An Autoethnography of Teaching English to Young Learners: From Theory to Practice

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ABSTRACT In this paper, the researcher look into the own theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching English to young learners through an autoethnographical research design.In order to understand to what extentthese theory-driven conclusions "actually work" in primary school English language classrooms, the researcher recorded autoethnographical entries over a period of four months while teaching at a state-run primary school in Antalya, Turkey. These notes contain feelings and opinions about teaching and theoretical knowledge. The autoethographical work revealed that the researcher had difficulties in classroom management, keeping students' interest in the activities, using the mother tongue of the learners in the classroom, and using too many instructional materials in number and nature.

INTRODUCTION

Research in Turkey on young learners' learning of English as a foreign language (hereafter, EFL) is scarce, especially when the nature of the classroom tasks and procedures used in Turkish primary schools are considered. However, there are some research studies published in academic journals that have touched upon some issues related to teaching foreign languages to young learners such as those near the age factor (Uslu 1998; Tutas 2000; Yigiter 2015), teachers' use of methods and approaches in young learners' EFL classrooms (Kirkgöz 2008), coursebooks used in primary school EFL classrooms (Arikan and Tekir 2007; Arikan 2009; Cakir 2010; Saracand Arikan 2010; Deneme et al. 2011; Bozdogan 2012), using technology, games, and cartoons (Er 2008; Arikan and Ulas-Taraf 2010; Yolageldili and Arikan 2011; Coskun 2013), policy and curriculum (Kirkgoz 2007; Topkaya and Kucuk 2010; Ozmatyatli and Ozkul 2013; Tok and Sinan 2014), ideal or exemplary applications in other countries (Ansin 2006; Aslan 2008; Sevik 2008), and teachers' and parents' views (Genc-Ilter and Er 2007; Gursoy et al. 2013). Although only very few of them are empirical studies, these studies reveal the need for continuous teacher development opportunities, application of new instructional activities, further changes in policies and curricula, and serious changes in the coursebooks used in classrooms especially when the quality of the language in coursebooks is considered. Despite the fact that such research exists on young learners' English language classrooms in Turkey, naturalistic studies that share the lived experiences of English language teachers in their classrooms is yet scarce and autobiographical accounts are non-existent.

Scott and Yteberg (1990) articulate that in young learners' classrooms, words are not enough and visual materials and the human body must be used while teaching through songs, rhymes, and games. Similarly, McKay and Guse (2007: 3) underline the importance of paying attention to multiple intelligences through enjoyable and achievable hands-on activities that appeal to young learners' sense of fun. These suggestions are in line with the current national curriculum for primary schools' English language lessons, as "the new curriculum strives to foster an enjoyable and motivating learning environment where young learners/users of English feel comfortable and supported throughout the learning process. Authentic materials, drama and role play, and hands-on activities are implemented to stress the communicative nature of English" (Bakanligi et al. 2013: ii).

Throughout the autobiographer's academic life as a teacher educator, the researcher has always been intrigued by the concerns raised by classroom teachers (practitioners) and academics whose theory-driven suggestions do not seem to be working in primary and secondary schools and universities. The impetus for conducting an autoethography grew out of a will-

ingness to understand to what extent theory-driven conclusions work in primary school English language classrooms. Similar to Ryan's (2012) visit to another country that enabled him to be a teacher rather than a student, the researcher found himself in another land with a new role. Moving from university-level English language teacher education classes to young learners' English language classrooms was a juxtaposition of the "theory" he taught especially in his "Teaching English to Young Learners I and II" courses and "practice," the act of being in a young learners' classroom. Looking into experiences in this change of spaces and roles, the researcher tried to find answers to a single question, that is, "what are the experiences of a researcher who is a teacher educator while teaching 3rd graders in terms of what he previously considered to be true from a theoretical viewpoint?"

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

While the researcher's previous duty was writing books and papers and teaching prospective teachers of English how to teach English to young learners, in the latter profession, the task of the researcher (now an autoethnographer) was to teach English to children directly. Hence, the autoethnographer faced the reality of teaching kids in a way to understand what actually happens in young learners' English language classrooms in Turkey rather than passing largely theoretical knowledge unto prospective teachers who would teach English in the future.

