

**Student Teachers' Experiences in the Distance English Language Teacher Training
Program (DELTTP) in Anadolu University, Turkey**

Abstract

This study addresses the student teachers' perceptions about their field experiences in the Distance English Language Teacher Training Program (DELTTP), which is a relatively new distance learning model for training English language teachers in Turkey. Qualitative data, obtained from 20 student teachers, included interviews and online discussion forums. Findings indicate that student teachers did not perceive their roles as critical thinkers that would help them engage in reform efforts in schools. Lack of communication between university supervisors and student teachers is among the major impediments of the student teaching component. Some suggestions are provided to enhance the effectiveness of student teaching and reflective practice in DELTTP.

Introduction

For over five decades, literature on teacher education has acknowledged the vital contribution of student teaching to the professional preparation of pre-service teachers (Conant, 1963; Nosow, 1975; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Strudler, McKinney, Jones & Quinn, 1999). However, it is widely considered challenging as well due to problems such as dependence on traditional views (Goodland, 1990) and focus on procedural concerns and routine tasks (McBee, 1998) rather than a focus on inquiry-based practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

According to Agee (1997), when student teachers' prior learning experiences with educational theories are followed by "reflection, inquiry, and classroom experiences" (Moore, 2003, p. 33), it helps student teachers gain understanding of themselves and their students as learners and leads them to be responsible for their own learning. Thus, providing student teachers with opportunities for reflection and critical thinking cannot be regarded as dispensable if a more efficient professional preparation is aimed.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the student teachers' perceptions about their field experiences in a distance English language teacher training program in Turkey. Launched in 2000, the Distance English Language Teacher Training Program in Anadolu University is a four-year undergraduate program affiliated with the School of Distance Education. The program was established to train a sufficient number of EFL teachers, in the shortest term possible, without abandoning the traditional high quality of training for EFL teachers (AOF, 2006). The main reason which led to the establishment of DELTTP was the implementation of eight-year continuous compulsory education in

1998, which increased the demand for teachers of English due to the fact that 2 hours of English per week for 4th and 5th grade students were included in the national curriculum. The distinctiveness of DELTTP lies in the fact that the first two years are carried out by traditional (face-to-face) education, while the last two years are solely done by old-fashioned distance education with on-line WebCT support for each class.

For student teaching, placement of each student teacher is done by the provincial administrative offices affiliated with the Ministry of National Education. Each student is placed in a public school according to their permanent addresses. Student teaching can be carried out in all 81 provinces of Turkey. Subsequent to this placement, provincial administrative offices assign cooperating teachers in selected cooperating schools. All cooperating teachers are trained by the DELTTP faculty members in Anadolu University before each academic year starts.

The student teaching in DELTTP, which is carried out during the last academic year of the program¹, comprises two separate courses. The first course, School Experience-II², consists of a 10-week period which starts in mid-November and ends in late February. Each student teacher is required to observe 5 classes of English each week. They are required to prepare weekly observation schedules in collaboration with cooperating teachers and submit all the schedules and copies of weekly plans to the local administrative offices shortly after they start the student teaching. Practice Teaching, the second 15-week component of student teaching, starts in mid-February and ends in late May. Student teachers lead most of the classes under the supervision of their cooperating

¹ An academic year in DELTTP includes a period between early November and late May, with a 20-day break in January.

² School Experience-I is offered as a required course in the sophomore year.

teachers. As in School Experience-II, they are required to submit the necessary paper work (e.g. weekly plans including their own lesson plans for the classes that they will be teaching during the 15-week period) to the administrative offices to be transported to the main office of DELTTP in Eskisehir.

Assessment criteria include a portfolio (e.g. journals, lesson plans), observation and evaluation forms and attendance sheets, which are filled in and signed by cooperating teachers. University supervisors visit some of the schools and randomly observe the student teacher presentations to give feedback. They also talk with the cooperating teachers about student teachers' progress. University supervisors, hence, do not have a stable role in the process-oriented assessments of student teachers' performances in schools; they basically evaluate the portfolios in order to determine the final grades.

Three research questions guided this descriptive study:

- 1) How do student teachers view the shared roles and responsibilities of the members of the triad (university supervisor, cooperating teacher and student teacher) in the student teaching component of DELTTP?
- 2) How is communication carried out among the members of the triad?

