

A Qualitative Investigation of Pre-Service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teacher Opinions

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Pre-service English teacher education students' perceptions of their education experience provide greater insight into developing an effective teaching strategy in English teacher education. The objectives for the study were: (1) to identify issues of interest or concern to the department and (2) to determine satisfaction levels concerning departmental issues. Data were drawn from focus group interviews involving 5 student-teachers in each of 5 groups. The findings showed that the English teacher education department students thought that the department was not fulfilling many of its purposes, although there were some strengths. Identifying what students think can help to open English teacher educators' eyes and minds to the realities of the English teacher education both locally and globally. Key Words: Pre-service English Teacher Education, Student-Teachers, Perceptions, Qualitative Research, and Institutional Evaluation

Background

The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process officially started in 1999 at the University of Bologna, Italia with the signing of the European Union (EU) Bologna Declaration in which the 29 European Ministers of Education affirmed their intention to:

- adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- adopt a system with two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate)
- establish a system of credits (such as European Credit Transfer System)
- promote mobility by overcoming obstacles
- promote European co-operation in quality assurance
- promote European dimensions in higher education

Therefore, the purpose of the Bologna process is to create the European Higher Education Area by harmonising academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe.

It should be noted that joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education stated that while creating the European Higher Education Area, the diversity of cultures, languages, and national education systems, and of university autonomy, would require

full respect for difference and uniqueness. Following the Bergen Ministerial Conference, in May 2005, there are 45 countries that are participating in the Bologna process.

The Bologna Process and the European University Association (EUA) Involvement

The European University Association (EUA) is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. It has been closely involved in the Bologna process since it aimed to support the need for a more coherent higher education and research system in Europe. It represents the European universities and the national rectors' conferences. Its major role is to make sure of the full involvement of the universities at each step in the Bologna process as the only way of ensuring sustainable reforms and a lasting impact.

The EUA believes that the full support of Europe's higher education institutions is essential to achieving the objectives of the Bologna process. For this reason, the EUA actively promotes activities in a variety of fields in order to enable its members across Europe to work together in addressing the Bologna objectives and in finding the best methods for their implementation.

The EUA represents Europe's universities in the different bodies that follow-up and manage the Bologna Process. The EUA has a formal role as a consultative member in the Bologna Follow-Up Group where it ensures that the concerns of Europe's universities are understood and taken into account in the development of the Process.

The EUA activities include:

- undertaking surveys and reports on the implementation of the Bologna process across Europe, notably including the Trends reports
- development of a project to further define Doctoral Programmes as the third cycle in the Bologna Process and to improve the information base for European policy decisions
- providing an Institutional Evaluation Programme and the Quality Culture Project, both of which assist universities in developing their institutional quality assurance mechanisms in a wider European framework
- managing a Joint Masters Project, in which networks of universities working together at the master's level across Europe are strengthening their structures and services by learning from each other
- promoting a European Qualification Framework and monitoring the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement across European higher education institutions
- supporting the integration of universities from South East Europe and from new members into the European higher education area

These activities enable the EUA to perform informed advocacy on behalf of their members, and encompass the main topics for the EUA conferences and other events. The EUA strives to facilitate the discussion and dissemination of project results among all EUA members and the wider community, and results are often published. Finally, the EUA works closely in partnership with the National Unions of Students in Europe to ensure full student participation in these activities, and to encourage full cooperation

between institutions and students in the development of the European Higher Education Area.

Bologna Process in Turkey

As known, on the 3rd of October 2005, EU membership negotiations were opened with Turkey, which has been an associate member of the EU since 1963 and an official candidate since 1999. Turkey takes part in education, training, and youth activities of the EU. Overall, the impact of EU assistance to Turkey is increasingly positive. The EU has provided significant resources in a number of important areas such as basic education.

