners (Rixon, 2013; Cameron, 2003).

In general, teacher education programs in the final year of their curriculum incorporate practicum courses which give student teachers the opportunity to observe an experienced teacher on work, link theory to practice, and develop teaching skills and competences before they embark on their real teaching experience. Previous research (Harrison & Lakin, 2018; Yuan & Lee, 2014; Eröz-Tuğa, 2013; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Stoughton, 2007; Seferoglu, 2006; da Silva, 2005; Smith & Lev- Ari, 2005; Tillema, 2000) has also shown that such programs not only equip student teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills about teaching and learning, but also give them the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and attitudes about learners and teaching. However, the field of teaching English to young learners (TEYL hereafter) is distinct

from teaching English to teenagers and adults. In addition to knowledge and skills, teachers of young learners need to be able to understand the way children think and acquire a foreign language, and equally important to be able to identify their interests so that they can integrate these into their teaching (Cameron, 2003). In other words, teaching English to young learners is a different experience as young learners are still developing cognitively, linguistically, physically and emotionally. Moreover, an important competence that teachers of young learners need to be equipped with is managing classrooms effectively. Although these topics are covered in most EFL programmes, student teachers are not given the opportunity to practise what has been covered in their young learners' courses.

Research studies on EFL student teachers teaching experience with young learners are scarce. However, several studies have investigated student teachers' perspectives on taking young learners' courses (Çakır & Güngör, 2017; Ekşi & Aşık, 2015; Eröz-Tuğra, 2013; Seferoğlu, 2006). Çakır and Güngör's (2017) study, for example, investigated third and fourth year pre-service teachers' evaluations of teaching English to young learners' course based on the 21st century teacher qualifications in five different EFL programmes in Turkey. The findings of the study showed that school experience should be integrated into the TEYL syllabus, and that there is a need to observe and gain real life experiences with young learners.

One area that most EFL student teachers question and even fear is classroom management. In particular, problems of control and discipline in crowded classes are most commonly mentioned problems. For instance, recently in their study, Merç and Subaşı (2015) examined twelve student teachers classroom management problems and their coping strategies. The main source of classroom management problem was identified as pupils. The level of noise, lack of student participation, uninterested students were among the given problems. Student teachers' solution strategies to these problems were showing individual interest, informing the cooperating teacher, warning, shouting at them or establishing eye contact.

To the best of author's knowledge, there have been very few research studies that have investigated EFL/ESL student teachers' experiences in young learners' classes. Instead, previous research mainly focused on student teachers' experiences in the final year of their education while doing their practicum. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by investigating student teachers' teaching experiences with young learners in real teaching contexts. The second aim of the study

was to evaluate the effects of early field experience on student teachers' professional learning, and possibility of integrating field experience into TEYL course on a voluntary basis.

Contextual information

The study was conducted during the Spring semester from March to May in 2016. The participants were third year TEFL student teachers taking Teaching English to Young Learners course at Middle East Technical University, Northern Cyprus Campus. The aim of the course was to:

- introduce student teachers to the theory and practice of teaching young learners in the EFL classroom.
- develop their knowledge about teaching the four skills to young learners
- design language teaching activities and materials for young learners
- introduce them to real classroom teaching so that they can implement various teaching approaches and become aware of young learners' needs and interests in terms of learning English

In Northern Cyprus, pre-school or pre-primary education is optional and targeted at three years old children. The official primary school entrance age is six. Private pre-primary schools start teaching English at the age of three, while at state pre-primary schools teaching of English is optional. Students at state primary school start learning English in Grade 3; however, they may be introduced to English at pre-school under the course name, English awareness.

The present study took place in four different schools. The table below provides information regarding the type of school, student's age range, the approximate class size, and whether English is taught at the school or not. All schools are public, and follow the national curriculum.

Table 1

Information about student teachers' background

Type of school	Age-range	Number of students	English
Kindergarten	3-5	12-15	Not taught
Pre-primary	5-6	15-18	Not taught
Primary school (year 1 and 2)	6-8	25-30	Not taught
Primary school (year 3,4 and 5)	9-11	25-30	Taught

In primary school, year 3 students have three class hours (40 minutes) of English, and in years 4 and 5, they have five class hours each week. Although English is not taught in kindergarten, pre-primary school and primary school year 1 and 2, students are introduced to basic vocabulary. The kindergarten, pre-primary school, and primary school year 1 and 2, where the student teachers did their field experiences have one to two class hours of English (approximately 30 minutes) per week in order to acquaint them with English. Basic English vocabulary and English songs are introduced to children so that they become familiar with the English language.

Method

Participants and data collection

The study employed a convenience sampling as the main aim of the study was to investigate the possibility of integrating field experience into the course based on the feedback received from the student teachers. In order to decrease bias degree, student teachers' feedback, peer review and methods triangulation were used (Johnson, 1997).

