

Pre-service teachers' evaluation of school experience

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ABSTRACT

School experience is a course which provides insights into teaching issues for pre-service teachers in their pre-service education process. In this sense, pre-service teachers may gain various experiences on teaching topics through observations. Those experiences can be evaluated in various ways. Therefore, this study aims at focusing on how pre-service teachers can be better motivated in the course programme and how awareness for the teaching profession can be raised. In a general sense, this study is a description of an attempt to look at the opinions of the pre-service teachers regarding aspects of teaching experience. The core of the study is to evaluate the weekly activities implemented by pre-service teachers and to enhance their recognition of students' attitudes in secondary education. The study was based on a descriptive study in which observations and the survey method were used. Activity reports were evaluated weekly and a questionnaire developed by the pre-service teachers was administered to the students in an Anatolian High School, in Turkey. The overall opinions of all pre-service teachers in the study revealed that the pre-service teachers gained insights into teaching issues and their students' attitudes towards learning English. (*Journal of Cooperative Education & Internships*, 2010, 44(1), 1-5).

KEYWORDS: school experience, teacher education, students' attitudes, student teacher

Teacher education is a collaborative process between faculties and schools. The aim of such collaboration is to prepare pre-service teachers to gain experiences in teaching issues which combine theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Thus, pre-service teachers may have opportunities for evaluating their achievement of teaching skills by both observing and practicing in school environments. In teacher training programmes, this collaborative process is employed in school experience courses. Since school experience courses are available for gaining experience in many aspects of the teaching profession, those courses are considered as the most essential in initial teacher education (Tang, 2003). Pre-service teachers have the opportunity to teach one or two classes under the supervision of an experienced teacher by participating in all activities, thus, they can gain experience of teaching in schools (Cope & Inglis, 1997). In this sense, school experience provides an occasion for the improvement of a significant variety of knowledge and skills for the majority of pre-service teachers. With the necessary arrangements of institutions in the curriculum for the implementation of teaching practice, pre-service teachers are able to acquire those skills (Tang, 2003).

In the education process, pre-service teachers are loaded with theoretical knowledge about teaching matters; however, experience gained through teaching practice is much more effective from the pre-service teachers' perspective than the theoretical experience (Halbach, 2000). In other words, school experience courses create ideal environments in which pre-service teachers can practice theoretical knowledge in formal instructional settings. The objectives of the course are to develop teaching competency, to provide opportunities for observing real classroom environments, evaluating course books, monitoring students in their learning process, augmenting learning of how to teach by sharing experiences and opinions with other pre-service teachers, and cooperating with teachers and supervisors (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 1998). Furthermore, in the course, pre-service teachers are involved in various pedagogical experiences such as planning, teaching, and assessment (Caires & Almeida, 2005). In this process, they may face some trouble and have some expectations. In this sense, various studies have been carried out to focus on the different aspects of school experience to highlight pre-service teachers' attitudes, opinions, and expectations about the course and mentors at schools (Gömlüksiz et al., 2006; Aydın et al., 2007; Caires and Almeida, 2005; Aksu and Demirtaş, 2006; Demirkol, 2004). Some studies concentrate on the problems pre-service teachers encounter (Güven, 2004; Chambers and Roper, 2000; Özmen, 2008). In the studies mentioned, the perspectives of pre-service teachers from different fields of school experience are presented. The focal points appear to be the lack of focus in the course regarding the roles of supervisors, mentors, school administration, weekly activities, etc. The studies generally came to the decision that pre-service teachers should be given feedback by supervisors and mentors at schools, cooperation between faculty and school should be provided, the reported activities should be examined and feedback should be given, supervisors should organize seminars to share their experiences with pre-service teachers, the number of pre-service teachers for each supervisor should be decreased in order to control the group properly and give feedback easily.