Autoethnography is a branch of what is elsewhere called social anthropology. In social anthropology, As Guvenc (1991) claims, researchers enter a society, or a field, and without being contented with mere observation, they constantly ask questions, collect data on the subject under study, prepare hypotheses, and perform experiments. An autoethnography focuses on one particular aspect of being and how it was achieved in interaction with the socio-cultural contexts by exploring one's "learning experience, struggles, solutions, failures and successes" (Kaveh 2012: 7). Ricci (2003: 594) states that by reading an autoethnography, the reader can "experience something new" so as "to feel, to learn, to discover, to co-create" (p. 594).

As Ellis (2004) articulates, an autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno). An autoethnography focuses on one specific aspect of who the person currently is and how he/she has reached this point in his/her life (Lapidus et al. 2013: 27). In other words, in an autoethnography, the writer (autoethnographer) writes about a single case in her life. Although moving from the self, as Corbett (2003: 108) argues, an ethnographic observer can "start to work towards larger generalizations that can later be checked against interviews and library research" while such research can make the ethnographic researcher put herself into the place of others.

Ellis et al. (2011) claim that autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography (writing about one's past) and ethnography (studying a culture's practices) so as to produce aesthetic, evocative, and thick descriptions of experience. Bochner and Ellis (1996) write that "Ethnography is what ethnographers do. It's an activity. Ethnographers inscribe patterns of cultural experience; they give perspective on life. They interact, they take note, they photograph, moralize, and write" (cited in Lapidus et al. 2013: 28). In that sense, autoethnography is an amalgamation of print, audio, and visual documents produced by a researcher who aims to provide readers with a complete picture of a single problem or case.

When it comes to reporting findings, as Raab (2013) argues, "autoethnographical writing highlights action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and a sense of self-consciousness" (Raab 2013: 2). Hence, it can be said that autoethnographical research studies try to find answers to researchers' heart-felt questions that stem from their tangible problems within a specific society. In their autoethnographical research, Lapidus et al. (2013) mention In this auto ethnography of an L2, Ryan (2012) juxtaposes his experience as an L2 learner with his experience as both an ESL teacher and a graduate student. While this juxtaposition leads him to question some of the methods that L2 teachers use, through his autoethnography, he re-examines his identity as an L2 learner/teacher.

The state school in which this research took place is situated in Konyaalti, Antalya. The majority of the students enrolled at the school are from middle and upper-middle class families and

the technological equipment in the classrooms is up-to-date and in use. The classroom teacher is a smiling, positive, and energetic man in his mid-thirties and is loved by the students very much as personal observations have shown. He is attentive to students' problems and is good at his content knowledge as in-class observations and conversations with some parents and teachers put forward. Students involved in the research are 3rd graders who are 8 year olds.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

The researcher kept a research diary throughout his involvement in the young learners' classroom. According to Fox et al. (2007: 148), a research diary "is a comprehensive record of the research process and contains a reflection on that process." The autoethnographies were written over a period of four months (one class-hour per week). The researcher took notes of his feelings and opinions about classroom teaching and re-read them on a daily basis, commenting further on these notes, the whole of which has become the data in this research.

Issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability have been a concern for qualitative research studies. Ellis et al.'s (2011) discussion of the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability may shed light on what makes this particular autoethnographical paper reliable, valid, and generalizable. Reliability, in qualitative research, refers to the narrator's credibility. In that sense, the researcher/author should give sufficient amount of "factual evidence" from his or her experiences in order to make the conclusions reliable by constantly asking himself/herself "Does what I write make 'me' believe that this is actually what happened to me?" (Bochner 2002: 86). When the issue of validity is considered, "verisimilitude" is a key concern that affects the scientific quality of any qualitative study. Evoking a feeling in the readers' minds that the experience described is lifelike, believable, possible, and true makes up the core of the issue of validity. The autoethnographical writing must connect readers to writers while providing continuity in their lives. In order to make an autoethnographical writing valid, the researcher/author should ask, "Does the story enable the reader to enter my 'subjective world'?" (Plummer 2001: 401). Finally, as is the case in any research study, readers compare their lives to the autoethnogra-