Twenty-four student teachers, taking TEYL course, participated in the study. All student teachers had completed their methodology, education and language skills (Teaching Speaking and Listening) courses and, would have completed the second language skill course (Teaching Reading and Writing) which they were taking at the time of the current study. Therefore, the student teachers were mostly familiar with teaching approaches and methods.

At the beginning of the young learners' class, the course instructor asked for volunteers to teach at pre-schools. Student teachers were told that they would get 5% for participation in the teaching program, and 5% for writing their reflective journals. All students agreed to do voluntary teaching as they all stated that it would be a different experience for them. Student teachers were not informed about the intention of the researcher until the end of the semester in order to decrease the degree of bias.

As a result, the student teachers were randomly placed in three types of schools: kindergarten, pre-primary school and primary school. While visiting the schools, they were involved in various tasks for six weeks:

- For the first task, they were asked to observe the assigned language teacher for two weeks, write a reflective paper for each observation based on what they have learnt from the observation/teacher and what they would have done differently,
- Teach at least one class hour each week for four weeks, receive feedback from the assigned teachers, and write a reflective paper on their strengths and weakness.
- Write a final reflective paper on their experience with the young learners.

All tasks were sent to the course instructor via email. At the end of the six weeks, student teachers were informed about the purpose of the research study and were asked if they would be willing to participate. All student teachers accepted to take part in the study, and stated that they would be happy to contribute. Then, they were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire at home. The questionnaire, by and large, focused on their expectations, experiences and whether they would consider teaching young learners in the future. With this questionnaire, student teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences and also offer their suggestions related to the course and teaching experience at placement schools.

Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out using content analysis in order to identify main concepts relating to student teachers' observations and experiences. The data were coded in the following three phases. First, the researcher read the data several times in order to gain an overall understanding of the student teachers' experiences. The researcher marked the data by a code (e.g. observation, teaching experience, classroom management etc.). Second, while reading through these codes, the researcher labelled tentative categories (e.g. students, attention, challenges, positive/negative effects etc.). Lastly, the data were sorted on the basis of its fit into topics that reflected the research aims. The two main themes that emerged were the challenges that student teachers faced during their teaching experience, and the solutions they had produced to overcome them.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher requested a colleague to analyse a set of data. Later, the researcher and her colleague discussed the coding until they reached "intercoder agreement" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 428). Moreover, two of the student teachers were also invited to comment on the interpretation of the data, and their feedback was taken into consideration during the refinement of the final analysis. If there was any misunderstanding or

missing information, student teachers were also able to comment on them in person. To ensure confidentiality, for the student teachers' names, pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper.

Findings

Based on the analysis of the reflective journals and the open-ended questionnaires, two main categories emerged; challenges students faced and benefits they have gained. The sources of perceived challenges were mainly related to classroom management problems. These are getting and maintaining young learners' attention and dealing with noise level. Although the topics have been covered under a different heading for convenience of exposition, there is overlap between each theme. For example, getting students' attention was difficult because they did not perceive the student teachers as their real teachers. Moreover, although the experience was challenging for most student teachers, the findings revealed that they were able to benefit from the experience.

Challenges

Getting/maintaining young learners' attention

Classroom management is a perennial problem not only among student teacher teachers, but also for novice and even experienced teachers. The most frequently encountered classroom management problem that the student teachers reported in this study was related to student misbehaviour. Student teachers explained their classroom management problems, by and large, as managing students' behaviour, getting their attention, and maintaining the flow of the lesson. The following comment from Berry was typical of the concern raised:

I faced several difficulties that I didn't expect as difficult as they were. For instance, keeping students under control was quite difficult, because they can immediately get out of control. When I checked my activities even for a minute, they may start yelling at each other, fighting with each other, getting on the table, running around the class, teasing each other and so on. (Berry, Pre-primary, Overall reflective paper)

Another student teacher, while observing her co-operating teacher, became aware in her first week that managing student behaviour even for experienced teachers was difficult.