From the results of these studies, it can be concluded that school experience is a compulsory course which can be assumed being as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and teaching practice in pre-service teaching. In addition, this course is a step for the teaching practice course in which pre-service teachers are responsible for preparing a lesson plan each week and then applying the plan in a classroom at school. The plan is evaluated by mentor, supervisor and the student teacher who prepared the plan. After the evaluation phase, the plan is revised and applied again. During this process, pre-service teachers are also responsible for preparing portfolios (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 1998).

DESCRIPTION OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE COURSE

School experience is a compulsory course which is included into the teacher training curriculum in the first semester of fourth year education in Turkey. Pre-service teachers have to attend schools determined by the faculties for four hours a week. At the end of the semester, they are assessed by mentors and supervisors. Criteria for assessment for each student teacher are related to the objectives of the course. While assessing the performance of pre-service teachers, their developing

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abilities in teaching practice and the observation process are taken into account and evaluated. The proposed outcomes of the course are based on the expectation that all school experience and professional practice subjects will assist pre-service teachers to experience teaching capability and to become involved in the life of the school setting as an associate member of staff. Attendance of a school experience course is a preparation for teaching practice. Assessment is made in a process in which supervisors and mentors make progressive evaluation of pre-service teachers' efforts. Assessments in schools are determined by the marks derived from the scoring system as agreed on in each school experience criteria sheet. All subjects are graded and the grades are determined by various combinations of evaluations done by school mentors and faculty supervisors. The final score is obtained from the average of the scores reported by staff and supervisors. The scores are graded on the basis of five criteria which are determined for school experience courses. The criteria are:

- Fulfilling the proposed activities of the plan prepared for the school experience course (the activities are reported weekly in the school experience course guide);
- Taking guidance from school mentors in the proposed periods (the suggestions are on the principles of teaching in a classroom, motivation, classroom management, assessment, feedback, school rules, etc.);
- Applying the suggestions of mentors after the guidance periods (pre-service teachers apply what mentors proposed);
- Obeying professional behaviour and external appearance standards (pre-service teachers have to behave and dress as for the requirements of teaching profession); and
- Attending school as determined in regular schedule (pre-service teachers have to attend schools as determined in their schedule by school; otherwise, they may fail in this course).

As mentioned, the central focus in the school experience course is to scrutinize all details and support pre-service teachers' professional performance so as to prepare them for teaching practice in the next term of the teacher education programme.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Since previous studies claim a lack in some aspects of school experience courses (such as inadequate assistance of supervisors and mentors or missing points of weekly activities) this study focuses on how pre-service teachers can be directed in their school experience course programme in which awareness for teaching profession is provided regarding the pre-service teachers' expectations and observations in schools for the duration of the course. The study also aims at investigating some applications to motivate pre-service teachers through feedback, reports, seminars, weekly plans, and observations. In addition, investigating the students' attitudes in secondary education by the pre-service teachers is taken into the core of the course process. The purpose of taking the students to the core of the course is to make sure that the pre-service teachers gain experiences about target groups who they will tutor.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were nine fourth year pre-service teachers in the English Language Teaching Department (ELT) at Trakya University. The small number of the pre-service teachers can be evaluated as the most advantageous aspect of the study. The reason for this small number is that the numbers of the students attending ELT departments in Turkey are generally limited to 20-40 in each class; for that reason, for each supervisor at the faculty, the numbers of pre-service teachers taking school experience courses are generally limited to nine or ten. The participants carried on school observation activities at an Anatolian High School.

METHOD

The research was based on a descriptive study in which observations and the survey method were used. In this study, it is assumed that to examine a group of pre-service teachers in-depth and in a longitudinal way would provide a systematic way of looking at events by collecting data and reporting results. Thus, an understanding of how the school experience courses are implemented and what the pre-service teachers have experienced from those courses within real-life context is assumed to be gained. Therefore, the plan of the course was designed weekly to implement the activities in the school experience guide prepared for the faculties of education and to monitor the mentors, the school environment and, the most significant, the students in the classes they are observing. Each week, the pre-service teachers' reports on the activities were evaluated and they were questioned about the benefits of the activities for them as prospective teachers. Further, they were given feedback about their reports and directed to the next activity. While implementing the activities, the behaviours of the students and the mentors in the classroom were noted.

