

Investigating Pre-service EFL Teachers' Self-concepts within the Framework of Teaching Practicum in Turkish Context

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Abstract

The present study aimed at understanding the nature and potential dynamism of five pre-service EFL teachers' self-concepts in the domain of English as a foreign language (EFL). To this end, the effects of pre-service teachers' experiences gained alongside the practicum on their EFL self-concept development were also discussed. Data were generated in a case study research paradigm using journal entries and in-depth interviews. The major themes derived from the analysis of the data were indicative of pre-service teachers' self-beliefs which profoundly affected their EFL self-concept development. These included the passion for English, the use of L1 and L2 in language teaching, and the critical experiences that the pre-service teachers had during the practicum. It was shown how the practicing teachers' EFL self-beliefs can at once be dynamic and also stable, depending on the type of beliefs investigated. The study concludes by suggesting the need to help EFL pre-service teachers to form positive but realistic self-concepts within the framework of EFL teacher training.

Keywords: self-concept, self-belief, EFL, case study

1. Introduction

Recent educational trends worldwide have long witnessed the widespread recognition of student-centered education which has also dominated the Turkish education system over the past few decades. In student-centered education, as the name suggests, learners are by nature placed at the very center of education where educational goals, to a large extent, come to be geared to meeting the individual learning needs of students. Notably, this growing interest in individual has been reflected in a wealth of publications which mainly draw on the learner variables like students' attitudes and motivation, language anxiety, learning styles, and perceptions of individual learners (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Of these learner variables, self-related beliefs have received considerable research interest in recent decades.

As the related literature demonstrates, research interest in self-related belief, to date, has typically been reflected in its various guises, including self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-esteem and self-concept. Academic self-concept, among the others, is the major focus of the present study and emerges as one of the most important constructs that has been closely linked to academic performance in a large number of studies (Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003). However, it is critical to note that the number of in-depth, focused studies exploring the nature and development of learners' self-related beliefs in the domain of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) is still scarce (Mercer, 2011; Henry, 2009; Pellegrino, 2005). Motivated by the need to address this gap, this study, first and foremost, aims to extend our understanding of learner self-concepts with a particular focus on the pedagogical issues embedded in teacher education in respect to the domain of FLL.

1.1 Literature Review

In recent years individual perceptions of the self have become the focus of an increasing number of studies (Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis, 2008; Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Williams & Burden, 1997). It has been widely acknowledged that learners' beliefs systems like their sense of self play a critical role in how they interpret their experiences, direct behaviors and manage their learning (Wenden, 1998; Mercer, 2011). Despite the huge amount of interest in issues relating to the self, however, the concept of the self is notoriously difficult to define, given that there is "wide disagreement about how to define the self, and measure it" (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 1992). In view of this, it is felt that an appropriate definition of the self is of central importance to clarify our focus of the self and its

concomitant processes that would form the basis of our interest in the self-related issue. In quest of the root and nature of the self, Leary and Tangney (2003, p. 6) have proposed a useful definition in that the self is viewed as “the set of psychological mechanisms or processes that allows individuals to think consciously about themselves” and be able to make deliberate attempts to regulate their behavior (Chong & Liem, 2014). Notably this construction of self in turn denotes beliefs about learner’s self, often referred to as ‘self-beliefs’, which would be deemed fundamental to the present study.

Importantly a great bulk of research has focused increasing attention on self-beliefs. Within psychology-based research, self-beliefs are thought to affect behavior and attitude (Pajares and Schunsky, 2005). It is widely acknowledged that self-beliefs play a key role in academic achievement (Pajares and Schunsky, 2005; Mercer 2008, 2011). Moreover, it has often been asserted that such beliefs have been found to be prominent in determining student’s motivation to learn (Dörnyei, 2009; Williams and Burden, 1997). Given the broad scope of research into self-beliefs, it is suggested that self-beliefs appear to function in domain-specific ways (Marsh et al., 1988). Of these domains, FLL emerges as being a complex undertaking which may embrace different understandings of self-related values and qualities (Mercer, 2011). In what follows, the interface between language learning and self-beliefs is made evident in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) where self-beliefs are often key motivational constructs (Dörnyei, 2005; Csizer and Lukacks, 2010; Woodrow 2006; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; Mercer 2011). From this perspective, in their review of self in the foreign language domain, Csizer and Magid (2014) postulate that a student’s sense of self plays a more significant role in language learning “since language after all, belongs to a person’s whole social being; it is part of one’s identity, and it is used to convey this identity to other people” (William and Burden, 1997).