Although the content of the lessons and the topics are easy, controlling young learners in class, catching their attention and having discipline are too hard. I saw that a primary school teacher should always be in her/his good mood because students are easily affected from the teacher's reactions. (Emily, Primary School year 5, Reflection 1)

Olga also realized that controlling students was difficult. However, she became aware of what she had to do to overcome the problem. Her solution to the problem was as the following:

I very much liked teaching in primary school even though it is very tiring and kids are harder to control compared to adults but I have seen that once you set rules that are possible to follow for them you can control them (Olga, Primary School year 5, Reflection 4)

Additionally, related to these problems, the two student teachers explained what had happened and how they dealt when faced with a problem:

*In this lesson, my weakness was not to be able to manage the classroom. The children were dynamic and it was hard to **get their attention**. I should develop my classroom management skill. (Irene, Kindergarten, age 3-5, Reflection paper Week 8)*

...maintaining the flow of the lesson and attracting students' attention as much as possible were tough for me. As the weeks have passed, we, as teachers have learned how children behave when they get bored or what kind of activities they like. In time, I have learned how to manage the children and how to maintain the flow of the lesson. (Irene, Kindergarten, age 3-5, Overall reflection paper)

*The biggest difficulty that we encountered was the **attention span of the children**. When they were working on an activity, they were bored and they were starting to deal with other things such as bothering their friends or asking permission to go outside and drink water. To deal with this problem, I tried to draw the students' attention by transforming the activities into a play. For example, while a student was colouring, he/she could get bored and I asked him to race about finishing colouring early. Most of the time it worked and I could deal with attention problems. Also, clapping and raising voice were a good way to direct the students' attention to the activities. (Mike, Kindergarten, age 3-5, Overall reflection paper)*

As the student teachers' group of learners were between the ages of three to five, keeping them under control was not an easy task for these student teachers. However, as they have spent more time with the children they were able to find the right teaching approach.

Lisa teaching 5-6 years old students at the pre-primary school mentioned that she sometimes lost students' attention due to boredom or tiredness. This is how she solved her classroom management problem:

In order to make them engaged with the lesson, I suddenly told them to sit down, stand up, touch your “....”. TPR works while getting attention. (Lisa, Pre-primary school, Reflective paper 4)

Student teachers who were teaching older grades seemed to have fewer problems which resembled the problems reported by student teachers at kindergarten. Both groups of student teachers identified the problem of getting students' attention, however, their way of dealing with the problems differed slightly. Below is Celine's explanation:

I was worrying about my classroom management skills but I didn't face any problems other than wandering around, speaking without getting permission, and going to toilet. I overcame these problems by explicitly warning the students and getting the attention of the wandering students by asking them to do the next exercise. (Celine, Primary school years 3, 4 and 5, Overall reflective paper)

Dealing with the Noise level

All student teachers complained about the level of noise in their classes while observing their co-operating teacher as well as while doing practice teaching. Due to high noise level, coordinating teachers and student teachers were unable to carry out activities and also maintain classroom discipline. While observing his coordinating teacher, George explained that the noise level was sometimes intolerable. He explains:

We observed 2 lessons and they were 40 minutes long. To be honest, it was like 40 years! Screams and other noises were distracting me badly. (George, Pre-primary school, Overall Reflection Paper)

One student teacher wrote that although she used her own way of making the students quiet, at times she had to employ the strategy that her co-operating teacher used. The excerpt below illustrates her approach to dealing with the noise level:

When they made noise, I tried to shout because they are used to it because of their teachers. Therefore, I had to shout at them. However, I usually used “1 2 3 tip” and this really worked. (Tracey, Kindergarten, Reflection paper 4)

Student teachers stated that the noise level in their classes increased while they were forming groups. This finding is in line with previous studies (Merç & Subaşı, 2015; Carless, 2004) study. Tom expresses his approach as follows:

So I made them 3 big groups according to their seating, rather than smaller groups of 4. I realized that they could be very hostile against the other group members when there is a chance to fail the game, because they were throwing things to each other when the other groups achieved. (Tom, Primary School year 3-4, Reflection 3)

Related to noise level, student teachers realized that they needed to be more patient towards young learners. This was a solution strategy that was also used by student teachers in Merç & Subaşı's study. The student teachers in the current study also stated that they have actually learnt to be patient and more understanding while teaching young learners. Michael's comment represents student teachers' patience developed in time:

I wasn't a patient person, but I learned how to be a patient and supportive teacher towards these students. (Michael, Kindergarten, Overall reflection)

In addition, several student teachers mentioned that they were not taken seriously by the students, as they were not their 'real teacher' and that they were not seen as 'the authority'. As a result, students in their classes felt free to act as they wished. Thus, such behaviour lead to an increase in the noise level and not paying attention to the student teachers' lessons.

