Reflections of Individual Differences on Students' Personal Development Plans

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to identify the 3rd year ELT students' individual differences regarding how they personally plan to develop themselves in terms of their weaknesses in English. The content analysis of their plans and interviews constituted the data for the study. The results indicate that the situation in Turkey as a monolingual and developing country has a direct influence on the way the students prepare their plans.

Keywords: Teacher education; development plans; individual differences; student-teachers; weaknesses in language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Lately, non-native language teacher's professional competence has been the scope of various research. Professional competence is claimed to consist of two components: language competence and communicative competence. Language awareness, on the other hand, is an aid in both. (Thomas, 1987 in Cots and Arno (200, 59). Self evaluation regarding language competence can be considered as a useful means for a language teacher to identify his/her weaknesses and strengths which in turn, may help to design a route for further development. Self evaluation triggers awareness, autonomy, intrinsic motivation as well as ability to set one's own goals (Brown, 2005). Research on the strengths and weaknesses non-native teachers of English experience in different aspects of language which are considered to influence their teaching skills has shed light onto the matter (Braine,2006). Llurda's study, for example, inspired by the hypothesis that "high-level language skills are essential for NNS language teachers' successful teaching. Pedagogical skills are also important, provided an acceptable level of the former has been achieved" examined the skills needed by non-native speakers to become successful language teachers as viewed by their practicum supervisors (2006, 132). The research findings revealed that the language problems that the teachers experience are particularly in the communication in L2 (spoken and written) and that the teachers who have failed are those who have generally had both language and teaching skills problems. Similarly, Cullan (2002, 29) emphasizes the importance of the language proficiency in teaching stating "a teacher without the requisite language skills will crucially lack authority and self confidence in the classroom, and this will affect all aspects of his or her performance."

1. The Study

This study explores the probable individual differences regarding how students personally plan to develop themselves in terms of their weaknesses in English. The study was conducted within the framework of methodology courses offered in two semesters.

ELT-1 starts in the second term of the 2nd year and continues as ELT-2 in the first term of the 3rd year. In this course, the students study the CEF and English curriculum designed by the Turkish ministry of education in accordance with CEF. They work on the "can do statements" and make discussions on the relevance of the activities in the English course book to the descriptors of CEF. In addition, they criticise the curriculum and course book in terms of negative and positive aspects, and discuss the feasibility of implementation of the new curriculum in the Turkish context.

Toward the end of the course, the students evaluate their levels in English by self-assessment checklists at C1-C2 level. Then, they sit for a standard proficiency exam. The answer key is given to the students and at the end of the exam they make evaluations on their own exam sheets. Taking into account the exam results and their feelings during the exam, they are asked to write reflections on how, at the beginning, they viewed their level of English, what weaknesses and strengths they detected in themselves at the end of this process and how they viewed their levels at the end of the course. Following this procedure, the students prepare monthly development plans to improve themselves on the weaknesses they identified in the exam. The content analysis of these development plans constitutes the main source of data in this study.

Among totally 48 ELT-I students, 25 randomly selected 3rd year students participated in this study by means of their development plans. Randomly selected ten out of these 25 students also contributed to the study with their answers to the interview questions.

The study specifically focused on whether students' development plans reveal any individual differences in the strategies they used to improve their weaknesses via their plans.

II.RESULTS

The content analysis of the students' development plans revealed that the most frequently encountered problem in the exam was listening (20). Speaking appeared to be the second problematic issue (3) followed by vocabulary (2) and grammar (1).

1.1   Plans to Improve Listening

When we look at the ways students planned to overcome their weaknesses in listening, we see that they benefited from audio-visuals, audio materials as well as reading and speaking activities. Among all, watching the news on foreign channels appears to be the mostly preferred way to improve in listening (n: 19). This is followed by watching movies (n: 16) and serials (n: 11) as a means for development. Watching documentaries, audio-visuals on MP4, lip-reading, and watching cartoons are other strategies cited only once each. The rationale underlying the choice of students to be involved more in television watching, as they put it during the interviews, is related to the fact that it is easily attainable and of no additional cost to them.

Using audio materials to improve listening was another category emerged in the analysis of the students' development plans. Thirteen students stated that they used songs to become more familiar with

English sounds and pronunciation. While seven claimed to use the activities on the net, six listened to the radio broad casts. Listening to authentic dialogues on the MP3 player (n:3) listening to classmates' English with more care (n:2), Doing listening and note-taking activities, doing listen and repeat activities, doing pod-cast activities, doing a listening test from the internet-based TOEFL exam (n: 1 each) were the other strategies followed by the students.

Students further used reading skill as an aid to improve their listening. It appears that reading audio-books (n: 5) and reading articles about how to overcome listening problems (n:1) are the two strategies used.