There is currently a renewed interest in self-beliefs, which is characterized by a considerable amount of research into self-concept, a construct embedded in the umbrella term of such beliefs. Self-concept is often referred to as “a self-description judgement that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth associated with the judgement in question” in a specific field (Pajares & Schunk, 2005, p. 105). An individual’s self-concept subsumes the range of beliefs one has about oneself as Hamlyn (1983, p. 241) expresses “the picture of oneself”. It has been shown that it has come to be considered as one of the most prominent factors in human learning (Marsh & Martin, 2011). That is, how we see ourselves also determines how possible and realistic we perceive our future goals (Dörnyei, 2009).

A further defining feature of self-concept is concerned with the domain-specific nature of self-concept. Marsh et al. (1988) suggest that research would benefit from being carried out in specific domains as self-beliefs appear to function in domain-specific forms and are related to domain-specific achievements. Indeed, Mercer (2011) claims that research into self-concept needs to be carried out in domain-specific ways. Marsh (2006) concludes that “if researchers are specifically interested in self-concepts in particular academic subjects, then they should measure self-concepts with scales specific to those subjects”.

Given the domain-specific nature of self-concept, it is now widely accepted that self-concept is thought to play an even greater role in foreign language learning than in other academic subject domains because of the close links between language and the self-related values and qualities embedded in social and cultural forms (Williams & Burden, 1997; Pellegrino, 2005). To this end, research into self-concept has now started attracting attention of researchers in the domain of language learning although such interest has been limited (Mercer, 2011; Lau et al. 1999; Yeung & Wong, 2004; Kumazawa, 2013). In one such study, Mercer (2011) asserted that one’s self-concept in language learning may exhibit complexities. Her work aimed at making for a fuller understanding of the nature and potential dynamism of self-concept in the domain of foreign language learning. Much of the data in the study were generated using journals and in-depth interviews. The findings illustrated how language learning self-concept had a complex and multi-layered structure comprised of both dynamic and stable aspects. It was shown how a learner could possibly hold such contradictory self-concepts, depending on the type of beliefs and forms of change investigated.

Drawing on EFL learner self-concept, Lau et al. (1999) in their work proposed that the four basic skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) could be adequately represented by a single, global EFL learner self-concept. In term of its methodological approach employed, their work was conducted using a fixed-item questionnaire adapted from Marsh’s Academic Self-Description Questionnaire (ASDQ). As Mercer points out, this replicated study does not fully account for all potential subcomponents of such a self-concept. However, Lau et al.’s study is of importance in establishing the possible existence of a distinct EFL self-concept. Another study on self-concept, which also addresses distinctiveness of self-concepts in EFL, was carried out by Yeung & Wong (2004) who examined the distinctiveness of the verbal self-concepts for primary and high school teachers in Hong Kong speaking English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Their findings suggest that a single verbal self-concept

could not adequately represent multilingual students and they call for research to account for differing distinct self-concepts specific to each language. Taken together, this parallels work by Lau et al. (1999) in the way that the findings from the two studies confirm the multifaceted nature of self-concept.

Another particular study that has implications for self-concept was carried out by Kumazawa (2013). Taking a qualitative research method to data analysis, he interpretatively examined the relationship between the occupational motivation of a group of EFL novice teachers and their self-concept in the light of possible selves theory. A resultant finding of the study was a close link between teachers' motivation to teach English and their self-concept. He discusses how the participant teachers' self-concept changes in their transition from student to teacher and how their motivation is affected by their shifting self-concept. The findings revealed that novice teachers exhibit particularly dynamic developmental aspect of self-concept, which eventually help them reshape their self-concepts and regain their motivation.

2. The Study

2.1 The Research Questions

The present study attempts to illuminate pre-service EFL teachers' self-concepts and their development in the domain of EFL. For this purpose, it will address the following research questions with regard to six specific pre-service teachers:

- 1). What are pre-service teachers' self-concepts in the FL domain?
- 2). To what extent do pre-service teachers' language-related self-concepts change in their transition from student to teacher over time?

In discussing the findings to these questions, I will also argue to what extent the teaching experience that pre-service teachers had during practicum has an effect on their shifting self-concepts.