Benefits

Effects of early field experience

At the end of the semester, student teachers were asked to reflect upon how they felt and whether this experience contributed to their development. They all stated that the experience was beneficial

in terms of developing their classroom management coping strategies, teaching approaches, and also preparing their own activities and materials. The following extracts are typical of the comments made:

During this experience, I have changed in a good way because I have developed some classroom management strategies (mostly in order to deal with misbehaviours) and some skills such as to be creative while preparing new materials. (Fiona, Questionnaire)

I saw how to manage young learners. And the theories and assumptions that we did in the classroom did not stay there; we practiced them and saw which theories work and which ones do not work. (Irene, Questionnaire)

I can't deny the fact that theories that I learned from my courses actually helped me a lot. As the time passes I somehow succeeded at adapting myself to this new teaching experience. (Simon, Questionnaire)

It is also interesting to note that although many of the student teachers found the experience valuable, most student teachers said that they would not consider taking up teaching young learners as a profession in the future:

Frankly, I do not want to teach at kindergarten in the future because their learning styles do not interest me so much. In addition, I do not conceive that I can handle them, their misbehaviours or problems. (Irene, Questionnaire)

Before this experience I was just prejudiced about the teaching young learners, however after this I am sure that I don't want to be a primary, secondary, or kindergarten teacher at all. (George, Questionnaire)

Only four student teachers stated that they might want to teach young learners in the future. This is how Olga explains she became aware of her admiration towards young learners:

To me this internship contributed a lot because I believe that I have gained some management skills and made me realize that I actually liked to work with kids and I could consider working with them even though it requires lots of energy and lots of work.
(Olga, Questionnaire)

Discussion and implications

The present study investigated student teachers first field experience of teaching English to young learners. The findings of the study mirror, to some extent, themes highlighted in previous studies. First, the student teachers identified classroom management problems as challenges and they were able to deal with these problems successfully. Second, the student teachers perceived the experience of observing cooperating teachers and teaching real classrooms both beneficial and enjoyable.

A common problem that student teachers and novice teachers face is classroom management. Student teachers in this study also had difficulty in dealing with classroom management problems. This finding is in keeping with Al-Hassan et al., (2012) and Merç and Subaşı's (2015) findings that various classroom management problems are inevitable in young learners' classes. However, one potentially significant finding is that each student teacher in this study seems to have had clear ideas about how to manage young learners, and this awareness led them to develop their own strategies to overcome classroom management problems. Thus, this finding suggests that student teachers in this study were not passive recipients of knowledge, but were able to 'practicalise theoretical knowledge' (Tsui, 2009), which involves making personal interpretations of formal knowledge. Although the student teachers were not asked to reflect on the link between theory and practice, they often made reference to its usefulness in their teachings. This finding agrees with the results of Smith and Hodson (2010) that in addition to learning from 'hands on' experience, theory that was introduced at university sessions is beneficial.

Linked to the abovementioned finding, teacher education programmes could provide as many 'hands on' teaching opportunities as possible. Additionally, in keeping with previous research on observing cooperating teachers (Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Seferoğlu, 2006), this study found that observation of cooperating teachers contributed to student teachers' learning. The twenty-four student teachers in this study considered their teaching experiences and observations highly valuable. In other words, the real teaching contexts provided student teachers with first-hand experience and a better understanding of how young learners acquire a foreign language. Thus, they were able to develop professional knowledge in areas of student learning, and materials

development. This finding resonates with the research of Ekşi and Aşık (2015) who found that involving pre-service teachers in real classroom atmosphere enriched their knowledge of how children think, learn, and act. It is important that student teachers are supported and also provided with teaching experiences in various contexts so that they develop skills and confidence in teaching.

An unexpected and important finding in the study was related to student teachers' decisions related to not wanting to go into teaching young learners in the future. In contrast to Al Hassan et.al's (2012) student teachers who reported having satisfaction of teaching young learners, the student teachers in this study realized that they would not be satisfied teaching young learners in the future. Perhaps, had they not been given this opportunity they would have had made a wrong career decision. In this respect, teacher education programs play a critical role in providing as many teaching opportunities as possible to better guide student teachers in their final career decisions. These findings should be explored in further studies.

Conclusion

The present study investigated third year TEFL student teachers' experiences in real classroom settings. The study contributes to the literature by shedding light on the value of student teachers' teaching experiences in young learners' classes.

The student teachers in this study were successfully able to internalize and incorporate the theory they have acquired in their education into practice. Based on these findings, it is suggested that field experience that involves both observing experienced teachers and practicing teaching in real classrooms should be incorporated in young learners' courses. This implementation would provide students with the opportunity of applying what they have learned from the language teacher education programmes in real classroom settings.

In conclusion, the present study shows that preparing student teachers to meet the needs of all of their prospective students is essential. If they are not offered to experience teaching in various contexts, they will not be adequately prepared for their teaching profession, and they may make a wrong choice regarding the age group they may be able to teach in the future. Thus, it is crucial that such opportunities are provided. Although the findings of this study relate particularly to student teachers in Northern Cyprus, the recommendations may be relevant to other educational and training contexts. Thus, a similar study can serve to enrich our understanding of student

teachers' experiences teaching experience with young learners. However, this study calls for more research into student teachers experiences in various teaching contexts in order to further our knowledge of how they develop their professional knowledge and skills, and how the gap between theory and practice be strengthened.

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