pher's, by thinking about how the writers' lives are similar and different and the reasons why, and by feeling that the stories have informed them about unfamiliar people or lives (Ellis 2004; Flick 2010). Hence, an autoethnographical writing should give the reader a sense of the feeling that what is read would be experienced in the majority of similar cases or contexts so as to claim that the findings are "generalizable." To do that, the researcher shared his journal entries and their analyses with a professor who had also been teaching "Teaching English to Young Learners I and II" courses. With her oral feedback, the researcher finalized his analyses and shaped the paper accordingly while ensuring that his findings are based directly on his teaching experiences.

RESULTS

The researcher's conversations with the classroom teacher pointed at some problems associated with the class. The teacher evaluates the students as highly motivated kids, most of whom are very energetic and outgoing learners. The problems he comments on are mostly related with the classroom atmosphere itself. First, the classroom teacher is not happy about the class size. As he claims, there are 37 students in the classroom, which negatively affects the time the teacher can allocate to each learner. Similarly, this large class size increases the noise created by these learners, bringing classroom management problems. Second, the teacher has problems with attaining instructional materials because of financial reasons. Although he wants to make use of a variety of instructional materials, the school has minimal budget, which requires parents to share the burden of some costs. Finally, the teacher's observations in the researcher's own classroom teaching revealed that he was happy about practices of making the students speak, sing, and play instructional games in English rather than asking students to "write or copy down" what is on the board. In one chat during the break, he confessed that he "was taught English primarily through reading and writing which gave [him] a passing score in the KPDS/YDS exam, but could not enable [him] exchange a few words with tourists in Antalya." He finally said "I am so happy that my students are talking in your classes all the time. Some of them have started greeting me in English with a grin on their faces. I like their progress and enjoy

sharing happiness. I wish I was taught this way." Apart from these, the major themes revealed through analysis of the data are given and discussed below.

Theme 1: Classroom Management

The major theme present in the notes is about the whole setting that was new to the researcher. Primary school classrooms, he came to see, have almost no similarity with university level classrooms. Comparing university level classes with young learners' may sound awkward, but reading the notes can help the readers understand:

"Teaching English is not the only thing I do in this class. In the middle of joyful singing activity, a girl came up to me running, hugged and said 'I love you!' I responded, not knowing what do, 'Thank you!' [The knowledge I gained in the US concerning teachers' bodily contact with young learners made me feel uncomfortable because I was not sure if a student's hug was normal.] She then said to me 'You smell like my father!' to which I responded 'Maybe we use the same cologne.' Her answer made me feel awful as I turned red with embarrassment 'No. My father smokes, too!' I never went into the classroom having smoked a cigarette again." (November 2013)

This made the researcher realize the importance of "attitude goals" in addition to the "content goals" in course planning, as well as the importance of the body of the teacher in young learners' classrooms. As can be seen in the extract above, the researcher came to understand the importance of the psychology of learning with young learners as well as the importance of attitude goals rather than cognitive ones. His experiences revealed that attitude goals often remain in the background in many young learners' classrooms while they were not even considered to be important in adults' education.

In the autobiographical notes, the researcher's shortcomings as a teacher with "deep" theoretical knowledge but "shallow" practical knowledge and experience have appeared in a way to exemplify his frustration as though he was a novice teacher in the classroom:

"I am exhausted. These kids... They did not stop for a second. There was nothing but a horrible chaos in the classroom. They rarely listened to my instructions such as "be quiet!" but, to my surprise, one of the students yelled out *"be a flower" and I remembered! I yelled out "be a flower!" and then the students started cooling down and stopped walking around in the classroom. I learned the best of my new classroom management skills from a student! She was a life-saver."* (November, 2013)

Students' prior knowledge of English has contributed to the problems associated with the researcher's poor classroom management skills that could not put an end to the chaos in the classroom. He wrote:

"Two or three students have already learned some English before. They are my spoilers. They are the first to answer my questions and often times others repeat what these knowledgeable ones previously have said" (December 2013).

