TURKISH EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' CHARACTERIZATION OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

One of the key questions educational researchers investigate involves better understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Researchers in general education have identified several universal teacher characteristics that transcend various disciplines. While educational researchers agree that these characteristics are relatively consistent across different subject matters, there is little agreement regarding discipline-specific teacher characteristics (Bell, 2005). The present study aims to investigate Turkish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pre-service teachers' perceptions of the distinctive characteristics of language teachers. The participants were 85 freshman level and 98 senior level Turkish pre-service teachers (PTs) of English enrolled in a state university in Istanbul, Turkey. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire adapted from Lee (2010).

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of being a teacher has concerned many educational researchers who focused on the characteristics of teachers across different disciplines (Brophy & Good, 1986; Murray, 1991). However, there is still little agreement on the characteristics of specific subject matter teachers, i.e., language teachers (Bell, 2005). Borg (2006) points out that language teacher education programs are assumed to have an understanding of what it means to be a language teacher; yet, the distinctive characteristics of a language teacher are not easy to define without considering the social and cultural context of teaching and learning. There have been a limited number of studies focusing on how pre- and in-service language teachers characterize teachers (Bell, 2005; Borg, 2006; Mullock, 2003).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When research on characterization of teachers in general education is reviewed, it is seen that most of the studies focus on identifying the features of effective teachers and on comparing characteristics of different subject matter teachers. Findings of the studies on the characterization of effective teachers revealed that effective teachers were perceived as having good and strong rapport with students and successful instructional organization and as being task oriented, enthusiastic, and clear in explaining the subject matter (Murray, 1991; Perry, 1985; Perry & Penner, 1990). Studies comparing teachers of different disciplines found some differences. For example, in their study with teachers of humanities and natural sciences, Murray and Renaud (1995) found that humanities teachers were characterized as having more positive attitudes, more enthusiasm, and stronger organization skills than teachers of natural sciences implying that teachers of different disciplines are perceived differently.

A number of studies were also conducted in order to characterize effective language teachers (Bell, 2005; Brosh, 1996; Lee, 2010; Mullock, 2003; Park & Lee, 2006). For example, Bell (2005) listed characteristics of effective foreign language teachers as perceived by in-service foreign language teachers (i.e., French, German and Spanish) in the United States. Being enthusiastic for the target language and culture, having competence in the target language, having extensive knowledge about language, and finally using group work to encourage greater degree of learner involvement were found to be the features of effective language teachers. In another study, Mullock (2003) identified the characteristics of a good English language teacher as perceived by pre-service teachers from various countries. The findings were as follows: a good English language teacher knows and understands students' needs and strengths and/or weaknesses, knows the subject matter, and is skilled in teaching techniques and methods. Brosh (1996) investigated the desirable characteristics of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers as perceived by both high school in-service teachers and students in Israel. The results revealed that being knowledgeable and competent in the target language and being clear in explaining the instructions are perceived to be the most important characteristics of language teachers. Similarly, Park and Lee (2006) focused on the identification of the characteristics of effective EFL teachers by both high school in-service teachers and students in South Korea. The perceived desirable characteristics were language teachers' being proficient in language, appealing to learners' interest areas, and raising learners' confidence and motivation. In addition to the abovementioned studies which aimed at understanding the effective and desirable characteristics of language teachers, Borg (2006) attempted to classify the distinctive and unique

characteristics of foreign language teachers in general. He identified 11 characteristics that are unique to and distinctive of foreign language teachers as perceived by non-native EFL pre- and in-service EFL teachers from different European countries. Those characteristics were found to be the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, methodology, teacher-learner interactions, non-native issues, teachers' characteristics, training, status, errors, student body, and commercialization (p. 24). Finally, Lee (2010) investigated Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of some of the unique characteristics of EFL teachers that distinguish them from teachers of other subjects. He found out that they perceive EFL teachers to be unique in four main categories: the complex nature of the subject matter, the content of teaching, teaching approach, and teacher personality.

Based on the review of the literature above, it can be concluded that the characterization of effective teachers of different disciplines vary depending on the context and the participants, i.e., in-service teachers, PTs or students. Therefore, considering the need to investigate the characterization of foreign language teachers in different settings and by different people, the aim of this small-scale study is to identify domain-specific characteristics of foreign language teachers, in contrast to different subject matter teachers, in an EFL setting, Turkey, which has not been explored in terms of the relevant issue before. Specifically, the present study aims to report and compare the distinctive and unique characteristics of EFL teachers and language teaching as perceived by Turkish freshman and senior pre-service EFL teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Setting

Eighty-five freshman and 98 senior Turkish PTs of English, enrolled at the English Language Teaching department of a state university in Turkey participated in the study. The university where the present study was conducted is both an English and Turkish medium university. In the four-year English Language Teaching program the basic skills courses, e.g., Reading, Writing, Grammar and Speaking, are offered in the freshman year. Method courses such as Approaches and Methods, Second Language Acquisition, are offered in the subsequent years. The participating PTs were all native speakers of Turkish.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in the spring term of the 2009-2010 academic year by means of a questionnaire adapted from Lee (2010). The questionnaire consisted of two parts with a total number of 30 items (on a 5-point Likert scale) and aimed to provide a characterization of EFL teachers and teaching. The first part of the questionnaire consisting of 22 closed-response items examines the distinctive characteristics of EFL teachers in comparison with the teachers of other subjects. The second part of the questionnaire with 8 closed-ended items focused on the characteristics of English language teaching.

