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The influence of higher education experiences on ELT students' learning outcomes

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Abstract

This study identifies and discusses whether and to what extent the learning outcomes are achieved in ELT Departments of two Turkish Universities based on the following two frameworks: The *European Profile for Language Teacher Education* and *Framework of Turkish Higher Education Competencies*. Findings regarding the contributions of in or out of class experiences to these expected outcomes are also discussed. The analyses demonstrate that not all these outcomes have been achieved and that what happens outside the classroom needs to be focused more to give the trainee teachers access to essential learning opportunities during their education.

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Keywords: Higher education; learning experience; learning outcome; language teacher education programs; out-of-class learning.

1. Introduction

Classroom experiences and curriculum are not the only influences on college outcomes. Studies on the influence of higher education on learning outcomes suggest that several personal, interpersonal and academic qualities are, as reported in earlier studies, attributable to out of classroom experiences (Kuh, 1995; Astin, 2003; Winston, 2003; Pascarella, 2006; Goodman, 2007). More specifically, it is suggested that the students' experiences during college have more impact on the students than the nature of the colleges or universities themselves. Popular measures of academic program quality such as educational expenditures per student, faculty/student ratios, faculty salaries, and research productivity alone had little or no direct effect on student development. Instead, learning, academic performance, and retention all were associated with the students' interactions with their peers, with faculty, with involvement in out-of-class activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Thus, identifying potential linkages between various types of experiences, both formal and non-formal, and different dimensions of student growth is crucial in enhancing our understanding of the diverse factors that play critical role in learning and personal development. Along the same line with this argument, the overall purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between learning outcomes and their antecedent experiences in higher education context. A

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learning outcome is defined by European Qualifications Framework (European Commission, 2008) as a statement of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process. In this sense, the scope of learning outcomes includes theoretical knowledge, practical skills and strategies and social competences.

This study aimed to explore to what extent these learning outcomes were acquired by senior students enrolled in English Language Teaching departments of two different universities located in Adana and Mersin, Turkey. We also attempted to reveal the web of relations between outcomes and any learning opportunity experienced both in classroom and non-classroom context.

2. Data Collection and Analyses

Participants of this study include 142 senior students enrolled in English Language Teaching departments of two different universities located in Adana and Mersin, Turkey. Most of these participants are in their fifth year at these universities as they attended preparatory class for one year before they started their education in the department.

Pascarella (2001) states that student self-reported outcomes shed light on how likely it is for students to attribute their growth to educational experiences. Acknowledging the validity of this idea in this study we administered a questionnaire that consisted of two main parts. The first part comprised 43 expected learning outcomes which were developed from two sources. The first was *European Profile for Language Teacher Education* (Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza, and McEvoy, 2004) which proposes key elements to be included in a teacher education program to equip language teachers with necessary professional competencies. The second source was the *Framework of National Higher Education Competencies* (Higher Education Institution, 2009) which was developed to revise and restructure university education in Turkey. For this part, we asked the participants to rate to what extent they acquired these expected learning outcomes on a 3-point Likert scale. The analysis was carried out under 3 categories as suggested by the European Profile for Language Teacher Education: *Knowledge and Understanding*, *Strategies and Skills* and *Values*. We carried out factor analysis on the items in these categories for data reduction and determination of the labels to be used for these categories. Items loading below .40 and cross-loading and freestanding ones were excluded from the data. Accordingly, the number of the items in Knowledge and Understanding were decreased from 15 to 10 and grouped under 2 labels; the ones in Strategies and Skills were decreased from 20 to 16 and grouped under 3 labels; the ones in Values were decreased from 8 to 7 and kept under one label. For the labels, we used the taxonomy of Kuh (1995) as explained in the next section.