Turkey joined the Bologna process in May 2001, in Prague. This is one of the main steps towards becoming a full member of the EU. It is important to join the Bologna process, because pursuing and implementing the objectives of the Bologna Process helps to make a positive impact on the modernization of the Turkish Higher Education System. It helps Turkish students and staff to establish bridges, therefore making it easier for them to move from one education system to another, which means facility in moving from one country to another. The Bologna process makes the degree systems more similar, yet preserves the specific nature of each higher education system. Therefore, the Bologna process serves to facilitate “translation” of one system to the other contributing to the increase of mobility of students and academics and increasing employability throughout Europe. The Bologna declaration aims to increase mobility of students and staff across the European Higher Education Area. Currently, Turkey is also a member of the Bologna Follow-up Group and participates in all conferences, seminars, and projects related to the Bologna process.

Previous studies show that a considerable number of Turkish students believe that the EU membership will positively affect the most economic indicators; For example, Özdemir, (2004) showed that students believed that educational standards and health services would improve, unemployment would decrease, the welfare of the families would increase, and the respect for the human rights would increase.

However, given the (unreported) differences between students from different departments of the same university, it is highly possible that students of different departments might differ in their constructions of the EU. This study was conducted at the English language teaching department, given that the subject area is closely related to a western way of thinking and culture, the students of the department look westwards in search of the development, and they are generally very positive about the EU membership. Because the EU membership implies that as individuals they will benefit from the EU membership, the students at this department seem to be worldlier in their opinions. Through informal conversations, it appears that students are aware of the benefits of the institutional evaluation and that their opinions on the self-evaluation phase have been taken into account. For the young people of the department the role of EU is important for their future. They want better education to adopt their future life in the EU, therefore they want the Institutional Evaluation Program to implement the Bologna process.

This study aimed at exploring, describing, and explaining the institution through the eyes of the students in the department. It was hoped that the study would provide a good framework for understanding what students think at the departmental level. As

stated by Henkel and Vabo (2000) institutions' perspectives should now be centred on the student rather than the teacher, focusing on what might be done to enable them to reach their goals. Institutions' perspectives should also be centred on preparing tomorrow's teachers to think and act with global consciousness. Inquiring about what students think can help to open EFL teacher educators' eyes and minds to the realities of the English teacher education both locally and globally, building on the world data.

Study Context

Turkish Higher Education System

The Turkish Higher Education System provides training for individuals based on contemporary teaching methods, to meet the needs of the nation and country in the fields of training and education, scientific research, and to encourage creative and reflective thinking that will help develop both individual citizens and the nation as a whole.

Atatürk University is a state university subsidised mainly by state funds and by its own resources. It offers over 150 different undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to its 40,000 students with more than 2,000 teaching staff.

Founded in 1957, Atatürk University was twinned with the University of Nebraska immediately after its establishment, when an Agreement of Cooperation between the two institutions was signed. The university is located in Erzurum whose history dates as far back as 4000 BC. The University is located in Erzurum, a historical and non-industrial city in the eastern part of Turkey, with a population of approximately 2,200,000.

The School of Education is one of the biggest in the country with 265 teaching staff and 10,400 students. Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education has 10 departments and 25 teaching programs.

In Turkey, public demands for quality English teachers have escalated. Teacher education programmes carry special responsibilities for raising the quality of teaching and learning in the schools. The Turkish system of accreditation was designed by the Higher Education Council to assure quality, and to lead to improvement. The development of the accreditation system in Turkey builds on considerable change and development in teacher education started in 1997. The researcher took part in this process until 1999. This department was visited in 2002. However, the accreditation process was ceased without local or national evaluation process. Therefore, the EUA Institutional Program Evaluation will help to identify the efficiency of the institution. Atatürk University is now involved in the EUA process. It is also included in the round of evaluations of the EUA, which started in October 2005 and finished in June/July 2006. Atatürk University applied to the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme to have a chance of third party view about its mission and vision setting. This process begins with self-evaluation process at a departmental level. This study was conducted as part of the self-evaluation process of the university. Therefore, recently, the department has started to make a self-evaluation with regard to quality assurance. This study was done to contribute to this self-evaluation process. The objectives for the study were twofold: (1) to identify issues of interest or concern to the department and (2) to determine satisfaction levels concerning processes, functions, services, and other pertinent departmental issues.