Since attendance of a school experience course is a preparation for teaching practice, many activities designed for observing the present situation at the school are introduced into the school observation guide. As an additional activity, decided by the supervisor during the course period, the pre-service teachers were responsible for preparing questionnaires to administer to the students and interviewing the students at the school after the pre-service teachers taught them. Such activity, considered to be encouraging for pre-service teachers to experience research process, does not take place in the guide. Therefore, the aim of introducing this activity was to enhance the pre-service teachers' ability to design research and identify the attitudes of the students towards English courses so that they could gain experience for evaluating the students in the classroom. Such a survey was thought to be useful for the pre-service teachers to gain experience in doing research in their future professional life. The focus was on enabling practitioners to engage in research so as to search for real teaching situations. This means that they were expected to collect practical knowledge about their own profession and the relevant topics such as student profiles, education policies, teaching issues throughout their careers. Thus, by following research findings, they might learn to find solutions to possible problems in the future.

RESULTS

The overall ideas of the pre-service teachers about the activities in the school observation guide were reported weekly; at the end of the term, a general evaluation was reported by each student teacher in the research group. The pre-service teachers commented on similar points. Some of the opinions of the pre-service teachers about school experience are given below.

The Pre-service Teachers' Evaluation of the Activities

Instructions and Explanations: Through this activity, they recognized how important it was to give clear instructions and explanations, how visual aids can be used during explanations, and how body language and eye contact create a warm learning atmosphere.

Question and Answer Drills: Those drills helped them to distinguish questioning strategies and the efficiency of different question types, the impact of questions on students' comprehension and production skills, and students' individual attitudes towards questions.

Classroom Management: Classroom management during a teaching period is one of the most important skills to be implemented. The pre-service teachers agreed that they observed how unproblematic it was to teach in a peaceful atmosphere through classroom management. Such an environment fosters students' enthusiasm for learning.

Evaluation of Student's Performance: The pre-service teachers observed that evaluation tools such as homework, worksheets, quizzes, and examinations were regularly used to assess the performances of the students. They also offered some extra evaluation tools such as project work through which students carry out long term studies. The pre-service teachers agreed that evaluation was an important activity which helps teachers to decide whether goals and objectives of the lesson are achieved or not.

Course Book Evaluation: The pre-service teachers observed that the mentors generally used course books in their classrooms, but that they did not apply all the parts of the books in their existing form. They variously adopted some parts, omitted others or added additional activities. Thus, courses could be planned regarding the objectives, the education process and needs of the target students.

Group Work: By observing group work in the classes, the pre-service teachers came to the same conclusion that group work triggered and encouraged the students to become involved in class activities and to share their ideas. Moreover, even inattentive and reluctant students participated in the activities and successful students could help them. Thus, group activities were agreed to be beneficial for fostering social relationships among students during the education process.

Preparing and Using Worksheets: In a general sense, pre-service teachers agreed that worksheets were useful exercises for the students. However, they observed that when the worksheets were not organized well, some students lost interest and enthusiasm in doing the exercises on the worksheets. Such an experience was noted as a good experience by them, because they learnt that worksheets having short and clear instructions, appropriate for students' linguistic level and interest are more effective for students' involvement in lesson.

Evaluation and Recording: This activity was generally recognized as similar to Evaluation of Student's Performance. They noted the target behaviours expected by the mentors. The mentors recorded and consulted some profiles. But the pre-service teachers suggested that the evaluation could be made mutually by taking the students' ideas into consideration.

Testing, Grading and Analysing: The pre-service teachers benefited experiences from the mentors' test preparation process. On the other hand, they offered some alternative ways for assessing both comprehension and production skills which were observed as missing parts of the tests. They added that a test should evaluate not only students' grammar and vocabulary or reading knowledge but their writing and speaking skills as well.

Using Simulations in Education: The pre-service teachers generally commented that they observed the benefits of simulation activities in language classes. However, they also identified some weak points of those activities. They agreed that such an activity took much more time than the other and the students got bored. In spite of that, such activity enabled the students to be active and creative during the lesson, thus promoting their cooperation.