The second part of the questionnaire was composed of the possible experiences that might have a contribution to learning outcomes. We examined the relevant literature to identify these experiences and came up with the following 16 experiences: *any peer interaction in or out of class*; *peer-observation* (while micro-teaching, in practicum, etc); *methodology-related academic course*; *academic courses other than methodology-related*; *projects/tasks requiring group work*; *classroom-based practice* (micro-teaching); *structured teacher feedback*; *contact with faculty our of class*; *part-time teaching*; *practicum*; *cultural life and diversity in campus life*; *workshops/seminars/conferences*; *exchange programs* (Erasmus); *independent learning activities* (library, websites, etc.); *student clubs*; and *classroom-based ICT activities*. Frequency analyses, cross tabulations were computed to determine the relationships between these experiences and the learning outcomes.

3. Findings and Discussion

For all the 3 categories, we wanted to see to what extent the trainee language teachers gained the expected outcomes and to what experiences these outcome domains were attributed. The first category, Knowledge and Understanding, refers to what trainee language teachers know and understand about teaching and learning language resulting from their education and has been examined within two labels. We examined this category under two labels. The first one, *Subject-Matter Confidence* refers to academic and course-related learning and the content mastery of the participants and contained the following items in the questionnaire: (a) classroom techniques and activities, (b) language teaching methodologies, (c) apply information and communication technology (ICT) for pedagogical use in the classroom, (d) theoretical knowledge about my field of study, (e) apply information and communication technology (ICT) for personal planning, organisation and resource discovery, (f) how to record learners' progress and (g) developing my linguistic competence.

The second label under Knowledge and Understanding, *Cognitive Skills and Intellectual Growth*, refers to the ability to synthesize information and experiences, seeing connections between thinking and experiences and reflective thought and it includes the following items: (a) critically analyzing the knowledge and skills learned, (b) scientifically analyzing concepts and ideas in my field of study, and (c) evaluating and interpreting scientific data in my field of study. Table 1 presents the extent to which the participants gained these outcomes and the experiences that contributed to these gains.

Table 1. Attributed Experiences to Gains in Knowledge and Understanding

Outcome Domains	Experiences							
	Method courses	Projects/tasks	Micro-teaching	Other courses	Structured feedback	Peer interaction	Peer observation	Independent studies
Subject Matter Confidence (59.1%)*	30.8%	28.3%	21.5%	19.3%	12.5%	18.5%	13.2%	16.3%
Cognitive Skills and Intellectual Growth (28%)*	24.4%	22%	11.2%	16.1%	--	--	--	14%

* percentage of self-reported outcomes

As seen in this table, 59.1% of the students think that they gained the subject matter confidence, which was mostly linked with the formal academic program and classroom-based activities, such as methodology courses, group projects and tasks assigned by the teacher, micro-teaching, other courses and structured teacher feedback. The average percentage of all of these experiences is 22.48. Our data reveal that peer-related activities also play a role on gaining the subject matter confidence, either through any interaction with their peers in or out of classroom (18.5%) or observing their peers in class or practicum (13.2%). The last antecedent experience here is independent studies carried out by the participants outside the classroom, such as using the library or web-sites (16.3%). One of the aims of formal academic programs of higher education is to give students theoretical knowledge; it thus comes as no surprise that most of the participants in this study have gained subject matter confidence. It is again expected that most of this knowledge is gained through experiences gained in or out of class by the guidance of the teacher as it is the teacher's role to offer insight into the subject matter.

Regarding the second label, *Cognitive Skills and Intellectual Growth*, we see that only 28% of the trainee teachers have acquired this skill (Table 1), which means that the participants have not yet developed the ways to critically analyze the knowledge and skills learned, or the concepts and ideas in their field of study and to evaluate and interpret the data in their field of study. Still, the ones who believe to have gained this outcome domain state that they have benefited most from formal academic programs, and only some from independent activities. At this point, it is clear that our participants have not benefited enough from the activities offered them in the university campus other than in-class experiences. Out-of-class experiences such as involvement in organizations and clubs, participation in cultural awareness activities, and perceptions that faculty are concerned about student development are believed to be more important to the development of critical thinking than in-class experiences (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Desler, and Zusman, 1994). Thus, it is not surprising that our participants have not developed their cognitive skills and intellectual growth. Developing such a critical and enquiring approach at an early stage is important in the transition between being a trainee teacher and a qualified one (Kelly, et al., 2004); therefore, a lack of acquisition of this skill will probably result in failure in our participants' transferring their knowledge into practice when they start their profession.

