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Never too late to mend: ELT teachers' thoughts on the teacher trainee curriculum

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Abstract

Teaching English either in a second language or foreign language context have long been an issue in the field, and how to train people to meet the goals of language teaching, namely teachers, is another important subject that has been raised since 1900s. While the importance has been given to how to train teachers and what to teach them, it has been noted that little emphasis was put on the efficiency of teacher training curriculum in the professional life. The aim of this study is to investigate how efficient teachers think the lessons that teacher trainees take at university are for their profession after graduation. In order to find out the teachers' opinions on the usefulness of the courses, a Likert type questionnaire, including 23 lessons offered by the curriculums of Foreign Language Education departments of universities in Turkey, was given to the participants who are actively teaching English in various K-12 schools and universities in Turkey. The results reveal that teachers find Contextual Grammar I-II, Advanced Reading and Writing I-II, Listening and Pronunciation I-II, Oral Presentation Skills I-II, Linguistics I-II, Approaches to ELT I-II, Language Acquisition, Teaching English to Young Learners I-II, Materials Adaptation and Development, Measurement and Evaluation in Language Teaching and Practicum courses quite beneficial for their professions and help their teaching, while Lexicology, English Literature I-II, Translation, Scientific Research Techniques and Second Foreign language courses have been found to be unbeneficial for their profession. Also, the difference between variables like gender and teaching level were also analyzed. According to the study results, it is quite clear that universities should start a revision process in their curriculums in order to meet the needs of the teachers actively teaching in the field.

Keywords Second language, foreign language, Turkish EFL learners, teacher beliefs, lesson efficiency

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1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher training

It is stated that in the early 1900s, teachers are considered to be born with teaching skills (Ünal (2010)). That means, a teacher is gifted in terms of teaching and does not have to be equipped with any professional knowledge in his/her serving years. In 1950s, this understanding started to change and pre-service and in-service training have been started to be given more importance and different models of teacher development have been proposed by different researchers. Three of these models have been put forward by Wallace (1991). According to the Craft Model, novice teachers imitate the master teachers' behaviors in the class and teaching experience passes from one generation to another in this way. The second model is Applied Science Model and according to this model the trainee puts his/her theoretical knowledge into practice. The theoretical findings are transformed to the trainees by the experts in the field. These two models have been criticized because the trainers are considered to be receptive in the sense that they have a tendency to do what the master teachers do and find useful in teaching context and the information is being transferred in only one way (Ur, 1997). The final model was proposed in the Reflective Model. In this model, experience and scientific knowledge are equally important. At the same time, this model requires the trainee to think about his/her teaching situation, make inferences from both the desired and undesired aspects of teaching process. Additionally, it is important for the trainee to develop knowledge-in-action by practice and the ability to make a reflection on teaching experience in this model. However, this model has been criticized for being independent from external learning resources such as lectures, reading and so on.

Ünal (2010) states that although there are different models to describe training programs, all training programs applied in different countries aim to enable trainees to combine theoretical and practical knowledge to be used effectively in the classroom atmosphere. Although teacher training and teacher education are used interchangeably, basic distinctions have been made about these two concepts. According to Jenkins and Murrey (1998) training is specialized on a specific aspect or problem defined in the profession of teaching, while education tries to develop the ability to come up with some solutions when there is a problem. Pre-service teachers are provided with training throughout the undergraduate program and in-service trainings are also common for in-service teachers for further professional development.

1.1.1. Pre-Service ELT Training

In line with all the developments in the world, pre-service training has undergone a shift from a model of knowledge transmission to a more process-oriented model from 1960s to 1980s (Gülden, 2013). According to Knowledge Transmission Model, pre-service teachers are provided with certain knowledge in the form of general theories and pedagogical methods. This information also includes prescriptive grammatical information. The pre-service teacher puts this knowledge into practice by observing other

teachers or trial and error method in his/her first year in the profession (Johnson, 1996). However, since the 1980s, teacher education has moved from this view of knowledge transmission to one of knowledge construction models in which pre-service teachers build their own concept of language teaching through their experience by integrating theory, research and opinion with empirical and reflective study of their own classroom practices (Tharp and Gallimore, cited in Wang 2001: 53).

There have been other factors influencing teacher training programs. Suzuki (2010) states that there is a need for some changes in ELT undergraduate training programs because of the different varieties of English. In the past, English was taught to prepare students to communicate with the native speakers of two main varieties of English: British and American English. However, there are lots of people speaking English from different backgrounds. As a result, learners of English can communicate with non-native speakers of English. That means there has been a shift from English as a Foreign Language to English as the Lingua Franca of the world. According to Mac Kay (2002), this would make a new formulation of English education necessary and this is closely related to pre-service ELT training.

1.1.2. The Development of Pre-Service ELT Training in Turkey

Pre-Service ELT Training in Turkey is categorized into two groups as before and after the foundation of the faculties of education.

1.1.2.1. Before The Faculties of Education

Demircan (1988) states the following qualifications were certified as foreign language teachers before 1982 (the foundation of Faculty of Education).