Speaking was also cited as a means to improve in listening. The mostly preferred way to achieve that as identified in their plans was making video calls on MSN (n.3). Practice English with native friends (n: 2), attending a conversation club (n: 1), working in holiday resorts (n: 1), and making face book chats (n: 1) were the other strategies under this category. Two students sought for improvement by attending ELT seminars as well as involving in self-evaluation activities.

1.2   Plans to Improve Speaking

In order to develop themselves in speaking, students utilised two technological means; chatting with native speakers on the net (n: 2), and watching BBC and CNBC-E (n: 1). Two students preferred speaking to oneself in English and making friends with Erasmus students to improve in speaking. In addition, one of the participants stated that s/he used read aloud activities for the same purpose.

1.3   Plans to Improve Vocabulary

Two students who had problems with vocabulary knowledge at the end of the test they took, used newspapers and articles to build up on their knowledge of vocabulary. As they elaborated during the interviews, they made use of these texts to select and study unfamiliar words. Furthermore, they tried to use these words in their speech and writing (n: 1). Students utilised writing activities to improve their repertoire of words not only by using new words in their texts but also by preparing vocabulary lists (n: 3) and keeping a vocabulary notebook where they both noted the definitions and sample sentences with them (n: 1). One of the participants tried to solve his problem by memorising phrases which s/he believing that phrases would constitute a context for the unknown word which in turn would help to keep it in mind more easily.

Only one student appeared to have problems with grammar and the solution he found was reviewing the grammar rules followed by practise of the grammar item reviewed

III.ASPIRATIONS AND OBSTACLES

During the interviews the students were asked if they had the chance, what other ways they would use to improve themselves in terms of their identified weaknesses. Of totally 25 students, seventeen without hesitation chose to going to foreign countries where they would inevitably have to interact in the target language in a natural environment. This way, as they believed, their weaknesses would take progress without direct effort. Two students wanted to join student organisations, another two thought of continuing their education abroad and one of them stated that s/he would take part in Erasmus and work and travel programmes. The rest were content with what they were actually doing to improve themselves.

When questioned about the obstacles that prevented them from putting these plans into action, the most commonly cited obstacle appeared to be the economical situations they had been experiencing (n: 14). Because the participants were third year students and had only one and a half years to graduate, school constituted another burden for them to realise their plans (n: 2). Two students stated that family related problems raised difficulties for them. The government exam they have to sit after graduation in order to be assigned to schools as teachers (n: 1) and bureaucratic reasons (n: 1) were deemed as barriers for their plans to be materialised.

IV.DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study attempted to identify the weaknesses third year ELT students experienced in the language they were about to teach and how they planned to progress toward improvement in these identified areas. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the content of weekly development plans students made based on their weaknesses was analysed. In addition, interviews were held in order to understand the rationale behind their choices and bring depth to the study. The findings revealed that the majority of the students had problems with listening skill which may be attributed to the fact that classes in Turkey as a monolingual country are the only places the language learners can be exposed to the target language. In most cases, as the teachers very frequently switch to the mother tongue or even the medium of English instruction is Turkish, learners can not be said to acquire especially listening and speaking skills. Another weakness the students spotted in themselves by means of the test they took was related with vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, this has got a connection with the way students are taught languages at schools, which is an outcome of the back wash effect of university entrance exams students take. Due to the nature of this exam, students memorise words in a traditional and rote manner, however they do not have the opportunity to practice these words in meaningful contexts. This way, words are stored in short term memories and after the university exam, they are mostly forgotten. As the findings suggest, among the 25 students who participated in this study, there was only one student who had problems with grammar. The way s/he chose to strengthen this weakness was by practising grammar rule which supports our argument on the educational system in turkey.

When we consider the choices the students made to deal with their weaknesses, although they would prefer going abroad to improve their language, we see that they planned to watch foreign television channels, do various activities on the internet and read and write. These all may be connected with the fact that Turkey as a developing country has been suffering from the effects of economic crisis, which in turn makes it almost impossible for most to spare funds for education abroad. This view can be said to have been validated by the students' answers during the interviews where they stated that the biggest obstacle to put their plans in action was the economic situation they were in. In addition, as they were very close to graduation, they did not want to take risks to impede their education because graduation means assigning to schools, and beginning to get wages.

To conclude, we may suggest that the weaknesses students have in the target language as prospective teachers and the plans they make to better their situation are directly related with the educational system and the economical situation in the country respectively. This seems to be the reason why we detected more similarities rather than differences in terms of both the problems experienced and solutions planned in this study. Thus, the

findings presented in this study call for an urgent need for the teacher education institutions to provide the future teachers with more opportunities for language improvement as Berry (1991, 99) puts it "language improvement is a valid aim of teacher training since it:

a) increases teacher confidence

b) facilitates the use of the target language in the classroom

c) widens the choice of methodology."

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