The questionnaire was piloted with 34 PTs in the same department and the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the present study was .81. Descriptive analysis of the data was conducted using SPSS 13.0 and mean scores and their standard deviations were calculated for each item in order to identify characteristics specific to the domain of EFL teachers and teaching as perceived by EFL PTs.

FINDINGS

The mean scores and standard deviations of the responses of PTs of English to the first part of the scale were computed in order to identify how they characterize English language teachers and to see whether there are differences in their perceptions. Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and ranks of the perceptions of both freshman and senior Turkish pre-service EFL teachers.

Analysis of the data revealed that perceptions of freshman PTs of English focused on affective factors in their characterization. The item "English language teachers are more motivating" had the highest mean score (M= 4.33) followed by "English language teachers encourage learners to express their needs and preferences for learning more" (M= 4.26) and "English language teachers have more positive attitudes" (M= 4.25). The characterization of senior PTs, on the other hand, showed that the items focusing on teachers' methodology received the highest mean scores. They agreed that, compared to other subject matter teachers, "English language teachers are more creative" (M= 4.20) "English language teachers use more progressive teaching methodology" (M= 4.08) and "English language teachers use more authentic activities" (M= 4.05). While the items with the highest ranks showed differences between the groups, the items with the lowest mean scores were the same for both freshman and senior PTs of English. They all stated their disagreement on the items stating that "English language teachers have lower status" (M= 1.99 for freshman PTs and M= 1.94 for senior PTs), "English language teachers use

English which creates a greater distance between teachers and students" (M=2.49 for freshman PTs and M= 2.47 for senior PTs) and "English language teachers use less traditional lecture-style approach" (M= 3.27 for freshman PTs and M= 3.52 for senior PTs).

When the remaining items comparing English language teachers to the teachers of other subject matters were analyzed, it was seen that both freshman and senior PTs agreed with all the positive statements such as "English language teachers spend more time preparing for lessons," "English language teachers have a better sense of humor," and "English language teachers teach learners to use learning strategies and skills more" (see Table 1 for the mean scores and standard deviations of each item).

In the second part of the scale, PTs were asked to rate their opinions on "teaching English" in order to understand their perceptions of the distinctive characteristics of English language teaching (see Table 2). The item "Teaching English involves developing learners' communication skills" received the highest mean score from both the freshman and senior PTs (M= 4.24 and M= 4.47, respectively). The item receiving the second highest mean score for both groups of PTs was "Teaching English involves more than teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (M= 4.12 for freshman, M= 4.38 for senior PTs). "Teaching English involves teaching the culture of English-speaking countries" was the third item receiving the highest mean score (M= 3.79 for freshman PTs and M= 4.05 for senior PTs). When the items receiving the lowest mean scores were analyzed, it was seen that freshman PTs were indecisive for the items stating that "Teaching English means correcting every mistake learners make" (M= 3.39), "Teaching English is more difficult than teaching other subjects" (M= 3.42) and "Teaching English is difficult because mastering English takes a long time" (M= 3.47). Similarly, senior PTs were indecisive for the following two statements: "Teaching English is more difficult than teaching other subjects" (M= 3.34) and "Teaching English is difficult because non-native English teachers' abilities are compared to that of native speakers" (M= 3.32). They, on the other hand, did not agree that "Teaching English means correcting every mistake learners make" (M= 2.20).

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Table 1

Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and ranks of the distinctive characteristics of EFL teachers