Planning and Organizing Lesson: Observing how to plan a lesson and organize the activities was acknowledged as a framework for teachers of English by the pre-service teachers. They observed the applications of the steps included into the content of lesson plans in a flexible way during observation process.

Evaluation of School Observation: As the last activity, the pre-service teachers reported their overall ideas about the school observation course, the benefits of observed activities in the guide, the attitudes of the mentors and the school administration towards them, the feedback given by the supervisor at the faculty, and the behaviours of the students in their classes. They generally agreed on the positive aspects of those issues. They also added that they had the chance of observing the students in real teaching environments. But they commented that the students in secondary education, particularly in the Anatolian High School where they made observation, were not so eager to learn English. Such a judgement was always discussed during the weekly meetings with the supervisor. They, therefore, were directed to determine the attitudes of the students towards learning a foreign language by administering questionnaires as an additional activity.

The Additional Activity: The Evaluation of the School Students' Attitudes Towards English Courses

As an additional activity, the pre-service teachers were required to evaluate the students' attitudes towards English courses in order to gain insight into the target group they tutored. This additional activity, which was designed as a survey, was offered by the supervisor in order to direct the attention of the pre-service teachers to inquiry-based approaches for professional development. The survey was administered after the pre-service teachers taught the students in the school. They designed a questionnaire for the purpose. The questionnaire was administered to 86 students attending secondary education in the same Anatolian High School. Of 86 ninth grade students students, 39 students were male and 47 were female. It was a simple questionnaire comprising thirteen items. The questionnaire was evaluated by the pre-service teachers and the supervisor. The questionnaire aimed at investigating students' general tendency towards learning English. The items in the questionnaire comprised general insights about learning English. Under this generalization, specific topics such as language skills, course books, materials, the way of learning and using English were questioned. The findings of the questionnaire are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Attitudes of students attending secondary education towards learning English

| | yes | undecided | no |
|--|-----|-----------|----|
| Do you like learning English? | 47 | - | 53 |
| Do you think knowing English is important? | 79 | 2 | 19 |
| Do you deal with English only at school? | 82 | - | 18 |
| Is learning English difficult for you? | 71 | 5 | 14 |
| Are English courses enjoyable? | 62 | 9 | 29 |
| Do you think the course book is enjoyable? | 37 | 7 | 66 |
| Do you think the materials used in English courses are satisfactory? | 51 | 5 | 44 |
| Is reading in English difficult for you? | 23 | - | 77 |
| Is writing in English difficult for you? | 68 | 2 | 30 |
| Is listening in English difficult for you? | 77 | - | 23 |
| Is speaking in English difficult for you? | 86 | - | 14 |
| Do you use English out of school? | 27 | 5 | 68 |
| Do you get help for learning English out of school? | 12 | - | 88 |

As indicated in the table, more than half of the students (53%) like learning English, while they mostly accept the importance of knowing English (79%). Most of them (82%) do not deal with English out of school and agree on the difficulty of learning English (71%). Despite the difficulty of learning English, they mostly affirm that English courses are enjoyable (62%). Nearly half of the students (51%) are satisfied with the materials used in English courses, but more than half (66%) do not like the course book. When they were questioned about the skills, most of the students (77%) declared that reading skill is not difficult, but writing, listening and speaking skills are accepted as hard tasks. In addition, they mostly do not use English (68%) or get help for learning English (88%) out of school.

The findings provide evidence that the students attending the Anatolian High School, where English is taught as one of the basic courses, do not have positive attitudes towards learning English and they are most probably involved in English courses not because they like English but because it is a compulsory course. Such an outcome was actually disappointing for the pre-service teachers who are eager to teach English.