Strategies and Skills, which is related to items about knowing how to carry out what has been learned, was the second category and examined under three labels: Practical Competence, Autonomy and Self-Directedness, and Vocational Competence. *Practical Competence*, which means application of knowledge, relating theory to practice and using skills learned in the classroom, includes the following items in the questionnaire: (a) how to adapt teaching approaches to the educational context and individual needs of learners, (b) practical knowledge about my field of study, (c) how to apply various assessment procedure, and (d) practical application of curricula and syllabuses. It is usually expected from a good language teacher to adapt the methodological approaches and the curricula to meet a variety of different needs of the learners. However, we found out that only 48.2% of the participants state that they have gained this skill (Table 2). The experiences attributable to this outcome domain

yield the same results as in the previous one: the participants again link their gains mostly with formal academic program: methodology courses being the highest, micro-teaching, group projects/tasks, other courses, and structured teacher feedback (20.6% average of all). Peer-related activities again play a role in this gain to some extent (15.7% average of the two). The only difference observed here is the association of part-time work with practical competence (11%), which is not something unexpected since taking a part-time job while attending university undoubtedly have a positive affect on developing practical skills.

Table 2. Experiences Attributed to Gains in Strategies and Skills

Outcome Domains	Experiences								
	Method courses	projects/tasks	Micro-teaching	Other courses	Structured feedback	Peer interaction	Peer observation	Independent studies	Parttime work
Practical Competence (48.2%)*	30.2%	19.8%	22.3%	19%	12.1%	15.8%	12.5%	--	11%
Autonomy & Self-Directedness (49.6%)*	21.1%	20.7%	16.7%	13.9%	10.4%	18.7%	11.5%	16.5%	--
Vocational Competence (38.5%)*	20.1%	25%	12.5%	17.9%	--	19%	15.4%	12.1%	--

* percentage of self-reported outcomes

Autonomy and Self-Directedness in this category corresponds to developing self-awareness, taking responsibility of one's own learning, and movement from dependent to independent thinking and includes the following items in the questionnaire: (a) self awareness, (b) self confidence, (c) methods of learning to learn, (d) reflecting my ideas and proposals in a written and spoken form, (e) reflective practice and self-evaluation, (e) independent language learning activities, (f) getting the responsibility of solving complex problems that might occur during practice, and (g) maintaining and enhancing ongoing personal language competence. By this, it is meant teachers' learning how to improve their own abilities and competences independently which is a way to learner autonomy. We again found out that only half of the participants (49.6%) gained this skill (Table 2). The experiences that are attributable to this gain were again similar to the previous ones as most of them come from formal academic program and teacher-directed activities (16.5% average of all these experiences) and peer-related activities (peer interaction, 18.7% and peer observation, 11.5%). Yet, we can state that independent studies also have a contribution to achieving this outcome (16.5%).

The last label under Strategies and Skills is *Vocational Competence* which means acquiring attitudes, behaviors, and skills related to post-college employment and reflective practice. This competence was reflected in the questionnaire with the following items: (a) peer observation and peer review, (b) ability to do action research, (c) incorporating research into teaching, and (d) identifying, analyzing and proposing solutions to the problems in my field of study. Table 2 shows that only 38.5% of the trainee teachers have gained this skill. As it is in all the other gains mentioned previously, this one was also associated with formal academic program (18.8%, average of all related experiences), peer-related activities (peer-interaction, 19% and peer observation, 15.4%) and independent studies (12.1%). There is a common belief in literature that education is a social science and that teachers must be researchers who can generate sound curricular practice and the questions emerged from teacher-directed research are more appropriate, investigations are more natural, and the findings are more credible than the research done by others (Arias, 1995; Flake and Kuhs, 1995). In this sense, action research is a viable model for getting teachers involved in educational research and allowing them to gain a better understanding of their own teaching while pursuing critical inquiry to activate change on their own terms (Wajnryb, 1992). The results here show that our participants are not yet equipped with the necessary skills which will help them get ready for this important role which is to be teachers-as-researchers.