Table 1: Qualifications Certified As Foreign Language Teachers Before 1982

-
- 1. To be a graduate of the department of Philology. Morning Classes (1933-)
Evening Classes (1974-)*
 - 2. To be a graduate of School of Foreign Languages (1972-)*
 - 3. To be a graduate of other departments at universities and to have had
foreign language courses throughout undergraduate program.*
 - 4. To be a graduate of Institute of Education (Morning Classes) (1941-1978),
evening classes (1974-1978)*
 - 5. To be a graduate of the foreign language departments by means of informal
education*
 - 6. To finish the informal summer school program (1974-1977)*
 - 7. To finish the intensive 1or 2 months long training in the Institute of
Education*
 - 8. To be a graduate of the other departments in Institute of Education and
have an additional training of foreign language*
 - 9. To finish the School of Foreign Language (it's two years long) under the
Ministry of Education Informal Education Institution (English, 1975-1982)*
 - 10. To be successful in the exams held by Ministry of Education*
 - 11. To be successful in the proficiency exams held by Ministry of National
Education
(1941-)*
-

12. *To go the European countries for personal development*

13. *To have the trainings given by the Ministry of Education and to be certified as foreign language teachers based on those trainings (1939-)*
14. *To be selected by the heads of the schools based on the criteria of having finished secondary education especially in the field of foreign language*
15. *There were more than 1200 people who worked voluntarily in Turkey as Peace Volunteers and they worked as English teachers after the year 1962. They were required to have graduated from higher education institutions and they worked with the title of “expert”.*
16. *To be a primary school teachers knowing a foreign language*
17. *There were foreign people working in especially Anatolian High Schools as foreign language teachers.*
-

1.1.2.2. *After the Faculties of Education (1982)*

With the foundation of Faculties of Education, there were some attempts to make the teacher training more systematic and the other institutions training teachers were transferred to Faculties of Education. There has been a shortage in terms of the number of English teachers in Turkey and The Ministry of Education has made different regulations to meet the demand of English teachers in Turkey (Evrin, 2013). Open University English Teacher Training Program at Anadolu University has been a considerable source for English teachers since 2000. The people having the following qualifications have been certified as English teachers since the year 1982. (Evrin, 2013).

Table 2: Qualifications Certified As Foreign Language Teachers After 1982

-
1. *To graduate from Foreign Language Education departments at universities*
2. *To graduate from different departments of the universities taking 40 credits of English*
3. *To graduate from Open University English Teacher Training Program*
4. *To graduate from English-medium universities and finish the certificate program of English Teaching*
5. *To graduate from other departments of Faculty of Education, have B or higher grades from KPDS and finish the certificate program of English Teaching*
6. *Primary school teachers can teach English in the fourth and fifth grades if there aren't English teachers.*
-

In the ELT programs at Faculties of Education in 1983-1984. (YÖK, 2007a), it is notable that there were some courses based on contrastive analysis such as translation courses and contrastive analysis of English and Turkish with the effect of psychological approach of Behaviorism although there was a shift from behaviorist point of view which sees language learning as habit formation (Watson, 1924; Thorndike, 1932; Bloomfield, 1933; Skinner 1957) and tries to prevent the learners from making mistakes because of the risk of their being fossilized to cognitive point of view which is more interested in

the activities going on in humans' brain (Mitchell & Myles, 2004) while using a language and socio-cultural point of view which sees learners as an active participant of the language learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). It is possible to say that, ELT training program used in the Faculties of Education wasn't related to the developments and findings in the second language learning research and in line with the second language teaching trends. There is another important fact about the program that only one month was allocated for practice teaching. Additionally, the courses which were related to language proficiency of the pre-service teachers such as English Grammar were given more weight than the courses which were directly related to teaching practice such as Language Teaching Techniques. There weren't any courses which were designed to teach specific language skills such as Teaching Grammar or Teaching Listening. Saka (2007) states that there isn't a standardization in terms of content, the number of the courses and the credits of the courses in training programs. He also maintains that the courses related to teaching and practice aren't held on regular bases as they are shown on the schedule and they are generally based on theories. It is also stated by him that the courses are determined based on the lecturers' fields of study and interest rather than the pre-service teachers' needs.

In the latest ELT program offered by YÖK (Council of Higher Education), although there are still courses based on Contrastive Analysis, their credits have been decreased compared to the program in 1983-1984. The elective courses from Fine Arts or Physical Education aren't available in the current program. At the same time, the courses related to such as History of English and Geography of English language which was available in the previous program isn't available in the current program. Some courses such as Community Service have been added to the program and the length of the school experience course has been made longer to last for both spring and fall terms with micro-teachings under the supervision of the lecturers.

In the light of this literature review, this study is intended to find out how efficient English teachers find the lessons in ELT program, whether gender and the level they teach at have an influence on it or not. In line with this goal, our research questions are as follows:

1. How efficient do English teachers find lessons in ELT programs in Turkey?
2. Is there a significant relationship between teachers' thoughts and gender?
3. Is there a significant relationship between teachers' thoughts and their teaching level?

2. Methodology

This part includes information on participants, instrument, time period and procedure, data analysis, and assumptions.

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted with 50 teachers teaching English at university and primary school levels in Turkey. Participants were chosen randomly from among the colleagues of the researchers. The distribution of the participants' age, gender and the level they are currently teaching at are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Age, Gender and Teaching Level Distribution

Age	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
23-28	29	58
30-39	16	32
40-47	5	10
TOTAL	50	100
Gender	(f)	(%)
male	11	22
female	39	78
TOTAL	50	100
Study Field	(f)	(%)
university	45	90
primary school	5	10
TOTAL	50	100

Table 3 shows that the participants' age range from 23 to 47, however; the majority of teachers are between 23-28 years old. Female participants outnumber male participants with 78%. In addition, teachers who are teaching English at university level are more than the ones teaching at primary school. Although the questionnaire included "high school" option, there are no teachers participated in the study teaching at this level.

