DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN THE PRACTICUM: A CASE STUDY IN TURKEY

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Introduction

The importance of English as a global language (Crystal 1997) is rising every day, and this increasingly necessitates good quality initial preparation for non-native speaker teachers in the school system in countries like Turkey. In this connection, this paper attempts to investigate university-based supervisors', school-based mentors' and student-teachers' own perceptions of pre-service English language teachers' strong and weak areas of language teaching practice in a Turkish context, in the hope that a comparative evaluation of their performance may shed light on where we stand in terms of initial language teacher education in a country where English is learned and taught as a foreign language.

What goes wrong in practice teaching and why?

This paper was initially inspired by the common complaints of the university-based supervisors and school-based mentors who participated in this study in relation to pre-service teachers' failing to meet their expectations during the practicum, particularly regarding their language proficiency skills. Prospective teachers' failing to meet the supervisors' and mentors' expectations, and in some cases their own as well, may stem from a variety of reasons. To start with, they begin their pre-service education with various expectations, beliefs and attitudes. All students experience a great deal of concern and anxiety regarding the school environment, their roles, relationships with mentors and most importantly the effect of all of these on their classroom teaching performance (Hastings 2004). The difference between prospective teachers' expectations and the actual reality of a school environment could be experienced, in some cases, as a shock (Stokking et al. 2003). This might be due, in this context, to the fact that student-teachers' entire teaching experience, prior to their actual school experience and practice teaching courses, is confined to microteaching sessions at the university. In most microteaching sessions the role of language students is acted by

classmates. However, no matter how hard one tries to simulate a real classroom it is still an artificial context in comparison with the language classrooms for young learners in which student-teachers are expected to teach after their graduation. Thus, microteaching can give the student-teachers a false confidence, leading them to think that everything will run as smoothly when they are teaching in a real classroom. On the other hand, microteaching, has an awareness-raising effect for students (I'anson et al 2003) and is also important in that it is the first teaching experience they have.

Reflective teaching can have a very strong impact on professional development (Schön 1983, Baird 1992), helping student-teachers realise their strong and weak areas, giving them a chance to improve, and thus feel more confident. Weiss and Weiss (2001) see reflective thinking as a special way of thinking about action and experience and as a process of cognitive inquiry. Indeed, reflective teaching, as explained by Gelter (2003), does not tend to emerge spontaneously unless something goes wrong or we face failure. If, then, reflective teaching does not emerge spontaneously, it should be developed and adopted in the course of time as the student-teachers gain experience. It is both university-based supervisors' and school-based mentors' responsibility to encourage student-teachers to inquire and think reflectively as early as possible in their teaching career, not only when they are faced with failure, but at all times. In this connection, the present study aims to contribute to the enhancement of opportunities for student-teachers to reflect on their teaching experience quite early on in their professional life, indeed before they have even graduated. Although post-observation meetings give university-based supervisors and school-based mentors an idea about students' successful areas and those areas needing improvement, it is worth investigating just how similar the three parties are in their perceptions of student-teachers' strengths and weaknesses, and in particular – in the context under investigation – to confirm whether there is a gap between the concerns of supervising faculty and mentors and those of the student-teachers themselves.

Background information

Pre-service teachers in the chosen language teaching programme are expected to teach at least four 45-minute lessons at cooperating secondary schools before their teaching is assessed in the presence of their mentors and university-based supervisors. When the assessed teaching session is over, the three parties come together to give

immediate feedback to the student-teachers about their teaching. This meeting is followed by a post-observation session conducted at a later date by the supervising teacher back at the university, in which each student-teacher has a chance to discuss their teaching in detail by focusing on their strengths and weaknesses individually. These meetings often reveal how student-teachers fail to meet expectations as far as their teaching is concerned.

Purpose of the Study

As stated above this study was inspired by the unfulfilled expectations of the supervising faculty and the mentors who participated in this study. Since there are three parties involved in practice teaching (i.e. university-based supervisors (USs), school-based mentors (SMs) and student-teachers), it seemed to be significant to investigate further whether the views of the three parties were shared or not.

In order to investigate this question, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to the three groups. It consisted of two items:

1. What are pre-service teachers' weaknesses with regard to teaching English during practicum?
2. What are pre-service teachers' strengths with regard to teaching English during practicum?