This situation that signals a problem with young learners' proficiency or knowledge levels suggests putting young learners into groups based on their levels. At first this seems like a minor detail, despite its importance, because of the fact that the practice of teaching English to young learners in Turkish primary schools is new and there are many other pressing problems such as crowded classrooms, quality of materials, and teachers. However, it is expected that this issue will be discussed in the future as time passes and as teachers start complaining about similar problems. The researcher had already known, theoretically at least, that young learners at the age of eight or nine were aware of and keen on following the rules and they had especially enjoyed making sure others followed the rules as well. In the middle of a settle-down activity, a coloring activity to be more exact, a group of students started yelling to attract attention. This moment is reflected in the notebook as follows:

"They were behaving like those adults in the parliament. I saw them pointing at a kid and yelling furiously "He changed his seat! He's not sitting in his own seat!" My initial reaction was to let that student sit wherever he wanted as I said, how ignorantly, "It's okay. He can sit wherever he wants." This intervention of mine made all the upheaval worse as a couple of students approached the poor nomadic student in a protesting manner. Having asked a student in the front row about what exactly was happening, I was told that it was a rule that no one could change his or her seat in the classroom. How on earth could I know this? I asked the student to return to his seat and as he did as he was told, things started to be more manageable" (March 2014).

This paper has shown that classroom management is of utmost importance, a notion that is also mentioned in the literature as an important point to consider. Linse and Nunan (2005: 187) write that "one of the biggest challenges facing teachers of young learners is classroom management" simply because "creating the balance between a caring environment and one where there is control is not an easy task for any teacher." In that sense, the researcher has realized that, despite he had taught classroom management skills to prospective English language teachers, experiencing young learners' classroom atmosphere showed the dimensions and depth of classrooms' organic activity that requires the teacher's use of appropriate classroom management skills.

Theme 2: Attention Span

A second theme that is displayed in the notes is about young learners' attention span. Despite the fact that there is no certain amount of minutes mentioned about young learners' attention span, the researcher came to see that they did not focus on a task more than three or four minutes. His first shock is described in the notes as follows:

"Who said children have short span of interest? These have none. I need five or six activities or tasks per class hour to keep them busy. Not two or three! They sang the song only twice. I had allocated 15 minutes for this song. We could sing, dance, and do Total Physical Response activities. They were supposed to sing it for at least six times, but after the second round, they were back to their own worlds" (December 2013).

The classroom teacher, during informal chats, stated that his students' attention span has severely dropped during the last few years. He stated that their "attention span was around ten minutes when [he] first started teaching almost thirteen years ago, but now it has dropped to five minutes maximum." This experienced teacher's observations must be studied carefully because this situation is also expressed in the notes as follows:

"Something must be done immediately by parents and the Ministry of National Education so as to increase these learners' attention spans. It feels like almost every student in this classroom is suffering from some sort of an at-tention deficit disorder. The class teacher once said that these students are always like that in all subject matters. Imagining these learners at work and still being able to learn makes me feel amazed. Their noise both tires me while making me feel like they can never learn in such a noisy classroom that is in constant turmoil. To my surprise, many of them pick up some words and expressions I want to teach quickly, but one problem remains! Because I cannot hear every student individually, I cannot really figure out who is learning what and to what extent. I think I must get used to their learning habits, which have no similarities with my university level classrooms." (April 2014)