2.2 Methodology

Within SLA, recent approaches to the study of self-related constructs including beliefs and self-concept have emphasized the benefits of more qualitatively-orientated studies (Mercer, 2011; Ellis, 2008; Barcelos, 2003). Research suggests that beliefs are notoriously difficult to define (Barcelos, 2003) and in this respect qualitative approach may concentrate on an in-depth understanding of, what Mercer calls (2011), "their situated, dynamic and complex nature". More specifically a useful method for this purpose is longitudinal case study research which can generate rich, detailed, personal and contextualized data (Mercer, 2011; Nunan & Bailey, 2009). As Duff (2008, p. 40) points out, longitudinal case studies provide "multiple observations or datasets, as information is collected at regular intervals, over the course of a year or longer". Accordingly, this study adopted a case study research paradigm in data collection and data analysis procedures.

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Participants and Context

The present study was carried out with the five participants studying in the Department of English in the Faculty of Education at Onsekiz Mart University located in Çanakkale, Turkey. Participants' ages range from 20 to 23. The five participants, Candan, Ipek, Emre, Merve and Gamze, (all pseudonyms), were novice pre-service teachers who were taking compulsory, year-long practicum course in their fourth year as part of their curriculum in the 2016-2017 academic year. The writer also assumed the role of supervisor for the pre-service teachers in the practicum course which was aimed at providing a setting for reflecting on their teaching experiences. As part of the practicum course plan, prospective teachers were posted to various state high schools in Çanakkale where they were required to teach at least two-hour English course a week. The supervisor encouraged pre-service teachers to observe and take notes on the teaching process observed in the practicum and then individually reflect on the resulting teaching experiences.

2.3.2 Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using two major data collection tools including written journal entries of participants and interviews held at different intervals. This data collection method in the study turns out to cover the two key components of case study research characterized by triangulation and longitudinality or multiple perspectives. As Mercer (2011) and Larsen-Freeman (2008) explain in relation to the study of complex constructs such as beliefs, self-concept and self-efficacy, this leads different forms of variability to be revealed. For this purpose, the major source of data was a series of ten in-depth, informal interviews based on semi-structured and guiding questions. The second source of data was collected in the form of 12 weekly written journal entries by participants during the teaching practices in their schools. It was felt that both data collection tools were particularly appropriate to

capture any potential changes in the subjects' self-concepts during this period of transition.

2.4 Data Analysis

A total of 10 interviews were conducted in Turkish except for 2 participants who felt that they would better articulate their views in English. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. At the very beginning of the practicum course, the practicing teachers were asked to report their attitudes towards English. This was followed by the other interview sessions which took place during the teaching practices in order to detect any potential change in participants' English self-concepts. The interview data were transcribed and all the data combined with written journal entries were coded line-by-line in an effort to find emerging patterns in the data set. The more interviews I conducted, the more clearly some patterns surfaced and clustered. Gradually I concentrated on the subjects' accounts of their reflections on the recent English self-concepts, which led to my deeper understanding of those issues.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Passion for English and English Language Teaching

The core EFL self-concepts reported by all pre-service teachers in the data were English as the subject matter and English language teaching as the educational process. The case study data revealed all participants' passion for English as well as for becoming an English teacher, which made it possible for them to maintain a stable, positive EFL self-concept from early in their studies. An extreme case was Candan who held an exclusive focus on the global importance of English. This is clearly illustrated in the data extracts below:

English is the kind of language that interests me most together with my native language. The greatest contribution English makes is that we are able to have easy access to current information. In addition, English provides us with different lenses for critically judging the developments that are of particular interest to us. Studying English, in cultural terms, may offer opportunities for exploring a variety of differing cultures as well as ways of life embedded in them. In fact, I believe that learning English is central to finding a good job in Turkey. (Candan, Interview, October 16, 2015)

Candan also added to this comment that English would presumably remain a lingua franca on a global scale, at least in the foreseeable future. It appears that the sets of self-beliefs Candan and the other participants held about the value of English had potential impact on their self-concepts in English, with which to achieve their teaching goals. In a sense, this attitude towards English turns out to be a main source of motivation for pre-service teachers, thereby aspiring to become an English teacher. On the other hand, examining the data regarding participants' perceptions of English in detail it is quite possible to suggest that they are integratively motivated to become an English teacher. As described by Gardner and Lambert (1972), integratively motivated learners want to learn the language because they want to get to know the people and the culture associated with that language.