By exploring the satisfaction levels concerning processes, functions, services, and other pertinent departmental issues, teacher educators can identify potential issues, and school administrators can better understand and identify issues of interest or concern to the department. The study helps to understand the context of English Teacher Education practice in the university. Although, the study was done to collect internal views for internal change, it has the necessity and value in identifying the important role the EUA Institutional Evaluation plays in contributing to innovation activities at regional, national, and European/International level. The EU initiatives are designing tomorrow's education. This research study may have a role in designing effective education for tomorrow for Turkey and the EU. Much of this research may also be of general interest to the wider population concerned with the teacher education practices and experiences of other countries.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of Atatürk University, the School of Education pre-service EFL teachers during the academic year 2005–2006. Twenty-five of 834 pre-service students participated in the study. The school is located Erzurum, in east Turkey, chosen for reasons of convenience. All the subjects were Turkish and spoke Turkish as a first language, and English as a foreign language.

The researcher used maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2005). The researcher sampled students who differ on academic achievement. According to “Atatürk University Academic Rules and Regulations Concerning Undergraduate Period of Study, Examinations and Assessment” the researcher identified four groups. The first group contained students whose grade point average (GPA) was below 2.00. These students were considered to be failing. The second group consisted of students whose GPA was at least 2.00, these students were considered successful. The third group consisted of students who, with at least a normal semester course load, obtained a GPA of 3.00-3.49 at the end of a semester. They were considered honour students. The final group consisted of students, who with at least a normal semester course load obtained a GPA of 3.50-4.00 at the end of a semester. These students were considered high honour students. The researcher asked for volunteers from each group. Four respondents were high honour students, six were honour students, ten were successful students, and five were failing students. Four respondents were men and 21 were women. Three were freshman, 11 were sophomores, five were juniors, and six were seniors, with ages between 18 and 25.

It was believed that taking students from these different levels would provide the most representative sample of experiences. Participation was voluntary. All participants were informed of the objective and design of the study, and a written consent was received from the participants for interviews, and they were free to leave the focus group if they wished. This aspect of the study is very important in light of the fact that the faculty does not have an Institutional Review Board yet, to review and approve the research that the research protects the rights of the participants.

A challenging issue was that the researcher was also a teacher educator during the data collection phase of the study. From informal conversations, it was understood that

although the researcher was seen first as a teacher educator, the students also accepted the “scientific and investigational” nature of the study, in their eyes the researcher was also accepted as an unbiased researcher. The researcher presented herself as a researcher, revealed her identity, and explained the purpose of study. The credibility of a qualitative research report relies heavily on the confidence readers have in the researcher’s ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field (Eisner, 1991; Patton, 1990).

Data Collection: Focus Group Interviews

The use of qualitative research has become widely used to understand the meanings students attribute to their experiences. As stated by Marshall and Rossman (1995) a benefit of qualitative research is that the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon unfolds. To obtain students’ perspectives on departmental functions, five focus groups, each consisting of five students were organized. Focus groups represented the first stage in the study and were used in an explorative manner. To gather the widest variety of information, a strategy of mixing failed, successful, honor, and high honor students from different years was used. The interviews, which lasted for approximately 50 minutes, were taped. The data came from the verbatim transcription of these interviews. Interviews were checked with the audiotape to ensure accurate transcription. Approximately 4 hours of audiotape resulted in about 40 pages of transcripts.

Kvale (1996) defines the qualitative research interview as "An interview whose purpose is to obtain description of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (1996, p. 5). The focus groups began with an introductory protocol script, as suggested by Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996), which (a) explained informed consent, (b) welcomed and thanked participants for their time, (c) described confidentiality, (d) explained the purpose of the audiotape recording, and (e) stressed the importance of respecting other's opinions. Each participant was asked to make an introduction, including first name and year in school.