2.2. Instrument

Data were collected through a questionnaire prepared by the researchers in Turkish. The first part of the questionnaire includes questions to elicit answers for the independent variables: age, gender and level of teaching. The second part includes a list of the lessons which are being lectured at most of the Foreign Language Education departments of universities in Turkey. These lessons have been determined by The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and are requisitioned to be given by higher education institutions in Turkey. The participants were asked to evaluate each lesson on a Likert type scale in terms of how useful they found that lesson to their current professional experiences. In addition to these items, teachers were asked to write an answer in Turkish to the open ended question "In your opinion, which lessons should be taken out from the curriculum of English Language Teaching Departments and which lessons should be offered instead, why?" The reliability analysis was done for the items in the questionnaire on SPSS 20.0 and the Cronbach's Alpha has been found as .85 which can be interpreted as significantly high and reliable.

2.3. Time Period and Procedure

Data were collected in the spring semester in 2014. The questionnaire was given by the researchers to their colleagues and the teachers were asked to fill in the sheets whenever they are available. The participants were told that their answers will be kept confidential and used only for scientific purposes.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through the statistics program IBM SPSS version 20. In order to get results for the independent variables, frequency analysis was

done. To find out the results in order to answer the research questions, independent samples T-test is used. Content analysis was used in order to analyze the answers to the open ended question.

2.5. Assumptions

The participants are assumed to have been more or less exposed to the curriculum offered by The Council of Higher Education. Moreover, it is also assumed that all the participants gave sincere answers to the questionnaire and take the study seriously.

3. Findings

This section includes core study results and they are presented with the sub-titles according to the research questions.

3.1. The Usefulness of Lessons

In order to find out which lessons are thought to have more benefit for the teachers' current teaching experiences, frequency analysis was done. The results for the frequency analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency Results of the Lessons

Courses offered by English Language Education Departments	Very Useful		Useful		Somewhat Useful		Not Useful		I did not take the course.	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Contextual Grammar I-II	12	24	17	34	11	22	3	6	7	14
Advanced Reading and Writing I-II	20	40	17	34	8	16	2	4	3	6
Listening and Pronunciation I-II	24	48	13	26	7	14	3	6	3	6
Oral Presentation Skills I-II	24	48	16	32	4	8	2	4	4	8
Lexicology	11	22	11	22	14	28	7	14	7	14
English Literature I-II	6	12	11	22	24	48	8	16	1	2
Linguistics I-II	19	38	18	36	10	20	3	6	0	0
Approaches to ELT I-II	31	62	16	32	1	2	1	2	1	2
Translation (English to Turkish)	12	24	14	28	13	26	8	16	3	6
Translation (Turkish to English)	12	24	13	26	15	30	7	14	3	6
Oral Expression and Public Speaking	17	34	18	36	4	8	2	4	9	18
Language Acquisition	24	48	15	30	7	14	0	0	4	8
Scientific Research Techniques	18	38	11	22	10	20	7	14	4	8
Specific Teaching Techniques I-II	20	40	15	30	5	10	1	2	9	18
Teaching English to Young Learners I-II	21	42	17	34	7	14	0	0	5	10
Teaching Language Skills I-II	26	52	13	26	3	6	0	0	8	16
Literature and Language Teaching I-II	6	12	11	22	12	24	8	16	13	26
Second Foreign Language	8	16	13	26	11	22	1	2	5	10
Drama	19	38	9	18	8	16	3	6	11	22
Field Study	6	12	7	14	9	18	6	12	22	44
Materials Adaptation and Development	26	52	10	20	8	16	1	2	5	10

Measurement and Evaluation in Language Teaching	25	50	15	30	5	10	2	4	3	6
Practicum	37	74	6	12	6	12	1	2	0	0

Table 4 shows that majority of the teachers think Contextual Grammar I-II, Advanced Reading and Writing I-II, Listening and Pronunciation I-II, Oral Presentation Skills I-II, Linguistics I-II, Approaches to ELT I-II, Language Acquisition, Teaching English to Young Learners I-II, Materials Adaptation and Development, Measurement and Evaluation in Language Teaching and Practicum courses are quite useful for their teaching experiences currently. Furthermore, interestingly, no participants think that Language Acquisition, Teaching English to Young Learners I-II and Teaching Language Skills I-II courses are useless. These courses are thought to be more or less useful for the teachers in their professions. Courses like Lexicology, English Literature I-II, Translation, Scientific Research Techniques and Second Foreign language are thought to be less useful compared to the other courses. Some participants have indicated that they did not take particular courses during their bachelor's degree. Literature and Language Teaching I-II, Drama and Field Study courses were not taken by most of the teachers participated in the study.

3.2. Language Teachers' Thoughts According to Gender

In order to find out whether English language teachers' thoughts on the usefulness of the courses vary according to their gender or not, Independent Samples T-test analysis was done. The results of the analysis are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Teachers' Thought According to Gender

Gender	N	X	S	sd	T	p
Male	11	56.27	16.6	48	.836	.407
Female	39	52.28	13.1			

Table 5 shows that there is not a significant difference between teachers' thoughts on the usefulness of the courses according to their gender [$t_{(48)} = .836, p > .05$].

3.3. Language Teachers' Thoughts According to Their Teaching Levels

In order to find out whether or not English language teachers' thoughts on the usefulness of the courses vary according to the levels that they are currently teaching, Independent Samples T-test analysis was done. The results of the analysis are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Teachers' Thought According to Teaching Levels

Gender	N	X	S	sd	T	p
University	45	54.55	13.8	48	2.20	.032
Primary School	5	40.60	7.4			

Table 6 shows that there is a significant difference between teachers' thoughts on the usefulness of the courses according to the levels that they are teaching English [$t(48) = 2.20, p < .05$]. English teachers teaching at university level ($X = 54.55$) think that courses offered by the universities' foreign language education departments are useful to their current teaching experiences more than the teachers working in primary schools ($X = 40.60$).