Theme 3: Materials

Materials appeared as the third theme in the notes. As time progressed, the researcher started to enter the classroom with a huge bag filled with a big plastic ball, some sock-puppets, ready to use worksheets, magazine cut-outs, self-made flashcards, and a USB full of songs and cartoons for young learners' English language classes. It was quite a curiosity-raising experience for the students to see the researcher's hands going in and out of this bag since this movement could determine the level of fun they would have right after the materials were taken out. For the majority of the boys, the plastic ball was the best material, while the girls opted for songs with videos. While this bag provided a variety of materials, the act of bringing and searching in this bag in the beginning of each lesson itself became a ritual for the class to wait for in amusement. One particular frustrating experience occurred when the researcher brought an insufficient number of copies of worksheets. Those students who were not handed a copy acted furiously and were in panic as though they were taking a serious exam that required them to participate. This experience is reflected in the notebook as follows:

"Never bring insufficient number of copies into the classroom! One or two students were crying out by saying "What are we going to do? We cannot do the work." A couple of those who were not given a copy were looking at those with materials in a scornful manner and many more were standing up and raising their hands to ask for an explanation or to protest the awful, heartless teacher of theirs. Thank goodness the classroom teacher was there for help! He

ran down and brought some extra copies into the classroom all the while I was trying to settle down those who were feeling left out." (February 2014)

One of the most important themes that emerged in these experiences with young learners has great classroom implications especially in terms of skills development. The researcher observed over and over again that writing words on the board spoils young learners' pronunciation. He noticed that when he didn't write the words he was teaching on the board, students pick up pronunciation easily. But as soon as he wrote the word on the board, they started pronouncing what they saw, which results in mispronunciation.

One interesting change seems to have occurred during this process as the researcher came to find practical solutions by using his "developing practical knowledge":

"Ha ha! I got it! After the second time of listening, as soon as I see that they become aloof to my beautiful songs, I attract their attention by dramatizing, using the masks I brought, miming, and jumping up and down! I walk around the classroom like the town's clown, but we all seem to enjoy it. We can now sing a song a few times more. As soon as their interest in the song fades, I start jumping up and down" (March 2014).

Another theme related with materials is a bit confusing. Here are some of these young learners' questions related with an activity by Ozer and Kaptan (2010: 37):

* Are we going to count these windows one by one or as a whole? (Tr. Bu pencereleri tek tek mi sayicaz yoksa butun butunmu?)
* Are we going to count the erasers behind the pencils, too? Because they are erasers, too. (Tr. Kalemlerin arkalarindaki silgileri de sayacakmiyiz? Onlar da eraser cunku.)
* Are we going to count the books in the bookshelves? But it takes too much time then. (Tr. Dolaptaki kitaplari da sayacakmiyiz? O zaman çokvakit alir ama.)
* Are were going to count the seats of the desks? (Tr. Desklerin oturma yerlerini de sayacak miyiz?)
* Are we going to count the windows of the bookshelves? (Tr. Dolabin camlarini da window diyesayacak miyiz?)

Hence, from the researcher's point of view, although this activity was simple and not problematic to apply, it was challenging for the students and applying it in the classroom brought serious and unplanned problems.

The researcher came to realize that understanding school culture as an organic entity is necessary for a teacher, especially when instructional materials are considered. In the sequencing of the topics, functions, and activities to be taught the topic "shapes" was the final topic of the semester's work. However, soon after beginning the topic "weather," with which the students learned some adjectives such as hot, cold, sunny, windy, etc., the researcher saw the board right across the classroom on which the students' projects on shapes were mounted. Furthermore, one week after the realization that they were studying the shapes, the researcher noticed that students were preparing 3D models to foster their knowledge of the shapes. This helped his understanding that he could have studied the curriculum offered at school and designedhis own lesson plans in a way to make use of the learners' growing knowledge, similar to what is elsewhere called interdisciplinary curriculum. The researcher conceptualizes this missing opportunity as a serious error that caused a loss of great opportunity that could activate the learners' background and evolving knowledge in a way to concretize what is learned and taught in classrooms.

Theme 4: Physical Structure

An analysis of the notes reveals that, apart from those issues related with the researcher's own shortcomings as a classroom teacher, classsize itself seems to be the root cause of the problems he faced. The researcher used to believe that students at this age easily picked up pronunciation and he made sure that he was well prepared in the pronunciation of each and all of the words taught. However, although he could hear some mispronunciations in the classroom, he could not make out who was saying what. This made timely interventions impossible especially because of the large class squeezed into a small classroom.