In this study, a pre-planned open-ended interview was used. The same open-ended questions were asked to all interviewees to facilitate the interviews and analysis processes. The interview questions are listed below. The first three questions were general questions. These questions were used as ice breakers to stimulate discussion.

- How do you feel about being a university student at Atatürk University?
- How do you feel about being a student in English teacher education?
- How do you feel about teaching English in general?
- Is there anything about practicing teaching that might cause you to feel anxious about it?
- Would you like to talk about learning to teach?
- Which experiences in the department/faculty did you find enjoyable?
- What are the best and worst things that can happen during teaching?
- How do you think your education experiences can be improved?
- What is your expectation of the teacher education program? What do you know about the EUA
- What do you know about the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme?

- How does the department benefit from the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme?

Data Analysis

A phenomenological framework grounded the inquiry. Participants' descriptions of their experience, with their perceptions and understandings of how they experienced it in their world, were essential to uncovering the nature of pre-service EFL teacher education at Atatürk University. Data analysis followed Giorgi's (1985) approach. As stated by Koivisto, Janhonen, and Väisänen (2002), the Giorgian method of phenomenological analysis is a clear-cut process which gives a structure to the analyses and justifies the decisions made while analysing the data.

Data analysis included the following steps:

1. All interviews were transcribed and transcripts were reviewed along with the audiotape to check accuracy. Transcripts were analyzed by the researcher.
2. The researcher reread the transcript to mark "meaning units." For the purpose of achieving a thorough understanding of the material, the researcher repeatedly and carefully read the transcribed interviews.
3. Extensive and varied raw text data was condensed into a brief, summary format. Next, clear links were established between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data, and then the data were mined for emerging themes that fit the purpose and the data type of the study.
4. The researcher reviewed the literature to examine previous research to define and describe this phenomenon in the light of that literature. The researcher determined four main code categories (Department services, General facilities, Department impressions, Student experiences at this department) were agreed upon.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the basic question addressed by the notion of trustworthiness is simple: "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (p. 290). Lincoln and Guba's criteria such as credibility, confirmability, and transferability were used to assess trustworthiness of the study.

Credibility refers to the confidence one can have in the truth of the findings and can be established by various methods. The method of choice was member checking. The researcher checked the accuracy of the findings with two voluntary participants to confirm that the results.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. There are a number of strategies for enhancing confirmability. The researcher in this study used a research assistant who works in the same department to confirm if the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others who know the department very well. The research assistant reviewed the transcripts, theme notations, and reductions for continued confirmation of credibility.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. This study gives weight to local conditions, as stated by Cronbach (1975), "when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (p. 125). This working hypothesis can have implications for other programs and their development as well as contribute on a global level. This local study can raise awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices found in educational societies around the world.

Results

The students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings about the program were categorized into four themes. From the students' point of view, "Department services," "General facilities," "Department impressions," and "Student experiences at the department" were considered as important themes in their education.

Department Services

This theme emerged from all student interviews, where students described how they felt about being a student in English teacher education department and what difficulties they experienced. Almost all of the students had reported dissatisfaction. Preparation they were receiving for their future occupation was not found satisfactory.

Student responses to questions generated a number of sub-themes. The first sub-theme that emerged for all students was the importance of "Testing/grading system". This sub-theme was one major issue of dissatisfaction.

The students mostly mentioned their instructor's role as an evaluative person. They had the perception that their instructors had a more evaluative role than a teaching role. Worrying about academic and non-academic staff's lack of information on the grading system launched recently was one of the issues brought up by students. One student said,

I spoke to a lot of teachers in the department.... But usually it didn't work because they did not have the correct information. I ended up actually having to go to Student Affairs Office and talk to the officers. So it was pretty time consuming.

The second sub-theme that emerged in relation to this question was related to the flexibility to design their own program of study that enhances their interests. They said they did not have much alternative. A female student with honors said, "We need elective courses around our areas of interest. We have limited number of elective courses and the academic advisors tell us which to select."