Depending on the questionnaire results which display the attitudes of their students taking English courses, the pre-service teachers were interviewed about the outcome of the questionnaire. The pre-service teachers mostly declared that the destination they have arrived at is not the point where they expected to be. In spite of all struggles, they thought there was something wrong or missing. One of the most important troubles, in this sense, was assumed to be the university exam. In Turkey, the students after secondary education should take a university exam. The graduates of high schools enter the exam in order to be admitted to Higher Education institutions. This examination, which is nation-wide, is administered by the Student Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM) every year. The graduates are evaluated regarding the grades of related subjects, their high school average results and their preferences according to the student capacity of each faculty. Those with higher grades are qualified for the four-year undergraduate programmes. Since the university entrance exam is thought to be a kind of competition for the graduates to be selected, the students mostly give importance to this exam during the education period. Therefore, the pre-service teachers deduced that since students should pass university exam, they do not think learning English was an important task. On the other hand, those who are participating in language classes for taking the university exam for being enrolled in the foreign language departments of the universities are required to answer grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension questions. Therefore, only those students were thought to be eager to learn grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension by the pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers also noted that they attained the knowledge of all teaching issues at the university but not real profiles of students and teaching settings. Therefore, they agreed school observation was a good experience for them since they examined most of the stakeholders in the education process such as teachers, administrators, classrooms, teaching materials, students, and so on. Furthermore, they added that the survey they administered highlighted some facts about the general profiles of students who will be their target learners in the future.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The similar ideas mentioned by all pre-service teachers demonstrate that the pre-service teachers gained insights into some issues related to teaching such as teachers' strategies in the classroom and school, teachers' behaviour towards students, recognition of the teaching profession, the importance of being an efficient teacher, students' attitudes and expectations, classroom management, motivation, using teaching aids efficiently and so on. Their reports provided evidence that they benefited from the experience by observing and applying all activities mentioned in the guide to school experience.

Most of the studies carried out to evaluate the school experience course identify the lack of focus of the course (Gömleksiz et al., 2006; Aydın et al., 2007; Caires and Almeida, 2005; Aksu and Demirtaş, 2006; Demirkol, 2004) and generally concentrate on the problems pre-service teachers encounter (Güven, 2004; Campers and Roper, 2000; Özmen, 2008). However, in the present study it has been concluded that the pre-service teachers were satisfied with the implementation of the course regarding the feedback of the mentors, the supervisor, and the school administration. One crucial point for such an encouraging outcome may be the number of the pre-service teachers. In the group there were only nine pre-service teachers for the supervisor. In addition, the pre-service teachers in the group were given feedback by the supervisor individually, the reported activities were examined each week and feedback was given. The supervisor organized some seminars to share her experiences with the pre-service teachers, the group was controlled at regular intervals, and the pre-service teachers were directed to carry out a small-scale survey so as to determine the students' attitudes towards foreign language education and attain knowledge of real profiles of the students at the school. Such a survey, conducted as an extra activity, encouraged and assisted the pre-service teachers in the ability to evaluate their own students' attitudes towards learning English in the future. This evaluation is a required step in the teaching profession for both teachers and students. By searching out students' ideas and attitudes, teachers can diagnose problems and find solutions to these problems. Moreover, they may gain insights into their students' requirements by applying need analysis procedures and design their course syllabus by taking note of their students' needs.

Depending on the results of this study, the school experience course can be valued as a course which is a bridge between theoretical knowledge and teaching practice in pre-service teaching. Moreover, this course provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain insights about students as language learners in real classroom settings. Thus, through the exploration of fears, doubts, needs, expectations and achievements, pre-service teachers can become aware of the overall development and growth of teachers and the guiding principles of teaching (Caires and Almeida, 2005). As regards the conclusions of this study, some suggestions can be offered for evaluating the process of the school experience course. Among these, pre-service teachers should be provided feedback weekly and their experiences should be evaluated cooperatively. They should be directed to observe students' behaviour in real teaching settings. During the observation process, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to teach at schools thus gaining more experience in preparing lesson plans, organizing activities, managing classes, evaluating students' performance, and so on. Moreover, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to evaluate the attitudes of students at schools towards foreign language education in order to gain insight about the target group they will tutor, thus determining their own teaching objectives.

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