All five participants mentioned their lofty interest in the teaching job as an English teacher. Their individual accounts rooted in their educational life stories indicated that they were all motivated at the outset of the teaching practicum to achieve a set of idealistic goals. This degree of motivation already held by the pre-service teachers is truly supposed to help them shape their core EFL self-concepts although they are inherently subject to change following the teaching practicum stage. Ipek, one of these participants, conveyed her reasons behind the teaching profession in this context:

I wanted to become an English teacher for many years. Actually I was inspired by various factors. I had interest in both teaching and learning processes based on the English linguistics and vocabulary knowledge. What really attracts me is to transfer the knowledge to my future students. (Ipek, Interview, February 21, 2016)

Ipek added to this comment that her interest in teaching English was driven by the desire to "transfer her knowledge to students of English". Importantly, such an ideal explicitly points to the significance of affective factors in forming EFL self-concepts. It was in this line of thought that Emre, the single male subject in the study, pointed out that "his actual educational purpose was not only to teach English but also to help them tackle the problems faced in the educational environment by sharing the experiences". Affect refers to the emotions, feelings, and attitudes that individuals bring to the learning experience and the role these play in motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Hurd, 2008). From these data, it seems that pre-service teachers' affective responses can be connected to their respective EFL self-concepts. However, as Mercer noted (2011), these effective responses only appear to be influencing their self-concepts in temporary ways.

3.2 L1 and L2 Self-Concept

A recurring theme emerging from the detailed analysis of the interview was the comparison across L1 and L2

self-concepts in the domain of English language teaching. Given findings by Marsh and Yeung (2001) who suggest that L1 and L2 self-concepts are quite distinct, comparisons between L1 and L2 self-concept are of interest. At the beginning of the teaching practicum, all five pre-service teachers were found to have adhered to the methodological principle that the first language should not replace the target language as the medium of instruction in the process of teaching English. They favor the use of L2 in the teaching process by referring to its potential educational outcomes as follows:

I generally tried to make use of English in the teaching process because we are supposed to act as role models in order for our students to adopt and acquire correct English. (Emre, Interview, April 25, 2016)

I will only use L2 in my courses and encourage my students to use it for their purposes. I believe that using L2 is of importance for effective communication... Teachers of English should motivate students to use the native language as much as possible. (Candan, Interview, April 25, 2016)

As a prospective English teacher, I feel that one of my major duties will be to give my lessons in English...I want to become a teacher who exposes my students to English so that they improve their English for better communication. (Ipek, Interview, April 28, 2016)

Confronted by the classroom realities in the practicum courses, as the pre-service teachers mentioned during the interview sessions, their L1 self-concepts appeared to have considerably changed. Several instances of this potential change were depicted by the participants by means of the interviews and journal entries as the extracts below illustrate:

While I was trying to give the lessons in English in connection with my first teaching experience, I realized that using English constantly is not suitable and effective. Students lack basic skills of English. Therefore, I decided to seldom resort to L2 when giving English lessons at the theoretical level. (Merve, Interview, May 10, 2016).

In addition, Emre shared his observations directed to the L1 that he noted in his own English lessons during the teaching practicum. He cited the ups and downs in his L1 and L2 self-concepts that are evident in the following extract:

From the teaching experiences that I had alongside the teaching practicum, I would suggest that we have to teach our courses in the native language. I was believing in the prominence of L1 in the teaching of English but after I had the opportunity teaching an English course and reflecting on it I found that it would be very difficult for me to give English lessons in L2 if I did not employ L1 whenever students failed to comprehend the teacher talk in English. (Emre, Interview, May 15, 2016)

3.3 Critical Experiences in ELT Context

In the data deriving from the interviews and journal entries, pre-service teachers' EFL self-concepts often appear to be influenced in one way by their experiences in a range of various language teaching environments (Trautwein et al., 2006; Marsh, 2006). Pre-service teachers were found to refer to several instances of these experiences in which they had taught the language and which they perceived as having been important for their EFL self-concept formation. For ease of explanation, the findings solidly rooted in these experiences were organized according to the two dominant categories as communicative language teaching (CLT) and classroom management.

3.3.1 Communicative Language Teaching

The first largest category of critical experiences emerging from the data concerns the place of communicative language teaching in the Turkish high schools highlighted by pre-service teachers. As might be expected, pre-service teachers were committed to giving English lessons in the target language with an emphasis on the underlying principles of the communicative approach "characterized by authenticity, fluency and meaningful tasks" (Brown, 2001, 42). Throughout the teaching practicum period this commitment was strongly exhibited by one respondent with an ongoing interest in CLT. Her self-beliefs about the practical use of CLT in the classroom did not alter even after the practicum stage, which consequently had an impact on stable and positive EFL self-concepts in methodological terms. The following extract from the data may illustrate her particular experience:

My ideas related to the components of CLT have not changed at the end of the teaching practicum in my high school. I tried to prepare language materials appropriate to the needs and expectations of my students taking into account the principles underlying CLT and I came up with attractive topics in order for them to actively participate in the lessons... When I faced a problematic situation during speaking I focused their attention on the source of this problem and suggested alternative speaking strategies to cope with communication breakdown.