Theoretical Framework

Frameworks utilized in this study included a) reflective teacher education, b) Cochran-Smith's (1991) descriptions for three school-university relationships: consonance, critical dissonance and collaborative resonance.

According to the literature, critical thinking is considered the most vital characteristic of becoming a reflective teacher (Calderhead, 1992; Richert, 1991;

Goethals, Howard and Sanders, 2004). Loughran (2002) states that “...reflection continually emerges as a suggested way of helping practitioners better understand what they know and do as they develop their knowledge of practice through reconsidering what they learn in practice.” (p. 34). Reflective teachers question their educational beliefs, judge their teaching in the light of recent developments, and try to discover better ways of teaching with respect to the changing needs of the society. Thus, it is important for teacher education programs to provide opportunities for student teachers to develop their reflective thinking skills (Arends, 1988).

Consonance type of school-university relationship as proposed by Cochran-Smith (1991) does not encourage student teachers “to make sound professional decisions using the language and concepts of research on effective teaching” (p.105). Cooperating teachers are trained on how to evaluate student teachers and how to do systematic observation. Competency-based evaluation (Cochran-Smith, 1991) is at stake regarding student teachers’ lessons, planning and performances. Critical dissonance, on the other hand, promotes critical perspectives that will lead to questioning of school policies. In addition, student teachers work with university supervisors to develop a critical perspective for their field experiences. Last approach to school-university relationships is the collaborative resonance, which is claimed the most effective of the three approaches. In this approach, intensity of school-university relationship is frequently emphasized. It is this intensification (action research, seminars held by all members of the triad, reformist efforts, joint planning of the program etc) that creates a richer environment for student teachers on their journey to learn how to teach.

The current study aimed to address these theoretical frameworks when analyzing student teachers' experiences in DELTTP Program.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods that were adopted by this study consisted of structured interviews conducted as online voice conversations and online discussion forums that took place in 4 sessions, each including 5 participants. Data were gathered from 20 student teachers during the last two weeks of their field experience in May, 2006. In order to eliminate the language barrier for more reliable and detailed results, interviews and discussion forums were carried out in participants' native language, which was Turkish, and subsequently translated into English, by the researcher. Each interview was scheduled at student teacher's convenience, and lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed for data analysis, and copies were sent to the interviewees for member checking. Both before the interviews and the online discussion forum, participants were sent e-mails explaining how to start a voice conversation by using msn messenger 7.5 and how to post a message in the discussion area.

Results³

Data driven from this study included transcripts of 20 in-depth structured interviews and electronic transcripts from the online discussion forum. Mayring's (2004) *qualitative content analysis* was used to code the data. Categories were developed inductively (Mayring, 2000). Figure 1 provides an example for the coding agenda.

Category	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules
	Concerns that refer to paper work requirements set by DELTTP such as:	"We are required to send the semester-long weekly plans of our cooperating	In this section, only concerns related to procedures and requirements will be

³ For the purposes of this research project, results of only one interview will be discussed here.

C1: Procedural concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attendance sheets signed by the cooperating teachers - weekly plans etc to be mailed to DELTTP - getting assigned a cooperating school 	<p>teachers to the provincial administrative offices and they send them to DELTTP. We have to do this in 2 weeks after we start the student teaching.”</p>	<p>included. They have to point to objective, straightforward information.</p>
C2: Management challenges	<p>These are related to classroom management strategies either observed or used by student teachers such as time management, eye contact with students, keeping the order in class and so forth.</p>	<p>“Once, I heard one student joking and I smiled. They wanted to learn why I smiled. The fact that I smiled at one student joke was not appropriate in terms of professionalism. It distorted the harmony of the class; I was about to lose the control just because I smiled.”</p>	<p>Other than the actual management strategies, self-evaluations directly pertaining to these strategies can be included.</p>

Figure 1: Example for a coding agenda, adapted from Mayring (2000).

Research question 1: For the roles and responsibilities of the members of the triad, three categories were generated; a) student teachers’ perceptions about their own roles, b) about their cooperating teachers’ roles c) and about the university supervisors’ roles.

Research question 2: Data for the ways of communication among members of the triad were categorized concerning; a) university supervisors’ visits to the schools, b) e-mails sent to university supervisors through WebCT, c) peer talk among student teachers, and d) conversations between cooperating teachers and student teachers on feedback.