Our last category was Values, which indicates promotion of *Social and Cultural Values* such as respect for difference, active communication, a participatory attitude to society, and experience of a range of different cultures and lifestyles. The items related to this outcome domain were as follows: (a) importance of teaching and learning about foreign languages and cultures, (b) growth in team-working, collaboration and networking, inside and outside

the immediate school context, (c) knowledge of the diversity of languages and cultures, (d) gaining knowledge of the social and cultural values, (e) growth in exercising rights, possibilities, and privileges as a citizen, (f) developing ethical standards and values on gathering, interpreting, publicizing and applying data, and (g) relationships with educational institutions in appropriate countries.

Table 3. Experiences Attributed to Gains in Values

Outcome Domains	Experiences					
	Method courses	projects/ tasks	Other courses	Peer interaction	Independent studies	Campus life
Social and Cultural Values (43.2%)*	14.5%	18.5%	14.1%	18.7%	20.1	13.9%

* percentage of self-reported outcomes

Table 3 presents that 43.2% of the participants believe that they gained the social and cultural values in their education. Having social and cultural values helps the development of self-knowledge and understanding of the feelings, experiences, needs, purposes and rights of oneself and others (Understanding the Common Essential Learnings: A Handbook for Teachers). In education this is displayed by the teachers in the classroom structure they develop and teachers reflect their own values to their students in their actions, decisions, and interactions with students. Thus, we believe having the trainee teachers gain such an important qualification should be more focused in teacher training institutions in order to raise their awareness on the vital role they play in promoting positive social and cultural values.

When we look at the Table 3 for the experiences which contributed to this outcome, we can see that campus life, which was not a contributor in the other outcomes, had some role (13.9%) in helping the participants to achieve their social and cultural values. Besides this, formal education program, peer interaction and independent studies, were effective as they were in all the other outcome domains. Then it is possible to assume that offering university students a diversity of activities in campus and encouraging them to join these activities would result in a higher percentage of students who can gain social and cultural values.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the data revealed that students perceive some qualifications as an outcome of certain experiences. That is, learning outcomes in the areas of theoretical knowledge and practical skills and strategies were attributed by most students to the curriculum, course requirements such as projects and tasks and peer-related activities. The same type of experiences, with an addition of campus life, was also reported by students as related to the gains in social and cultural values throughout the higher education period. In other words, the teacher, the classroom and the interactions that take place in it and the course-related activities were perceived as learning tools by the participant students. The other learning environments, such as workshops, seminars, student clubs or ICT work, and the resulted educational experiences were not reported by students as the type of experiences that play a role in their learning. The possible reasons of this situation might be either the unavailability of such learning opportunities or simply students' not attending to such learning activities. In both cases, the institutions and the teaching staff have an important role to play. As Winston (2003) states the most important purpose of higher education is probably to enrich the educational experiences. Likewise, Kuh (1995) argues that institutions seeking to enhance learning productivity should pay more attention to encouraging students to take advantage of existing educational opportunities and universities should be accountable for creating the conditions that promote such behavior.

Another important result of this study concerns the issue of independent learning activities. The participant students reported that their experiences related to out-of-class independent learning activities had an impact on their learning. In all of the three categories of learning outcomes, independent work was found to be a contributive factor by the students. Thus we can infer that students invest time and energy to their learning voluntarily when they are out of the classroom. However, for their effort to result in rich gains, a need for academic guidance was expressed by many researchers in the field of higher education research. For example, Terenzini, Pascarella and Blimling (1999) assert that out-of-class independent learning activities have cumulative impact on learning and for this

impact to be stronger, such experiences should be a part of coordinated and mutually supportive programmatic interventions.

The conclusions of this study has valuable implications for language teacher education by identifying curricular and extracurricular activities, events, social interactions and resources that students attribute to their professional and personal development. Such information, we believe, would be useful to policy makers and teacher educators in structuring and managing organized in-class and out-of-class learning opportunities.

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