Item No.	Items	Freshman (N= 85)			Senior (N= 98)		
		Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank
English language teachers							
(1)	use more progressive teaching methodology.	4.09	.98	9	4.08	.89	2
(2)	tolerate more of learners‘ mistakes.	4	1.06	12	3.69	.83	15
(3)	encourage more speaking in class.	4.18	1.06	6	4.03	1.13	5
(4)	use more authentic activities.	3.99	.92	13	4.05	1.08	3
(5)	are more creative.	4.24	.93	4	4.20	.95	1
(6)	are more flexible.	4.06	1.06	11	3.93	.82	9
(7)	show more enthusiasm.	4.23	1.01	5	4.08	.76	2
(8)	are better trained.	4.24	.99	4	3.90	.92	10
(9)	have lower status.	1.99	1.17	18	1.94	.94	19
(10)	have a closer relationship with students.	4.08	.95	10	3.94	.82	8
(11)	spend more time preparing for lessons.	3.79	1.07	14	3.99	.95	6
(12)	help learners gain skills which have more practical relevance to real life.	4.17	1	7	3.97	.86	7
(13)	have a more difficult job because they have to explain things to learners in English.	3.73	1.27	15	3.53	1.14	16
(14)	use English which creates a greater distance between teachers and students.	2.49	1.28	17	2.47	.99	18
(15)	encourage more student involvement.	4.15	.79	8	4.04	.75	4
(16)	have a better sense of humor.	4.06	.90	11	3.73	.97	13
(17)	are more motivating.	4.33	.85	1	3.84	.83	11
(18)	have more positive attitudes.	4.25	.94	3	3.93	.79	9
(19)	use less traditional lecture-style approach.	3.27	.91	16	3.52	.96	17
(20)	teach learners to use learning strategies and skills more.	4.15	.80	8	3.81	.96	12
(21)	encourage learners to express their needs and preferences for learning more.	4.26	.88	2	3.94	.85	8
(22)	know and understand students‘ strengths and weaknesses more.	4.08	1.01	10	3.70	.91	14

Note. N: # of students

* 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (can’t decide), 2 (disagree), 1 (strongly disagree)

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Table 2
Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and ranks of the distinctive characteristics of English language teaching

Item	Freshman (N= 85)			Senior (N= 98)		
	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank
Teaching English…						
(1) involves more than teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	4.12	.99	2	4.38	.81	2
(2) involves teaching the cultures of English-speaking countries.	3.79	1.21	3	4.05	.87	3
(3) involves developing learners' communication skills.	4.24	.87	1	4.47	.67	1
(4) means correcting every mistake learners make.	3.39	1.05	8	2.20	1.18	8
(5) is more difficult than teaching other subjects.	3.42	1.22	7	3.34	1.11	6
(6) is difficult because mastering English takes a long time.	3.47	1.22	6	3.56	1.09	4
(7) is difficult because teachers and learners work in a non-native language.	3.53	1.12	5	3.51	1.01	5
(8) is difficult because non-native English teachers' abilities are compared to that of native speakers.	3.55	.99	4	3.32	.99	7

Note. N: # of students
* 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (can't decide), 2 (disagree), 1 (strongly disagree)

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study has shown that PTs perceive language teachers as having distinctive characteristics compared to the teachers of other disciplines. While freshman PTs regarded affective characteristics (i.e., having more positive attitudes and being motivating) as distinguishing features of EFL teachers, senior PTs focused on teachers' methodology (i.e., using more progressive teaching methodology and being more creative as being unique to language teachers), both supporting Borg's (2006) identification of language teachers and Lee's (2010) findings. The reasons behind the differing perceptions of freshman and senior PTs might be attributed to the methodology courses (i.e., Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, Special Teaching Techniques) offered in the four-year teacher education program. Senior PTs, who have already taken the courses, might have considered the role and the importance of methodological knowledge as a crucial characteristic of language teachers. Some similarities were also observed in the responses of freshman and senior PTs. They both agreed that language teachers use learning strategies and skills more than teachers in other domains. In relation to the items stating that language teachers have a lower status than other subject matter teachers, their English use creates a distance between themselves and students and they use less traditional lecture-style approach, all PTs expressed their disagreement.

In terms of distinctive characteristics of language teaching, both freshman and senior PTs agreed that teaching English involves developing communication skills of learners and teaching more than four basic skills in line with the findings of Borg (2006) and Lee (2010). In addition, they perceived that teaching English means teaching the target culture supporting the findings of Bell (2003). These findings imply that PTs' perceive language as a tool for communication and culture as an inseparable part of it. In terms of error correction, PTs reported different viewpoints. Freshman PTs were indecisive whether teaching English means correcting every mistake or not. In contrast, senior PTs did not agree with this item similar to Lee (2010). The reason for this difference might be the training on the types, amount and time of error correction received by senior PTs in their teacher education program. Freshman PTs' beliefs on error correction might have been shaped by their previous schooling experience.

Before concluding, some limitations of the study need to be addressed. First, the data for the study included only freshman and senior PTs. Further research can investigate the perceptions of PTs at other levels in the same institution. In addition, data can be gathered from the instructors working at the same institution and/or

from in-service teachers to compare the similarities and differences among the different groups. Furthermore, the quantitative nature of this study has limitations. Further research can use additional qualitative methods to get an in-depth understanding of the reasons behind PTs' perceptions.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers some implications. As the study suggests, EFL teachers and teaching are perceived as distinctive and unique, but factors related to context and participants may influence the perceptions about what it means to be a language teacher and what is involved in language teaching. Language education programs must include the differing contextual factors and voices of all stakeholders to be able to train PTs on the complex structure of being a language teacher. By this way, language teacher education can have a better understanding of how language teachers are characterized. Moreover, these programs can provide a more detailed description of the uniqueness of language teachers and teaching and this may be more meaningful and relevant to PTs and their prospective students within a specific social and educational context.

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