((Ipek, Interview, May 8, 2016).

Like Ipek, the remaining four participants also expressed commitment to the CLT at the outset of the teaching practicum:

CLT is a type of teaching method in language teaching. In this method students are encouraged to interact with each other...I think it is a really effective method because our main aim should improve our students' speaking and communication abilities. (Gamze, Interview, March 24, 2016).

I really find CLT valuable in the field of English language teaching. The reason for this is that it simply takes the language as a means of communication and interaction. (Candan, Interview, March 24, 2016).

After the teaching practicum, these participants with high ideals for CLT underwent fluctuations in their previous self-beliefs, which eventually led to the development of negative and dynamic EFL self-concepts in this domain:

Contrary my expectations, many students in my classroom did not take part in discussion...Few students were able to successfully activate their knowledge of grammar rules in functional terms in the classroom... Students were not competent in communication skills. Thus we need to consider these shortcomings in the process of practicing CLT approach (Candan, Interview, May 20, 2016).

3.3.2 Classroom Management

The last category of the critical experiences in the data relates to the participants' reflections on the way they managed their own language classroom. Fowler & Şaraplı (2010) caution that classroom management is the greatest concern of most teachers, especially those who have not yet begun their careers in education. According to Everson & Weinstein (2006), this topic is regarded as one of the most serious challenges facing student and beginning teachers. In the beginning, pre-service teachers explicitly voiced the tension imposed by the classroom atmosphere:

I realize that it is very challenging to manage a classroom consisting of nearly 30 students...To the best of my knowledge, the most important issue to overcome is classroom management. To tell the truth, I am a bit concerned about this as a prospective teacher.

Importantly, the set of concerns about classroom management expressed by the participants appeared to have had an impact on a negative and stable EFL self-concept development from earlier in the practicum. Admittedly, of course, large classes in Turkish high schools pose potential problems for a well-maintained classroom and therefore this may have prevented pre-service teachers from feeling at ease with classroom management. After the practicum, it has become clear from the reports that the pre-service teachers got experienced in tackling the kind of problems often confronted within the ELT classroom through employing the range of appropriate classroom management strategies. Consequently, this had a profound effect on a positive and dynamic EFL self-concept development within the framework of classroom management. This change in the participants' self-concepts is implied in the following extracts which demonstrate their efforts to generate strategies with a view to overcoming the management problems in their ELT classrooms:

I thought that I could overcome this problem by paying attention to voice, stress and intonation. Additionally, I walked around the class instead of constantly standing in the same place to control my students (Gamze, Interview, May 18, 2016).

After the lesson in the practicum I found that students' psychological conditions played a vital role in the effectiveness of the lesson. That is to say, it is possible that a student might not be in a good mood. To avoid this problem I tried to keep them active as much as possible. I encouraged all the students to participate in the lesson. Simply little encouragement can make difference in the management of such problematic classes (Emre, Interview, May 15, 2016).

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, the findings of the current study confirm Mercer's (2011) presupposition that EFL self-concepts are part of a complicated network of interrelated self-beliefs, depending on a range of factors and motivations within the individual in the particular setting. In the present study, this multifaceted and dynamic nature of self-concepts was reflected in the voices of EFL pre-service teachers during the practicum in which they reported fluctuations on their EFL self-beliefs. As Marsh (2006) argues, these EFL self-concepts are likely to be influenced in predictable ways. In pedagogical terms, understanding pre-service teachers' distinct and separate EFL self-concepts resulting from their on-site experiences gained in the practicum is of particular importance in helping them to form positive but realistic self-concepts within the framework of EFL teacher training.

With regard to practical implications, the salient message derived from EFL pre-service teachers' experiences in

the practicum is the need to better inform them in ELT teacher training courses about the classroom realities of secondary school English teaching. Contrary to this, unrealistic ideals can make novice teachers' self-concept more vulnerable to the power of reality shock (Kumazawa, 2013). To this end, in an effort to stimulate student teachers' positive EFL self-concept development, both cooperating teachers and supervisors assigned to EFL practicum courses must well inform student teachers about potential challenges, in particular, by emphasizing the mismatch between theory and practice.

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