3.4. Teachers' Suggestions for the Curriculum

This part includes the categories constituted out of the answers given to the open ended question in the questionnaire. The answers are categorized into four titles and the sentences given for each category are grouped under each title.

3.4.1. Courses that need to be given more weight to

The participants have indicated that more time should be given to some lessons compared to the other fifteen of the teachers said there should be more lessons based on practice. While Drama and Methodology courses were indicated by 3 teachers to be emphasized more in the curriculum, Oral Expressions and Public Speaking, Scientific Research Techniques, Materials Adaptation and Development, Measurement and Evaluation in Language Teaching and Scientific Research Techniques were each named once by the participants.

3.4.2. Courses that need to be reduced or removed

Some participants have stated that some lessons should either be removed or reduced in the curriculum, as they believe that these lessons do not make great contribution to their professions. Seven of the teachers indicated that lessons which are based on English Literature should be removed or the time allocated for these lessons should be reduced. Also, 5 teachers found translation courses not quite useful and stated that they should be removed from the curriculum. Even though there were some teachers who have stated that Drama lessons are useful and should be given more time in the previous section, 2 participants wrote that Drama should not be included in the curriculum. Similarly, Scientific Research Methods lesson was said to be removed by one of the teachers. Second Foreign Language and Linguistics also were each indicated once to be removed.

3.4.3. Courses that needed to be added to the curriculum

According to the English teachers' answers, courses like Teaching English to Adults, Technology Use in ELT, Creative Teaching, Culture and Authentic Materials in ELT are proposed to be added to the curriculum of English Language Teaching Departments.

3.4.4. The effectiveness of lecturers

Apart from all these changes offered for the courses themselves, 3 of the participants have stated that lecturers who give these courses should be effective and efficient in order for the courses to be successful and useful for the future.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

In the present study, it is aimed to have an understanding about English teachers' ideas about the efficiency of the courses available in ELT programs offered by YÖK (Council of Higher Education) in terms of their professional life.

According to the questionnaire results, it has been found that, the courses which are related to language proficiency such as Contextual Grammar I-II, Advanced Reading and Writing I-II, Listening and Pronunciation rather than teaching the language are considered to be useful for English teachers. This result shows that English teachers expect the training program to provide them expected language proficiency at university level. On the other hand, it is open to discussion that whether the teacher should learn how to teach English or English itself.

In line with this concept, Johnson & Freeman (1998) state that, L2 teacher education should include not only disciplinary or subject matter knowledge defining the structure of language and how it is used but also the content of L2 teaching meaning "what and how language is actually taught in L2 classrooms". As Murdoch (1994) maintains, that teachers' confidence is mostly based on his or her degree of language proficiency. Our questionnaire results have been found to be consistent with the researchers in the field.

As the questionnaire results show, English language teachers find the courses which are directly related to their teaching experience in the class such as Oral Presentation Skills I-II, Linguistics I-II, Approaches to ELT I-II, Language Acquisition, Teaching English to Young Learners I-II, Materials Adaptation and Development, Measurement and Evaluation in Language Teaching and Practicum find useful for their current career. According to Graves (2008), pre-service teachers need to engage in practice. This practice can be considered in two ways. First concept is classroom practice including opportunities to observe teaching to prepare for teaching, to teach, to reflect on it, to analyze it, and finally to make some inferences from this experience and learn something from it. The concept mentioned here has been tried to be provided to the pre-service English language teachers by means of practicum courses available in the first year and fourth year of ELT undergraduate program. Qualitative data results also show that English language teachers think that Practicum courses need to be given more weight.

As one teacher said "I think, Practicum course should be given more importance and it should be longer than one year because when you are in the class as a teacher you need the experience of teaching more rather than the theories taught at the university."

Another teacher also said Practicum course should be started to be given in the freshmen year and it should be applied in a more efficient and useful way. In line with these views, one of the participants stated: "Only Practicum course should be available for the pre-service teachers instead of other courses in the senior year of the undergraduate program.". This participant also made a contribution by saying that "There should be a salary for practicum to ensure motivation for pre-service teachers." Another participant mentioned the credits of Practicum course should be increased and it should be available in the curriculum for four years for its being more effective.

Moreover, one of the English teachers participating in our research stated: “The credits allocated for courses based on second language learning theories should be added to the courses based on implementations of those theories in language teaching. In that way, those courses might serve to the expected benefits of the ELT undergraduate program. For example, the practicum course which I took throughout only one semester was more effective than the methodology courses which were available in two semesters for my future career.” The issues mentioned above show that, the qualitative and quantitative data results are consistent related to the courses which are found to be beneficial and the courses which should be given more weight.

To continue with the quantitative data results, as it is stated in the results section, all of the participants think that Language Acquisition, Teaching English to Young Learners I-II and Teaching Language Skills I-II courses are more or less useful. In line with these results, one of the participants stated that “Teaching to Young Learners should be more effective because most of the graduates of Faculty of Education work in the primary schools. There should be even a separate department called “English Teaching in Primary Level”. Additionally, in terms of overall results, English teachers teaching at university level are more satisfied with the courses offered by the universities’ foreign language education departments than the teachers working in primary schools. In line with the results mentioned before, it is possible to think that, the courses available in the ELT departments aren’t sufficient enough for working in primary schools especially in state schools. This inference has been made considering the available sources and materials in state schools. The book covered compulsorily in primary level doesn’t seem to be in line with the qualifications mentioned in the undergraduate courses.