Data

In the present study, data came from three different sources:

- 6 university-based supervisors working in the English Language Teaching programme of a Turkish state university
- 30 4th year pre-service teachers in the same programme
- 14 cooperating teachers acting as mentors in the private school where the pre-service teachers had their practicum

In the questionnaires given to all three parties, supervisors and mentors were asked to state the weaknesses and the strengths of student-teachers they had been working with since the beginning of the 2004-2005 academic year. Student-teachers, on the other

hand, were asked to list their own weaknesses and strengths in practice teaching. The questions were open-ended and the three parties who answered the questionnaire stated the strengths and weaknesses in their own words rather than ticking items given in a list, since the latter approach would have imposed ideas that they might not otherwise have had. When the questionnaires were analysed the listed strengths and weaknesses were coded into categories and the results were listed according to ascending frequency of occurrence.

Results

The following table lists the rank-ordered top five categories according to the frequency of occurrence for University Supervisors (USs), School-based Mentors (SMs) and Student-teachers.

University Supervisors	School-based Mentors	Student-teachers
Strengths	**Strengths**	**Strengths**
1. Materials preparation	1. Materials preparation	1. Establishing rapport
2. Establishing rapport	2. Motivation	2. Materials preparation
3. Lesson planning	3. Establishing rapport	3. Effective use of voice
4. Variety of activities	4. Lesson planning	4. Monitoring groups
5. Motivation	5. Classroom management	5. Good explanation skills
Weaknesses	**Weaknesses**	**Weaknesses**
1. Inaccurate pronunciation and grammar	1. Inaccurate pronunciation and grammar	1. Dealing with problem students
2. No error correction	2. Classroom management	2. Anxiety to teach
3. Unclear instructions	3. Lack of self-confidence	3. Ineffective use of voice
4. Poor time management	4. Poor time management	4. Unable to take immediate decisions
5. Lack of fluency	5. Unclear instructions	5. Unclear instructions/classroom language

Table 1: The top five items listed by University supervisors, School-based mentors, and Student-teachers

A triadic analysis of the strengths (summarized in Table 1 above) indicates that all parties agree that student-teachers are very good at preparing visually attractive, colourful and creative materials appealing to students' needs and interests, catering to all learning styles and all types of intelligences. Secondly, they agree that student-teachers are able to create a positive and accepting learning atmosphere in class and to establish rapport with students. Their good interactional skills in the classroom are directly related to their motivation and enthusiasm in teaching, which is the next item

USs and SMs agree on. Although student-teachers themselves did not list 'motivation' as their strength, it is easily observable in their creativity and effort regarding their materials and activities preparation. Another point not mentioned by student-teachers is good lesson planning which emerged as a strength in their teaching as stated by both SMs and USs. Among the most frequently stated strong areas of their teaching student-teachers included monitoring group work, effective use of voice and good explanation skills.

The most frequently cited weakness of student-teachers' as perceived by SMs and USs was inaccurate pronunciation and grammar, totally unmentioned by student-teachers themselves. The next point both parties agreed on was student-teachers' poor time management, as they were often not able to cover the lesson plan, unnecessarily extending one of the phases of the lesson (e.g. warm-up) or the activities in the lesson, or in some cases finished early and looked in panic at the US and SM sitting at the rear of the classroom and evaluating their teaching. Although student-teachers did not directly mention poor time management at all, they did express their general inflexibility by stating that they were not able to take immediate decisions regarding the lesson plan or were not prepared to cope with unexpected situations arising during the lesson. As for general classroom management skills, student-teachers were found to be unsuccessful by SMs. The only item shared as a weakness by all parties was 'unclear instructions'. Yet, not all the student-teachers agreed on this point; 10 out of 30 students indicated that they had clear classroom language and were able to give clear instructions, while 8 thought that this was a weakness in their teaching.

Teacher candidates also thought that they experienced anxiety and felt uncomfortable before and during the lesson and they were not able to use their voice effectively while teaching. Although the US's and SMs did not make any direct comments about students' anxiety, SMs indicated that student-teachers seemed to have a lack of confidence, which could account for their anxiety and the inability to control their voice.