The third sub-theme was about the class size. Generally class size relative to the type of course was not suitable, at the moment there were 50-60 students taking some courses. All agreed that lecture delivery, especially in large-class settings was very boring. "In a large class, the knowledge is delivered to rapidly, and hits all of us on a different level. Some of us might not learn, and some may learn at different speeds. The

knowledge is just lost.” Another student described similar experiences. “I have to ask more questions to learn, but in a large class, you can’t just ask the teacher everything.”

The fourth sub-theme concerns the course content. Most of the students felt that course content in their major field was not proper. One student said,

Some of the academic staff have good interaction with students at the teaching practice and they are interested in helping students in the school experience but they are not aware of the skills and strategies which are necessary in teacher education and are not prepared for their role to act as an instructor in the teacher experience.

Another added,

We have several courses, the course title and the course content is totally different from what we do, what we learn in the classroom. For example, we have courses titled, “The Drama in ELT”, “Short story in ELT” etc. We expected to learn teaching English through drama/theatre texts/short stories, learning/teaching activities using drama / theatre texts, but we only studied the basic theory of English Drama, English Poetry, we never studied properly how to use them in the classroom.

Furthermore, one freshman said, “Unfortunately, we found ourselves in a setting where learning is reduced to low level intellectual skills of listening and recording information that will be memorized for a multiple choice exam.”

The fifth sub-theme was focussed on the essential role of the students in the department policies. From all the interview sessions, the students stated that they had no voice in the department policies. Symbolically, they selected a representative, but practically this system did not work. One student said, “Our involvement in the management of our institution was very limited. This limited involvement results in the feeling of dissatisfaction among us, certainly we demand a higher level of participation for some decision making situations.” Another student added,

Rarely is the student given the formal right to express his or her views, therefore this study is important. But, this is not university’s decisions to ask what students think. The university does not collect data about student opinions because they think student views are valuable, and necessary. They ask because they will write report for the EUA Institutional evaluation.

Another sub-theme that emerged was the attitude of the faculty toward students. Students said they were also not happy with the attitude of the faculty toward students. One student said,

The faculty can make significant interventions to enhance the education lives of students within their schools. For example, they can make some interventions capable of reducing student stress. The faculty can influence

the emotional climate of the classes and, in so doing, motivate academic and impact positively upon students' education.

The final sub-theme, which emerged was the need for effective academic advisor help. Students said almost all students had some wants and needs regarding classroom facilities, computer labs, opportunities for student employment, availability of financial aid etc., but they did not find anybody to ask these questions. Students expressed that they found much to value in the chance to see an academic advisor on a weekly basis. Although they had an advisor, generally advisors' time was very limited and they would deal with course-problems. Complaints especially levelled against academic advisors included their lack of knowledge and inconsistent statements on information on the grading system launched recently.

Relatively few students reported they were able to see to meet with their advisor at least once a week. Students said although the academic advisors had visit time on their program, they were generally not present. Students said advisors were helpful only at the beginning of the semester, during registration.

General Facilities

The theme "General facilities" emerged from all focus discussions, where almost every student described in some way the lack of general facilities. Transit services, student health services, and food services were frequently mentioned as sources of complaints. One student said,

We start courses at 5 P.M and generally finish at 10 P.M. Erzurum is the coldest city of the county, when we leave the school from November till March, it may be as cold as minus 30s, generally at this time of the day, the roads become icy, the buses become very rare. Dark, cold..it is really late, you think about your personal security, feel frighten, feel cold...

Another student mentioned,

It is difficult to stay healthy. We are in a transition period, it is difficult to keep a balance between busy class schedules and healthy living. In here we engage in smoking, unhealthy eating, unhealthy sleeping. We do not think long term consequences...

Another added, "I think there must be appropriate services for us to help us develop healthy eating, sleeping, behaviors and lifestyles."