According to the questionnaire results there is not a significant difference between the female and male teachers’ considerations about the efficiency of the courses. The considerable ratio of the female participants compared to the male participants, as it stated in the limitations part, might have given a rise to this result.

Apart from the findings mentioned above, there have been some concurrent ideas about the effectiveness of the teachers although they weren’t expected to do so. For example, one of the teachers stated instructors’ contribution to the course is much more important than the course content. He/she also stated some courses are found to be beneficial thanks to the instructors. Another teacher said: “...While administering the questionnaire I realized that, the efficiency of the courses is closely related to the lecturers’ qualifications. At the same time, lecturers’ expertise to convey their messages is one of the most important factors for the course being beneficial. I think, Educational Technologies should also be included in the curriculum. The content of the courses like Introduction to Computer and Materials Development seem to be a bit old-fashioned. The subjects covered in these courses such as how to use Word and Excel are one of the basic things which an average fourth grader can do easily. Instead of this content, a more extensive educational technology’s course, covering tasks ranging from

preparing video and audio clips to live performance and use of social media in ELT as well as online content design, should be available in the curriculum.” This finding is consistent with Ekşi and Capa Aydın’s study (2013). According to this study, highest degree of the need in terms of professional development was for “New theories and practices of ELT” followed by “Use of technology in ELT”. This result shows that the training in terms of integrating technology in language teaching isn’t sufficient to meet the needs of the in-service teachers.

Finally, there are some courses that the teachers think need to be reduced or removed from the curriculum. For example, one teacher said: “Literature and Linguistics might be selective courses. I also think that, English Literature, Translation and Research Skills courses are not necessary for English teaching profession”. Another teacher stated: “Translation courses should be removed from the ELT curriculum. Instead of these courses, providing practice to the pre-service teachers should be added to the curriculum. At the same time, English Literature shouldn’t be given so much weight because integrating literature into classroom practice is very challenging”.

In conclusion, Overall analysis of qualitative and quantitative data findings has shown that the reflections of in-service teachers in pre-service training program courses should be taken into account and the curriculum should be redesigned. As stated in the results and discussion parts of the present study, it might be efficient for pre-service English teachers to have courses based on teaching experience. On the other hand, in-service teachers find the courses about language proficiency useful for their career. That means English teachers don’t have the facilities to be equipped with the language proficiency at high school level although they are experts in their fields. Current university placement exam based on multiple choice questions might have given a lead to this situation. The education given at high school system and ELT training programs are independent from each other. However, it might be a good chance for pre-service English teachers to have had the pre-requisite training for ELT programs at high school level. In this way, they might focus on how to teach the language rather than the language itself. Practicum courses are regarded as effective by most of the English teachers. This result has drawn us to the conclusion that, practicum courses should be applied in a more organized way. All in all, the pre-service teachers should be trained in a way that they will be able to use the knowledge and experience they gain at university in their professional career.

5. Limitations and further research

This study is limited with 50 teachers who teach at primary and university level. For further research, more and equally-weighted number of participants can be reached including high school teachers to generalize the results of the study (the significant difference in teachers’ thoughts according to teaching level). In this study, female participants outnumbered the male participants naturally since this is the pattern of English language teachers in Turkey. In further research, instead of random sampling, quota sampling can be applied and more equal numbers of participants can attend the study.

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The role of Mandarin speakers' mimicry ability in their accurate pronunciation of French

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Abstract

Language learners with higher aptitude scores are predicted to be better able to learn a foreign language than those with lower aptitude scores. In the aspect of pronunciation, an individual's mimicry ability is revealed to be a significant predictor regarding their accuracy in the pronunciation of a foreign language (Hinton, 2013; Purcell et al., 1980). The effect of other variables, nevertheless, may not be ignored. For instance, greater foreign language experience is predicted to be able to enhance language learners' foreign language proficiency (Flege, 1995). None of the previous studies investigated whether language learners with different language aptitude perform differently with the same amount of foreign language experience. The present study, therefore, investigated L1-Mandarin speakers' mimicry ability as an individual difference that predicts their accuracy in the pronunciation of French after receiving the same amount of French instructions. Forty-four adult L1-Mandarin speakers' mimicry ability was tested before they were exposed to French classes. Their French pronunciation was tested 3 times after the mimicry test. That is, at the end of the 4th month (test 1), at the end of the 10th month (test 2), and at the end of the 16th month (test 3) after the mimicry test. According to the results, their mimicry ability displayed significant effect on their accuracy in French pronunciation in test 1 and test 2, but did not show significant effect on their performance in test 3.