This physical structure, as experiences suggested, did not leave any room for working with the learners who needed constant attention and feedback, which has been accepted as a norm in young learners' English language classrooms. To this end, Harmer (2007: 83) notes that good teachers at this level must "work with their stu-

dents individually and in groups, developing good and affective relationships," although the physical structure of the classroom in which the researcher worked cannot allow teachers to work with young learners in a robust manner.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, the researcher's (autoethnographer's) knowledge of teaching English to young learners is taken as the case to be studied. The emphasis is on the change of the researcher's context-dependent knowledge as he moves from his role as a teacher educator at a university to a classroom practitioner in a primary school. The single most important issue that emerged from this study is that the theory and practice of teaching English to young learners are not always incompatible. The researcher (autoethnographer) isaware that what he called his"theoretical" knowledge that did not fully work in the classroom may stem from shortcomings as a primary school teacher because of his being new to this setting. Despite this, he believes that an unfavorable classroom atmosphere dominated, such as lacking a carpet on which students could sit and play. These were the main factors triggering problems. Such negative realities were also discussed by Ansin (2006: 19) who concluded that "ideal teaching methods and techniques require ideal teachers and ideal classrooms. Our severely crowded classrooms make ideal foreign language teaching difficult to attain."

Although the researcher has considered the truth value of what he called theoretical and practical, it should be marked that beliefs as teachers and researchers are constructed and interwoven in an inseparable manner. As Raab (2013: 3) suggests, an autoethnographic research "paints a vivid picture of the researcher (self) and those he or she is studying (the participants). The researcher presents him or herself to the reader through vivid and carefully crafted character descriptions." The researcher believes, like many others, through this thick and believable description of the classroom interaction and the researcher's previous experiences, issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability, as they pertain to this research, become acceptable. Future research should try to be specific about and sensitive towards teacher-researchers'beliefs and values in similar studies. To do that, autoethnography presents itself as a dynamic research technique through which the researcher can discover what is within and outside herself as a personal, social, and educational reality.

CONCLUSION

As was stated in the introduction, very few studies on young learners are empirical in nature. Therefore, many empirical research studies are needed to portray the realities of teaching English (and other foreign languages) in Turkish primary schools. In such studies, special attention should be paid to academics' own theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching foreign language to young learners since, as the results of this paper showed, the theory and practice of teaching foreign languages to young learners differ widely from prospective foreign language teachers' classes to actual primary school settings. Such research results are especially important for academics teaching "Young Learners" courses because within these courses future teachers of foreign languages are prepared for teaching in these classrooms. The researcher's final words on a page in the notebook may epitomize the major challenge faced in that young learners' classroom: "Things could be much better if only there were much fewer students and movable chairs and desks or even a carpet on which we could sit."

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this paper reveals, classroom experience has a profound effect on an academic's theoretical and practical knowledge of what it means to be a young learners' English language teacher along with understanding many other aspects such as learner characteristics, learning styles, classroom management, materials and curriculum. Such a research endeavor develops an understanding of a teacher's role in educating young learners. Hence, autoethnographical studies should be devised and used by academics who teach prospective teachers how to teach in young learners' classrooms.By doing that, it would be possible to enhance the theory and practice of teaching young learners.

Autoethnography provides a venue for teachers and students to see the classroom in different perspectives, especially as an organic entity. Such research makes teachers examine and reflect upon how they think and work. As class-

room teachers develop their repertoire, they are encouraged to cultivate in themselves a sense of respect and an increased educational role in the problems faced in practice.

Similar studies should be conducted to understand the true nature of young learners who are always in the process of exploring everything around them. An effective instructor of both young learners and prospective teachers who will soon teach them must give importance to developing effective relationships with these target populations. The best way to start doing this is working with children while testing the value of the theory that binds the practice, carrying such practical knowledge into teacher education programs. This learning process will help academics not only develop theoretical knowledge but also a body of practical first-hand experience that will result in robust learning activities at all levels.

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