With specific regard to student-teachers' language proficiency, we have seen that both the SMs and the USs thought that inaccurate pronunciation and grammar was the most common weakness, while lack of fluency was also mentioned by USs. Another weakness stated by USs was that student-teachers failed to correct the

students' errors and give feedback when they asked questions during their teaching session.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicated that student-teachers were aware of their strengths in materials preparation, motivation and enthusiasm, creating a relaxed and a pleasant classroom atmosphere, and establishing good rapport with students. These points were all confirmed by SMs and USs, as well as the student-teachers themselves.

Other results, however, indicate contradictions. One-third of the student-teachers found themselves strong in monitoring group-work, using their voice effectively and having good explanation skills, assessments which were not confirmed by the mentors or supervisors at all. To start with monitoring groups, in most of the observed assessed teaching and microteaching sessions, it seemed that student-teachers enjoyed walking among the groups and checking students' work, as this gave them a sense of being teacher-like. However, they seem to have a misconception about monitoring group-work in that for most of them 'monitoring' means simply walking among the groups and giving a very quick glance at students' work or even pretending to do so. The fact that the same student-teachers were not found very successful in giving feedback and correcting errors by the supervisors and the mentors may additionally indicate a misconception about group monitoring. A point which was not mentioned in the questionnaires but often observed by USs and SMs is the student-teachers' tendency to stand in one corner of the classroom and not move around the classroom comfortably during whole class teaching. This could perhaps account for student-teachers' finding themselves successful in monitoring group work; group-work activities are the only phase of the lesson when they can move around the classroom very comfortably. Some students say, upon being criticised for not using the classroom space effectively, that when they are anxious and nervous about their teaching they cannot do more than one thing at a time, such as explaining a point, asking questions and moving around at the same time.

The next two points, effective voice control and clear instructions could only reflect the strengths of a very small number of students, probably one or two students in every 20, simply because teachers and supervisors think otherwise. These points are

among the most frequently stated weaknesses of our students. As mentioned above, for some students this was also stated as a weakness by the students themselves.

The only weakness agreed upon by the three parties is student-teachers' failing to give clear instructions. In spite of their preparation and possible rehearsals, it is observed that they often fail to give clear instructions as they do not have a very good command of the English language and thus tend to make lengthy explanations.

As for the weaknesses perceived by the students themselves, what is noteworthy is the fact that none of students realised that 'inaccurate pronunciation' and language-related skills were major weaknesses of theirs. Either they simply did not see them as an important component of their teaching or they were not aware of their deficiencies in this area. Instead, they worried more about dealing with unwanted and unexpected situations and losing control of the students, which can be relatively easily overcome in the course of time as teachers gain in experience.

<u>Conclusions</u>

These findings indicate that there seems to be a shared perception of student-teachers' strengths in the practicum among all the parties in question. However, when it comes to the weak areas needing improvement, the results reveal that student-teachers have different perceptions from those of their mentors and supervisors. What initiated this research in the first place was the apparently shared dissatisfaction of supervisors and mentors with reference to student-teachers' poor language skills, and the results indicate that this perception is indeed shared by the two groups. What is surprising, however, is student-teachers' lack of awareness of their language-related weaknesses. Although this may seem to concern primarily the teacher educators in the specific context this study was conducted in, these results may have implications in terms of the effectiveness of the feedback sessions carried out in any teacher education programme. If the teacher candidates were told more specifically where they are going wrong, then they could presumably become more aware of their weaknesses and more successful in overcoming them. During the feedback sessions immediately following the trainees' teaching, it is often observed that mentors, in particular, tend to focus largely on what went well in the classroom in order not to discourage the trainees, who have just come out of the classroom in an anxious and excited state. However,

this could be misleading in terms of trainees perceiving their actual strengths and weaknesses in teaching.

The results outlined in the present paper are context-specific, yet, they may encourage language teacher educators more generally to investigate the particular problems involved in teaching a foreign language in a non-native context and, specifically, to tackle the language-related weaknesses of teacher candidates when such problems are encountered. The study also shows that it can be worthwhile to give a chance to all parties involved in such programmes to reflect on and compare their perceptions. Moreover, teacher educators might be encouraged to question the effectiveness of feedback sessions connected with the practicum and to improve them to provide teacher trainees with a more realistic picture of what they can and cannot do well, in order to prepare them better for the demands of their future profession.

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