Keywords aptitude, mimicry ability, accurate pronunciation, foreign language experience

1. Introduction

Language learners' accurate pronunciation of a foreign language is revealed to be influenced by a wide range of variables, such as L1 knowledge, onset age of learning the foreign language, gender difference, etc. (Piske, MacKay and Flege, 2001). Some of the variables can be controlled, whereas others are not within the controllable range. For instance, as an inborn ability, language learners' aptitude in the learning of a foreign language may not be controlled. Language learning aptitude is defined as how well an individual can learn a foreign language in a given period of time and under given conditions. It is found to be relatively stable once a person matures (Parry & Stansfield, 1990). Language learners with higher degree of aptitude are predicted to be able to do better in foreign language learning in all circumstances than those with lower degree of aptitude (Robinson, 2005). Language learning aptitude can be assessed with relevant tests, such as Pimsleur's Language Battery (Pimsleur, 1961) and Carrol & Sapon's (1957). The majority of the tests assess language learners' memory, sensitivity to grammatical distinctions and phonetic coding² that affect their capability in

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² Phonetic coding tests assess language learners' ability to recognize sounds and from association between them and their written form so that they can later be recalled (Hinton, 2013).

the acquisition of a foreign language as a whole. Language learners' mimicry aptitude is revealed to be a significant and independent predictor for their accurate pronunciation of a foreign language (Hinton, 2013; Purcell & Suter, 1980). For instance, in Purcell & Suter (1980), mimicry ability was put only secondary to the influence of language learners' L1 knowledge in determining the degree of their perceived foreign accent. The significant role of mimicry ability in the pronunciation of a foreign language is further illustrated by the recent study conducted by Hinton (2013). Two groups of participants joined in the study. They were 20 to 22 year-old Polish speakers who had been studying English as a foreign language in Poland. None of them had previously studied French. Thus their mimicry ability was tested in terms of repeating French words and phrases. Their accuracy in English pronunciation was then tested. The overall results indicate that the participants' mimicry ability is a significant predictor for their accurate pronunciation of English as a foreign language. However, the second group performed much poorer than the first group in the accuracy test, despite that the two groups of participants displayed similar levels of mimicry ability. It might be caused by the fact that apart from aptitude factors, other variables may have displayed influence on the participants' English pronunciation, such as gender difference, personalities, the ways and amount of time that the learners spent in English study, etc. Nevertheless, Hinton (2013) provides us with an effective method to test language learners' aptitude in the accurate pronunciation of a foreign language. This method is employed in the present study.

In addition to aptitude, there are many other factors that may have influence on language learners' accurate pronunciation of a foreign language. One of the most important factors would be language learners' experience in learning a target foreign language. For instance, Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model (SLM) indicates that greater L2 experience contributes to enhance the learners' capability in producing L2 speech sounds. SLM predicts that L2 speech learning is a long journey. It requires a large amount of native-speakers' input to success (Flege, 2003). Numerous experiments have provided supporting evidence for this prediction (i.e. Mortreux, 2008; Bohn & Flege, 1992; MacKain, Best, and Strange, 1981). Nonetheless, the importance of language experience may not neutralize the significant role of language learners' aptitude in language learning. At least SLM did not provide us with relevant evidence.

None of the previous studies examined whether language learners of different levels of aptitude perform differently after receiving the same amount of foreign language input. The present study, therefore, aims to investigate the role of aptitude in foreign language learning. Specifically, this paper reports on a longitudinal study on the effect of language learners' mimicry ability on their accurate pronunciation of French during a period of 18 months. It explores whether L1-Mandarin speakers of different degrees of aptitude in language learning perform differently after receiving the same amount of French input.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Forty-four native Mandarin speakers volunteered to join in the study (M=20.27, SD=0.36, 23 female and 21 male). They were the 3rd year university students who were doing English for their Bachelor's degree in China. As English majors, they were required by the university to study another foreign language in addition to L2-English. They chose to study French as their 3rd language. Before the present study, none of the participants had any knowledge on French or ever traveled/lived abroad. They received 4 hours' French classes per week. The teacher was a native French speaker. She had been working in China for 12 years, and could speak Mandarin very well.

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Mimicry test

The mimicry test was carried out 1 week before the participants started the French class. The testing method proposed by Hinton (2013) was employed in the present study. That is, the participants were asked to repeat a series of words and phrases of unfamiliar foreign languages. The stimulus words/phrases adopted in the present study were words and phrases from Spanish and German. All the participants reported that they had no knowledge on the two languages. The stimuli included 10 Spanish and 10 German words/short phrases. Each stimulus was read once by native speakers of the languages (stimuli of Spanish were produced by a female speaker, stimuli of German were produced by a male speaker), thus yielding to a total number of 20 stimuli. The recordings of the stimuli were then cut and merged in a randomized order with 5-second interval in between 2 stimuli, so that the participants could repeat each stimulus during the 5-second interval in the mimicry test.

The mimicry test was carried out in a quiet room. The recording of the stimuli was played with a laptop. They were asked to repeat what they heard immediately after hearing each word/ phrase. They were tested individually and were recorded with a high quality recorder. As mentioned in Hinton (2013), the validity of mimicry test may compromise if the participants are too shy to mimic what they heard. In order to make the participants relax and do their best in the test, they were left alone in the testing room during the task after the investigator turned the recorder on. Moreover, they were told that their mimicry performance would have no consequences for them. The recordings were then transferred to the laptop.

A 5-score Likert scale was employed in the assessment of the participants' mimicry performance (0=no attempt or totally unrecognizable pronunciation, 5=very good pronunciation). Therefore, each participant received an overall score out of 100. The raters were the same speakers who produced the stimuli. They were asked to do the assessment individually in their own place. For the raters' record, the randomized recording of their own production was sent to them together with the participants' recordings in the test. The raters were asked to assess the words of their own native language. That is, the Spanish speaker (who was also the rater) assessed the participants' mimicking of Spanish words/ phrases. Likewise, the German

speaker (rater) was asked to assess the participants' pronunciation of German. The assessed results were then sent back to the investigator.

2.2.2. French pronunciation test

The participants' accuracy in French pronunciation was tested 3 times. Test 1 was carried out 4 months after the participants started French study, which was also the end of the first semester of their 3rd academic year. Test 2 was conducted at the end of the second semester of their 3rd academic year, which was 10 months after they started French learning. Test 3 was carried out at the end of the 1st semester of their 4th academic year, when they had been learning French for 16 months.