Department Impressions

The overall sample indicated a decidedly positive attitude towards teaching English. They all expressed strong favourable feelings. This was a very positive for the education system, since the attitudes toward teaching English is very important for their future performance.

Interestingly, although students were not positive about their overall impression of the quality of education at this department, almost half of the students said if they could start department over they would choose to attend this department. One student said, “My English teacher at the high school was a graduate of this department, he recommended this department to me. And, I would recommend this department to others, Why, I do not know, I am used to, I feel I am happy.”

One issue brought up by students was the academic staff. Students said actually most of the academic staff at this department welcomed students. One student said, “Research assistants and females are more approachable. Students feel more comfortable with them, and interact with them more, but they are not able use feedback to improve the department.”

One student said he/she felt that the younger academic staff also had little voice in department policies. In contrast, senior professors were described as less approachable, less accessible, and less accommodating than community college professors. One student elaborates, “The lack of interaction with some professors leads one student to feel that “some professors don’t care if they fail you.”

Student Experiences at the Department

Students said before they entered the university they believed that it was a powerful way of enabling them to help their intellectual growth, personal growth, and social growth. Chickering and Reisser (1993) also state that human development is a principal aim of higher education and pursuit of that aim is facilitated by theories that illuminate the nature of psychological development during the college years.

However, almost all said they did not consider themselves as intellectual university students. They said what they did for four years was to learn, show the teachers what they learnt for the examinations and forgot. One student said, “None of us believe that we acquire life-long knowledge, skills, concepts at the department, we have not been able to develop analytical thinking.”

The students frequently asserted that living far from their families taught them self-discipline and mature attitudes in a hard way. | The department represents students from almost all cities of the country, by that time they said they developed understanding others and others’ views. They said this experience helped them to adapt successfully to a variety of social situations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this focus-group study was to provide a window into pre-service EFL students experience for those who will produce a self-evaluation report for the EUA. This study does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the incredible range of student experiences. Rather, it focused on the student experiences of one department, in one university, and it was hoped to bring additional light to the student experiences literature.

The findings of the study can be viewed in a number of perspectives: Firstly, it seems that the EUA evaluations at this department will help to identify critically the

department's situation, its strengths, and also potential obstacles to meeting objectives and make recommendations on the systemic challenges. The EUA's Institutional Evaluation at Atatürk University will be a cornerstone to develop strong English teacher education program. Secondly, it is clear that all themes mentioned by the students play an important role in student learning and English teacher education in general. Therefore, the findings of this study support the need to rethink the English teacher education program in this university. Finally, pre-service English teacher education determines the quality of future in-service English teachers. A self-critical attitude of the department provided the basis for identifying weaknesses. Hopefully, the information from this study helps to provide a more concrete foundation for a dialogue about the experiences of students at the pre-service EFL department.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the number of participants is too small to be representative of the population. Secondly, as known qualitative research does not collect numeric data from a representative sample of the target audience. As a result, this type of research cannot be subjected to statistical analysis to estimate to what extent opinions expressed by participants reflect the opinions of the population studied. Thirdly, students were asked questions concerning their teachers, however the researcher was also a teacher, this may have reduced the validity of reports obtained during the focus groups. Therefore, the impact of the researcher as staff is unknown. However, all students seemed open and comfortable in the interview setting. Fourthly, some students tended to express views that are consistent with social standards (that is self expression bias) and try not to present themselves negatively. This social desirability bias may lead students to self-censor their actual views, especially when they are in a group setting. Fifthly, although this study was exploratory in nature, it identified that the student comments were almost all one-sided. There were little expressions of different experiences and interpretations.

Further Research

In the light of the findings and the experience of the researcher further research would be helpful. Especially, further research should build on the study findings to construct structured qualitative interviews that specifically collect event specific data (in a context that avoids presentation bias). On the other hand, although this study did not focus on gender issue, some data collected for the study suggests that female students may have significantly different experiences than male students, which deserves further investigation.

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