Analysis of student teachers’ perceptions about their own roles were grouped as follows: 1) procedural concerns such as being punctual for observations, 2) paying attention to the classes they observe and taking notes, 3) trying to improve their teaching

in the light of peer and cooperating teacher evaluations, and 4) developing classroom management skills.

Student teachers' perceptions about the roles of cooperating teachers centered around five categories: 1) being considerate to student teachers' needs and providing a stress-free atmosphere, 2) defining expectations and responsibilities between student teacher and themselves clearly, 3) working willingly to share their experiences with student teachers, 4) providing constructive feedback, and 5) establishing a warm atmosphere between student teachers and students in their classrooms.

Student teachers viewed the role of university supervisors as facilitators of the process (Richardson- Koehler, 1988). The current interviewee addressed the lack of communication with university professors, which she considered the biggest weakness of the student teaching component of DELTTP. However, she emphasized that this student teaching is country-wide and the university does its best to provide the best of opportunities to its students.

As for the categories regarding the second research question, the interviewee said that university supervisors "visited some of the schools without prior notification and randomly observed the student teacher presentations to give feedback". Whenever they needed, they could e-mail their university professors through WebCT. Professors would reply in the shortest time possible. This was a very easy and efficient method and student teachers were very content with it. Peer evaluation was not required for assessment; however, student teachers talked about their mistakes and continuously provided feedback for each other during their student teaching. Since 70% of the course grade was determined by the cooperating teachers (30% by the university supervisors), the

cooperating teacher of the current interviewee always kept an eye on her performances and gave feedback when necessary.

Discussion and Implications

Pertaining to her own roles, the student teacher generally addressed punctuality and developing practical skills that will help her in real classroom settings. She didn't mention being critical, following recent studies or trying to bring changes to the school environment, which indicated that she did not perceive her role as a critical thinker to engage in reform efforts in schools and she did not foresee professional development as a life-time engagement. In addition, these results lend support to the conclusion that the school-university relationship in this program represents Cochran-Smith's consonance model.

Communication among the members of the triad in a student teaching program is considered vital by many teacher education researchers (Wentz, 2001; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Thus, participant's views about the lack of communication among the members of the triad should be taken into consideration for future innovations in the DELTTP student teacher program.

Assigning a university professor to a reasonable number of students (e.g. 1 professor for 20 students) may not be possible for practical and financial reasons; however, DELTTP can employ one full-time faculty who will oversee the student teaching to encourage students' reflective practices through WebCT during their field experiences. It is of great importance to keep the communication channels open between student teachers and university supervisors.

The main limitation of this study was that the roles of members in the triad were gauged solely from the perspective of student teachers. It is plausible that cooperating teachers and university supervisors may have different perspectives for each party's role in student teaching.

Although the current study is descriptive in nature, it does raise several key issues for future research. So far, very little research has been conducted pertaining to the student teaching programs outside the US and the student teaching components of distance/online teacher education programs. Longitudinal and comparative studies that will look into the long-term results of the student teaching components of these programs may provide more insightful information.

Even though the nature of the DELTTP is different than its online teacher education counterparts, this study can be an excellent source for teacher educators to get inspired for new ideas on how to offer better pre-service training for students in online teacher education programs.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions

- 1- Can you tell me the procedures and requirements of student-teaching in your program? (For probing: do you have to arrange the school on your own? How many hours of observations are you supposed to complete in a week? Did you have a supervisor apart from your cooperating teacher How do you report your insights to your program, via portfolios?)
- 2- In what sense do you think the student-teaching was helpful for your professional development?
- 3- Would you mind sharing some of your student-teaching experiences with me?
- 4- Do you think you can apply what you've gained in your student-teaching to your actual teaching?
- 5- What kind of responsibilities did you have towards your supervisor and your cooperating teacher? What kind of responsibilities did they have towards you?
- 6- How did you handle the conflicts/problems if there were any?
- 7- Were you able to contact professors or instructors through WebCT when you needed?
- 8- Do you think your program (DELTTP) handles student teaching well?
- 9- (Depending on the answer to question 8) What could DELTTP have done differently in order to provide better opportunities for student-teaching?
- 10- What could you have done differently in order to gain more from your student-teaching? Do you have any suggestions for prospective students?