The participants were asked to do a read-aloud task in the tests. Twenty French items employed in Pimsleur (1961) were adopted as the stimuli in the present study (see Appendix). As Pimsleur (1961) indicates, the 20 items represent some of the significant elements of French pronunciation. Specifically, 12 different French vowels were embedded in the first 12 items. In addition, the pronunciation of the silent h could be tested with item 14. Oppositions of Jean/Jeanne, bon/bonne, marin/marine, fille/ville, pays/soleil, jeu/joue, which were found to be difficult for non-native French learners to learn, were embedded in items 15-20 (Pimsleur, 1961). The tests were carried out individually in a quiet classroom. In each test, the participants were asked to read the stimuli 3 times each. They were given enough time for preparation. The recording was started when the participants said they were ready. None of the participants reported that there was an item that they did not know. Their readings were auditorily recorded with a high quality recorder (Roland-03). The recordings were then transferred to a laptop.

The participants were also asked to finish a questionnaire by the end of each test (see Appendix). It aimed to investigate the influence of relevant variables, if any, on their pronunciation performance (i.e., the amount of time spent in French reading, writing, listening, and speaking in their spare time).

When the tests were finished, each participant's recordings in the 3 tests were put into one sound file. The sound files and the texts of the stimulus words were then sent to 6 native French speakers³ (3 female, 3 male) for assessment. The raters were asked to assess the participants' pronunciation with a 5-score Likert scale (0= totally unrecognizable pronunciation, 5= native-like pronunciation). Given that each sentence was read for 3 times by an individual participant, the raters were asked to choose the best version of pronunciation for assessment. They were not told that the recordings were from 3 different tests, so as to avoid potential bias. The raters did the assessment separately in their own place, and then sent the assessed results to the investigator. Individual participant's scores in each test were then summed up and divided by 6. Therefore, each participant received an overall score out of 100 in each test (20 sentences*5 scores*6 raters/6). The reliability and coherence of the raters' assessments were tested with Cronbach's Alpha. The results indicated that the raters' assessment was highly reliable and coherent ($\alpha \geq 0.90$).

³ The raters were paid to do the assessment. They were teaching French in a vacation school in China.

3. Findings

3.1. Mimicry test results

The participants' mimicry scores ranged from 40 to 78 out of 100 ($M=64.42$, $SD=0.96$). Thirty-one out of 44 participants' mimicry scores were between 50 and 70. Six of the rest participants' mimicry scores were above 70 (male=4, female=2). Another 7 participants' mimicry scores were below 50 (male=3, female=4). An interesting finding was that, according to the data obtained from the questionnaire, the 6 participants whose mimicry scores were over 70 were found to have better academic performance in their L2-English study. Four of them won several prizes in English speech competition held by the university and/or the government. Nonetheless, the 7 participants whose scores were below 100 had medium academic performance in their English tests in the last 2 years. The findings were in accordance to that in Hinton (2013). That is, there were wide differences among individual participants regarding their mimicry ability. Similar to that in the present study, those who were assessed to have better 'music ear' in Hinton (2013) also reported to have better academic performance, such as those who won prizes in recitation competitions.

In addition, the difference of the male and female participants' mean scores in the mimicry test was found to be statistically insignificant in the present study ($p>0.05$). In Hinton (2013), however, the female participants were revealed to have better mimicry performance than the male. It might be caused by the comparatively smaller sample size in Hinton (2013) compared to that of the present study.

3.2. French pronunciation test results

In test 1, the participants' scores ranged from 44 to 82 ($M=62.46$, $SD=1.90$). Thirty-four of the participants achieved the accuracy scores between 50 and 70. Eight participants' accuracy scores were above 70. Five among the 8 participants' scores were above 70. Another 3 of them received 66, 66 and 62 respectively. The rest 2 participants' pronunciation performance was not satisfactory, which were 44 and 46 respectively. It was found that the 2 participants' scores were both 40 in the mimicry test. For the majority of the participants, it seems that the better they did in the mimicry test, the higher accuracy scores they received in the pronunciation of French in test 1. In order to illustrate the observed phenomenon, the participants' scores in the mimicry test and pronunciation test 1 were coded into SPSS for the Correlation Test. It turned out that their mimicry ability was significantly correlated to their accuracy in the pronunciation of French in test 1 ($r=0.89$, $p<0.05$). In other words, the participants' better mimicry ability was associated with more accurate French pronunciation in test 1.

Findings in test 2 were similar to that in test 1. Specifically, their scores ranged from 52 to 84 ($M=68.12$, $SD=1.67$). The majority of the participants' scores were between 50 and 70 ($n=32$). Nine participants' accuracy scores were above 70, 6 of them received the scores above 70 in the mimicry test. The rest 3 participants' French pronunciation scores were 52, 56 and 56 respectively. Their mimicry scores were 40, 40 and 48. The participants' scores in test 2 and mimicry test were coded into SPSS for the Correlation

Test. According to the results, the same as that in test 1, the participants' mimicry scores were significantly correlated to their pronunciation performance in test 2 ($r=0.76$, $p<0.05$).

In contrast, the findings in test 3 were totally different from that in test 1 and test 2. The participants' scores in the pronunciation of French ranged from 68 to 94 ($M=76.46$, $SD=0.93$). Twenty-eight out of 44 participants' scores were between 70 and 80. Ten participants received the scores between 80 and 90. Another 4 participants' scores were above 90. Among the 4 participants, 2 of them ranged tops in the mimicry test. Another 2 of them, however, had medium performance in the mimicry test. The rest 2 participants' scores were both 68, despite the fact that their mimicry scores ranged in the medium level among all the participants (60 and 64 respectively). The correlation test results indicate that the correlation between their mimicry performance and French pronunciation in test 3 were insignificant ($r=0.39$, $p=0.07$).

According to the results, the participants' mimicry may have exerted an influence on their French pronunciation in the first 10 months of French study. However, this effect seemed to be weakened, or neutralized with the increased experience of French study. This speculation may be further illustrated by their improved accuracy in French pronunciation across the 3 tests. It was found that their improved scores from test 1 to test 2, and from test 2 to test 3 were both statistically insignificant ($p>0.05$). Their improvement from test 1 to test 3, however, was revealed to be statistically significant ($p<0.05$). This finding may have provided supporting evidence for SLM's prediction. That is, greater language experience facilitates language learners' acquisition of the target language (Flege, 1995).

Data collected with questionnaires explored other relevant variables' influence on the participants' performance in the 3 tests. According to the data, all the participants expressed some degrees of interest in French study. The participants were all Mandarin speakers, who started French study at the same/very similar age, taught by the same teacher, with the same textbook, in the same language environment. Therefore, the influence these variables were not taken into consideration. Instead, the amount of time and the ways that the participants spent in French study were investigated. Specifically, their total amount of time spent in French reading, speaking, listening and writing was calculated from the beginning of French study to test 1, test 2, and test 3. It turned out that during the term time, the majority of the participants read and listen to the dialogues/vocabulary items on the textbook for about 0.5-2 hours per week. They spent additional 0.5-2 hours in doing the exercises in the textbook in terms of writing. During the summer/winter holidays, few of the participants reported that they did not spend any time in French study. The rest of them spent about 0.5-5 hours per week in French reading/listening/speaking/writing, depending on individual difference.

Repeated-measure ANOVA was carried out to investigate whether the amount of time that the participants spent in reading, speaking, listening, writing French, and the gender difference displayed significant influence on their pronunciation performance. According to the results, the amount of time that the participants spent in reading and listening to French have

played significant effect on the participants' improved accuracy in the pronunciation of French ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, those who spent more time in reading and listening French were found to have gained significantly more improvement than those who spent less time in doing so. The amount of time that they spent in speaking⁴ and writing, as well as gender difference was found to be statistically insignificant for their French pronunciation ($p > 0.05$).

4. Conclusions

This study examined the influence of language learners' mimicry ability on their accurate pronunciation of a foreign language. L1-Mandarin speakers' mimicry ability was tested before they start French study. Their accuracy in French pronunciation was tested 3 times in a period of 16 months. During the period of time, they received the same amount of French input in classes, though there were individual differences in the amount of time spent in French learning after class. Their mimicry ability was revealed to be a significant predictor on their French pronunciation in the first 10 months of French study. Nevertheless, language experience seemed have weakened, or neutralized its influence in a longer period of time: their French pronunciation was insignificantly correlated to their mimicry ability after 16 months' French study. Therefore, the role of language learners' mimicry ability may be significant in the early stage concerning their accurate pronunciation of a foreign language, but may be weakened/neutralized with the increasing experience in the target foreign language. Particularly, reading and listening to the target language may facilitate their accurate pronunciation of the language.

The present study suffers from some limitations. For instance, there might be some deficiencies regarding the mimicry test. As mentioned by Hinton (2013), there might be potential bias that the participants may be too shy to mimic the words/phrases. To minimize the potential bias, the investigator did not present when the participants were doing the mimicry test. Nevertheless, it was still not sure to what extent the tested results showed the participants' mimicry ability. Future studies in this field may do some improvement in mimicry tests.

⁴ The participants' amount of time spent in French speaking was very similar from one to another. This was because they only had the chance to speak French in French classes.

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Appendix

Stimuli for mimicry test:

Spanish: gracias, nosotros, Buenos días, Estoy bien, Mucho gusto, Por favor, Hasta luego, el aeropuerto, la iglesia, la hospital

German: Einverstanden, Das ist gut, Kein problem, richtig, Bitte schön, Auf Wiedersehen ,
Chinesisch, Schlecht, Fünfzehn, Hundert

Stimuli for pronunciation test (adopted from Pimsleur, 1961):

1. Il est fou.
2. Il est beau.
3. Nous sommes dans la salle.
4. J'ai vu le bébé cet été.
5. Qu'est-ce qu'il a bu?
6. Regardez le feu.
7. J'en ai neuf.
8. Il me le dit.
9. Ce train est lent.
10. Qu'est-ce qu'ils font?
11. Serve le pain.
12. Paris est grand.
13. Il est à la maison de son oncle.
14. Quelle jolie harmonie!
15. Où est Jean? / Où est Jeanne?
16. Le vin est bon. / La viande est bonne.
17. Mon frère est marin / Il est dans la marine.
18. J'ai vu la file. / Elle est en ville.
19. Quel pays! / Il y a du soleil!
20. C'est un jeu. Je joue.

Questionnaire:

Name: Age: Gender: Mother tongue:

1. What were your scores in the last 2 academic years' final English exams?
2. Have you ever joined any English competition? If yes, have you won any prize?
3. During the academic term time/holidays, do you have any chance to French on a daily basis?
If yes, tell the details.
4. During the time between last test of the experiment (mimicry test/test 1/test 2) and now, on average, how much time did you spend in French reading, speaking, listening, writing? And in which ways?
Days per week:
Hours per day: