



## Conceptualization of theory in English language teaching by student teachers and practicing teachers

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### Abstract

Teachers generally raise sharp criticism about theory with respect to its (lack of) relevance and benefits to practice in both teaching and teacher education. With the purpose of having a deeper understanding of this criticism, this study aims to explore conceptualization of theory by both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student teachers and practicing teachers. The data were collected from a group of 18 student teachers and a group of 16 practicing teachers. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the first group while the second group was asked to complete a questionnaire with likert-scale items. The findings revealed that both student teachers and practicing teachers regard theory from a more objective and scientific point of view. Both groups assigned various roles to theory like guiding practice; explaining ideas, concepts, issues; and generating opinions. The results indicated that both groups are able to utilize theories in their practices. In contrast to what literature suggests, not only student teachers but also practicing teachers appreciate theory in their practices. In this regard, the study offers promising results and provides suggestions for the betterment of teacher education programs.

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## 1. Introduction

The role and relevance of theory in language teaching and teacher education have always been questioned (Cummins & Davison, 2007; Segall, 2001). “The existence of a distinctive knowledge base” of the teaching profession (Knight, 2015, p. 2) is one of the frequently-stated reasons of most of the debates. Actually, having a distinguishing knowledge base is considered as the representing characteristic of a profession (Carr, 2000). Yet, the essence of knowledge base in teaching is interpreted differently. For instance, scholars like Shulman (2004) suggest that having a theoretical or research based background is the requirement of any profession. On the other hand, Schon (1983) criticizes the argument which sees theoretical knowledge as the backbone of teaching profession and calls for upgrading of practice as an equal of theory for the premises of the profession.

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As for teacher education, it is more likely to hear arguments that the knowledge conveyed by teacher education programs is very specific and does not necessarily enable teachers to make use of them in their daily teaching engagements (Johnson, 1996). To put it differently, student teachers claim that teacher education is too much theoretical and their learning gains in programs are not relevant to actual teaching practices in a classroom (Johnson, 1996; Sjolie, 2014). In their pre-service teacher education programs, student teachers are expected to learn the ways of mastering the field of teaching across two settings, the school which is the real world with real pupils where student teachers have their field experience, and the campus which is the world of theoretical and scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, these two settings are considered to be disconnected (Zeichner, 2010). The association of schools as the spring of actual experience in the field and the campus as the source of academic knowledge, in a way, puts theory as boring and dry (Sjolie, 2014).

All these various perspectives about the role and relevance of theory to practice are due to the difficulty of defining what theory really means. Darling-Hammond (2010) claims that “when teachers complain that university work has often been too theoretical, they usually mean that it is too abstract and general” (p. 40). To put it differently, in her point of view teachers criticize the very nature of the notion of theory, which is theories are abstract and general by nature. On the other hand, there are arguments such as theory becomes meaningful when it has implications for implementation (Segall, 2001). In general, it is ambiguous what kind of meanings teachers attribute to theory. Considering all these numerous insights about the place of theory in teaching, what does theory actually mean to both student teachers and practicing teachers? This study tries to seek out student teachers and practicing teachers’ conceptualization of theory in language teaching and language teacher education.

## 1.1. Literature review

### 1.1.1. The notion of theory in teaching

It is nearly impossible to clarify the definition, role, nature and function of theory in teaching without any references to practice. Simply, theory is frequently understood as the exact opposite of practice; while in its essence theory is abstract and quite general, practice is concrete and inherently specific; therefore theory stands remote from practice, which means it is irrelevant (Cummins & Davison, 2007; Sjolie, 2014). The role of theory evoked from such a conception is incomplete and scientifically oriented since this role is restricted to solely generating facts and explaining research findings in terms of their practicality in teaching (Cummins & Davidson, 2007). A scientifically based theory is considered to only seek knowledge itself and be descriptive, asserting what should or should not be done (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2008; Sjolie, 2014). A theory, attributed as scientifically oriented, is also associated with the concepts of universal, generalizable, objective and formal (Oonk, 2009). A different conception of theory which is a further step closer to practice is suggested by Thomas (2007). He presents theory as “the form of ideas formally expressed in a series of statements” (p. 28) and practice as the opposite directions of a single continuum. He identifies functions of theory as a means of thinking and reflecting, generalizing or explaining a model and developing bodies of explanations for learning.

As Knight (2015) proposes, “a form of situated, loosely articulated theory, born out of personal experiences” (p. 2) has also been reflected as in *craft knowledge* and *practical wisdom*. The definition of theory as “the articulation of the framework of beliefs and understandings which are embedded in the practice we engage in” (Pring, 2004, p. 78) is purely practice oriented and eschews the scientific perspective. As Oonk (2009) underlines, the understanding of theory falls into two poles, the first one is scientifically oriented conceptualization, the other one is a more personal, situational interpretation. Actually, the commonly asserted notorious gap between theory and practice in the fields of teaching and teacher education (Hascher & Cocard & Moser, 2004; Hobson & Ashby & Malderez &

Tomlinson, 2008; Sjolie, 2014) may be one of the causes for these two opposite conceptualizations of theory. On the other hand, there are certain opinions that theory and practice have an ongoing, two way relationship in which “theory integrates observations and practices into coherent perspectives and, through dialogue, feeds these perspectives back into practice and from practice back into theory” (Cummins & Davidson, 2007, p. 963). This mutual relationship can be of better service when teachers actually make sense of theory based on their practices (Johnson, 1996). To put it differently, theory informs and feeds practices when teachers actually try to situate their practices in theory by providing justifications to their practices. Nevertheless, how teachers interpret theory is mostly dependent on their definition and perception of theory, namely, their cognition.

### *1.1.2. Teacher cognition*

Teacher cognition, which is simply what teachers know, believe and think (Borg, 2009), is characterized as “an often tacit, personally-held, practical system of mental constructs held by teachers and which are dynamic-i.e. defined and refined on the basis of educational and professional experiences throughout teachers’ lives” (Borg, 2006, p. 35). Teacher cognition as a research area has been vastly explored in the last few decades because it has been acknowledged that teachers are active decision makers who have a significant role in designing and implementing classroom events (Borg, 2006). As a complex construct, cognition is made up of knowledge, beliefs and thought processes. Although some scholars like Fenstermacher (1994) and Richardson (1996) tried to draw a distinction between beliefs and knowledge, the common view is the difficulty of separating knowledge and beliefs: “in the mind of the teacher, components of knowledge, beliefs, conceptions, and intuitions are inextricably intertwined” (Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001, p. 446). With the recognition of inseparability of beliefs and knowledge, the leading framework for this study is teacher beliefs which can be described as “an individual’s judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do” (Pajares, 1992, p. 316). Pajares’s (1992) comprehensive review of teacher beliefs suggests that teacher behaviours are strongly affected by their beliefs and especially epistemological beliefs, which are beliefs about the nature of knowledge and have a significant role in interpreting knowledge and cognitive monitoring. In other words, beliefs and value systems of teachers have a formative power on their teaching practices. Hence, it is essential to investigate epistemological beliefs of student and practicing teachers about the nature and role of theory in language teaching and teacher education. Therefore, the present study aims to seek teachers’ cognition, in other words, how they conceptualize theory, which is the topic of many controversies and teachers’ complaints.

Investigating student teachers’ conceptualization of theory is a newly-emergent area of research. There have been very few studies conducted. For instance, Sjolie (2014) explored how 74 student teachers who were studying the secondary teacher education program in Norway conceptualized the nature and purpose of theory in teacher education. Before their graduation, at the stage of practicum, data were collected through written questionnaires and interviews. The researcher found out that student teachers associated theory with knowledge, thoughts and experiences of others and not integrated into their own actions. Regarding the role of theory, the results revealed that student teachers mostly attributed prescriptive roles to theory and considered theory to be a foundation for their practices. The researcher interpreted the results as an alternative narrative to the theory as general and abstract.

Knight (2015), on the other hand, analyzed student teachers’ conceptions of the role of theory in learning to teach in primary teaching program in England. Making use of a longitudinal qualitative case study, the researcher observed how student teachers in the practicum course changed their conceptualization of theory over a year. The findings revealed that student teachers firstly regarded theory as prescriptive, general and absolutely true which means that they accepted the correctness of

theories without criticizing them. At the end of the program, theory emerged as being owned, situated and questioned. With regard to the value of theory, student teachers at the earlier stage saw theory as knowledge to be applied in practice, however, as the time passed, they began to review theory as a way of making sense of practice and as a tool for critical thought. The researcher considered that the positive change in the conception of theory was mostly because of the process of socialization into school practice. In a similar vein, Emsheimer and De Silva (2011) investigated student teachers' perceptions of various educational theories and their reasoning about these theories; and how they built a connection between those theories and experiences gained in practicum. The researchers collected data through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with 15 student teachers at the end of their practical studies. The results demonstrated that student teachers mostly commented on theories by Vygotsky, Piaget and Skinner. Student teachers regarded correct attitudes, curricula and syllabus as well as methods of teaching as theories. Besides, the researchers concluded that this group of student teachers considered that theories can be 'plugged into' an actual situation, which is why they believed that while some theories were useful the others were not. The researchers further interpreted student teachers' perceptions of theory as static, and such an understanding was a one-sided process.

In investigating the conceptualization of theory, the present study concentrates on EFL student teachers' perspectives. With regards to studies about teacher education and learning how to teach, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005, as cited in Sjolie, 2014) present the dominance of the voice of teacher educators. In that sense, the study, by giving voice to student teachers, tries to enrich perspectives on conceptualization of theory and empower student teachers. In addition, it provides teacher educators with evaluative feedback on how effectively they teach theories. Moreover, the study broadens its scope and as a second phase it also tries to capture practicing teachers' opinions about theory. Therefore, it exhibits multiple perspectives on such a complex construct. Lastly, to the researchers' best knowledge, there is no study carried out with the purpose of enlightening the conceptualization of theory by teachers in the Turkish context. In this regard, this is a pioneering study.

### *1.2. Research questions*

In the direction of the above discussion, the present study attempts to answer to the following research questions:

1. How do EFL student teachers conceptualize theory in teacher education and teaching?
  - 1.1. What is the nature of theory to student teachers?
  - 1.2. What is the function of theory to student teachers?
  - 1.3. How do student teachers make use of theory in their practice teaching?
2. How do practicing EFL teachers conceptualize theory?

## **2. Methodology**

The present study adopted a mixed methods research approach. The mixed methods research studies entail the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data in one study (Dörnyei, 2007). In the present study, the traditional sequential arrangement (Dörnyei, 2007) was employed, which means that the first phase of the study was followed by the second one representing the other approach. In this context, at the first phase of the study, qualitative data were collected from student teachers; qualitative content analysis was conducted. At the second phase, data were collected

from practicing teachers through a questionnaire with likert scale questions and a limited number of open ended-questions. The present study tries to capture the single phenomenon which is the conceptualization of theory in teaching and teacher education by both EFL student teachers and EFL practicing teachers. Since the both groups, student teachers and practicing teachers who were all graduate students, studied at the same university, this can be also regarded as the conceptualization of theory by student teachers and practicing teachers in the same institution.

### *2.1. Context and participants*

The study was conducted in the department of Foreign Language Education (FLE) at a state university in Turkey. As one of the forerunners of higher education institutions in Turkey, it aims at educating student teachers of English as a foreign language.

The data were collected from two groups of participants. The first cohort was a group of 18 senior-year EFL student teachers who were registered in the second course of the practicum component of the teacher education program. Purposeful sampling was used regarding the selection of the senior-year students at the stage of practice teaching as participants. After attending various language improvement, linguistics, literature and methodology courses in three years, student teachers undergo the first professional field experience in the senior year. In this special stage of learning to teach, student teachers navigate between the campus and visiting schools where they have a chance to observe seasoned teachers and actual students, and professionally teach in their early carriers. They tend to harshly criticize theory they have studied in their teacher education program while enhancing the value of gaining classroom experiences (Hobson et al., 2009; Zeichner, 2010). Therefore, student teachers who have certain amount of practice teaching experience were particularly selected. During the data collection period, this group of 18 student teachers had been visiting the cooperating schools for nearly six months.

The second group of participants included 16 EFL teachers. Two of these teachers have experience between 6-10 years, and the remaining, 14 have 1-5 years of experience in teaching. They were all registered in an MA level course, 14 of them were MA students whereas two were PhD students. They were pursuing their graduate degrees in the same institution with the student teachers.

### *2.2. Data collection tools and procedure*

The data were gathered by means of two different questionnaires. The first one, only administered to student teachers, was an open-ended questionnaire aiming at answering the following three questions:

1. Please explain in your own words what “theory” is to you (maximum 50 words).
2. Please name theories you remember from/ you have learned in your teacher education program.
3. Please explain how you have or have not benefitted from these theories in your actual teaching.

These are the modified version of the questions used in Emsheimer and De Silva (2011) and Sjolie (2014). After piloted with five different student teachers, it was sent to e-mail accounts of 28 student teachers who were registered in two sections of the practicum course, for which one of the researchers was assigned as the teaching assistant. Since the construct itself was difficult to define even by scholars (Thomas, 2007), student teachers were given three weeks to complete the questionnaire and send it back to the researcher. In order to add a second dimension to the study, which is the voice of practicing teachers who were also pursuing for a graduate degree in the same institution, the researchers

designed the second phase of the study. The researchers endeavoured to triangulate the student teachers' results by using their responses to form the basis of the data collection tool used with practicing teachers, to see if they were consistent.

Due to convenience, the researchers designed another questionnaire composed of likert-scale items, which took nearly 15 minutes to complete. The second questionnaire included three parts. The first part was composed of seven statements made by the first group of participants with regard to the definition of theory. Practicing teachers stated the extent to which they agreed with the statements on a likert scale continuum (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Undecided, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree) and commented on them as well. The second part included 23 items the first group listed as theories they know. Teachers were requested to identify the theories they know, consider as theory, and state how valuable they find them in their teaching on a likert-type scale continuum which is positively geared (1: Not Valuable, 2, Slightly Valuable, 3: Valuable, 4: Very Valuable). Similar to the first part, the final section of the questionnaire entailed seven statements of the first group regarding how they benefitted from theories. Practicing EFL teachers indicated the extent to which they agree with these statements and commented on them. Before its administration, it was piloted with three teachers and they reported no problems in completing it.

### *2.3. Data analysis*

In order to analyze the data obtained from EFL student teachers through the open-ended questionnaire, content analysis was used. Content analysis is briefly described as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). After reading the data, the researchers coded the text thematically, with an inductive and interpretative approach (Creswell, 2013; Dörnyei, 2007). Based on those codes, conceptualization of theory was divided into three parts, its nature (subjective vs objective), its function and its relevance to practice. To ensure the validity of interpretation, two different researchers analyzed the data. The researchers calculated the number of codes and compared them. The inter-rater reliability level was calculated as above 0.85.

In order to analyze data gathered from EFL teachers, descriptive statistics was used. For the likert-scale items and likert-type scale items in which the teachers stated whether these are theory or not, frequency analysis was conducted, while to explore the value they attached to those items, the mean was calculated for each stated item. For the open-ended questions, content analysis was carried out. Before the administration of the second questionnaire, an expert in ELT checked it for face validity.

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, a number was assigned to each participant such as ST 1 refers to student teacher 1 and PT 2 refers to practicing teacher 2. In order to conduct this study, the researchers applied and submitted required documents to the Ethics Committee of the institute. The participants were treated in accordance with the ethical codes. At the beginning of the study, the participants were informed about the purpose and methodology of the study.

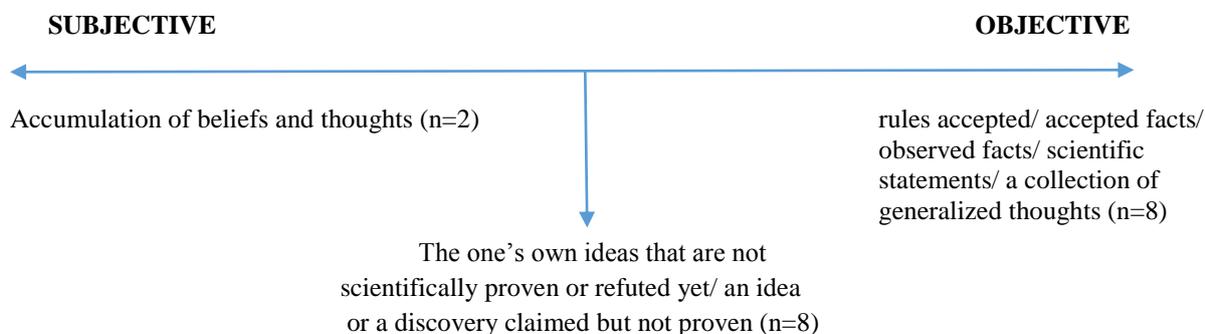
## **3. Results**

### *3.1. Student teachers' conceptualization of theory in English language teaching (ELT)*

As an answer to the first research question, three perspectives of theory, 1) its nature, 2) its function and 3) its benefits to practice have been revealed in the written responses of student teachers.

### 3.1.1. The nature of theory

Student teachers' responses to the question of defining theory in ELT in their own terms fell into three categories: 1) theory as accumulation of beliefs and thoughts, 2) theory as a proposal/ an idea which is not scientifically proven yet, and 3) theory as a set of scientific statements. These categories could be regarded as a continuum. One pole of the continuum represents the subjective nature of theory while the other one refers to the objective understanding, as can be seen in Figure 1:



Out of 16 student teachers, only two of them considered theory as personal, and tried to provide a subjectively oriented definition. They put an emphasis on individual views of teachers with regard to construction of theory. For example, ST 3 wrote: "I think theory is what you think or believe according to what you have accumulated throughout your life and experiences", whereas ST 4 stated: "it is a way of expressing your ideas and beliefs in a field".

Definitions of eight student teachers were situated in the middle of the continuum, the subjective-objective nature. In this category, student teachers mostly perceived theory as one's ideas or opinions which need to be verified but not proven yet. The first part of this conceptualization, 'one's ideas/opinions' can be considered as subjective, while expectations for verification or refutation for the truthfulness of these suggested ideas call for objectivity. For instance, ST 14 defined theory as "the ideas that are not proven scientifically but are believed to be essential steps" and ST 16 wrote that "theory is an idea or a discovery that is claimed but not proven yet. It is something that somebody has come up with but s/he couldn't prove that it is 100% true".

The other eight student teachers conceptualized theory in a purely objective manner, which requires generalization, verification, observation and approval of experts in the field. In other words, eight student teachers approached theory from the scientific, positivist point of view. To set an example, ST 5 defined theory as "the scientific statements that are brought about by the experts, professors or experts of a specific era" highlighting the significance of experts in theory building. ST 9 stated that "theory means a set of rules and applications in the field of teaching", underscoring the prescriptive feature of theory by means of rules; on the other hand, ST 10 emphasized generalizability: "Theory is a collection of generalized thoughts".

### 3.1.2. Specific Theories Student Teachers Remember

To provide a better understanding of how EFL student teachers view the nature of theory, they were asked to list theories they learnt in their teacher education program. The analysis of this question led to quite striking findings. The theories student teachers named were categorized into three main areas: 1) theories of learning, 2) approaches and methods related to language teaching and 3) theories related to second language acquisition.

Student teachers primarily specified theories of learning as the theories they learnt in their teacher education program. The frequently stated theories were Behaviourism (n=10), Cognitivism (n=10),

Constructivism (n=8), and Humanism (n=4). As a second category, with regard to their own field of teaching which is language teaching, student teachers listed approaches and methods as theories they learnt in their teacher education program: Communicative Language Teaching-CLT (n=4), Grammar Translation Method-GTM (n=3), Direct Method (n=2), Eclectic Approach (n=2), Natural Approach (n=2), Computer Assisted Language Learning-CALL (n=1). As a third category, the theories that student teachers specified as they know came from the area of second language acquisition. In literature and in their writings, some of them are referred to as hypotheses rather than theories, and they generally wrote broader terms rather than clearly specifying a name of theory. In addition, although they all studied those theories, students placed emphasis on different theories: Second Language Acquisition Theories (n=4), Universal Grammar (n=2), Critical Period Hypothesis (n=1), Krashen's  $i+1$  Theory (n=1), Noam Chomsky' Child Acquisition Theory (n=1), Input and Output Hypothesis (n=1).

### *3.1.3. The Function of Theory*

EFL student teachers also gave place to functions of theory in their definitions. The findings offered four significant functions for theories: 1) theory has an explanatory power, 2) theory guides teachers, 3) theory forms a base for generating opinions, and 4) theory has no practical applications.

In five responses, theory emerged as a way of explanation. ST 2 focused on theory as accounting for opinions: "Theory is a study that is done to explain ideas". ST 11 considered the explanatory power from the scientific perspective by highlighting that explanation should be rational as well: "It may be seen as giving a rational explanation for some assumptions or maybe even for some accepted facts". Likewise, ST 12 expanded the areas of explaining: "it is a sort of explanation about an issue, area or topic".

Six student teachers thought that theory can function as guidance. Student teachers focused on its descriptive and prescriptive roles in teaching and they tried to justify this role by particularly making use of concepts related to teaching, or by a metaphor. For instance, ST 3 provided a metaphor about theory for giving directions via resembling a teacher to a ship: "If you are likened to a ship, theory is like a map or route of your ship". ST 5 underscored the role of theory in preparing lesson plans and deciding on teaching style: "The theories guide us to modify or create our lessons and our own preference and style of teaching". On the other hand, ST 17 regarded theory as the underlying element for more general concepts in teaching and provided an example to justify her/his reasoning:

I think theory is the rationale behind the methods, activities, techniques that are conducted during the classrooms. I think a teacher designs his/her lessons according to theory that s/he believes true or reasonable. Therefore, I think it can be said that if a teacher believes that students learn by repeating and students should be punished or rewarded according to their mistakes and success, it means that the teacher believes behaviourism and s/he teaches his/ her lessons accordingly.

Four student teachers assigned the role of forming a base for generating ideas to theory. ST 13 wrote that "theory serves as a well-constructed base for ideas, opinions and claims to be risen upon". ST 10 approached the issue from a broader perspective, and stated that "anything could be theorized as long as it has a background to support the roots of the thoughts that construct the theory".

Only two student teachers considered theory as having no direct relevance to teaching practice. ST 8 believed that theory is not used in teaching: "theories are hardly detected or let me say used because it refers especially in our field explaining the state rather than showing something". Similarly, ST 6 conceptualized theory as only knowledge and not applicable in practice by defining it as "a solid base and knowledge-based phenomenon that does not contribute to improving the teaching learning context".

#### 3.1.4. Benefits of Theory to Practice

When EFL student teachers were asked to state how they had benefitted or not benefitted from theory in their practice teaching, they provided answers in three different ways: they stated that they either made use of theory at the knowledge level, or implemented what theories suggest in their teaching or did not make use of theory in teaching.

Five student teachers focused on how they developed their knowledge rather than elaborating on a classroom situation in which there is a direct implementation of a theory. Knowledge level benefits of theory revealed itself as how a student teacher came to realize what was expected from students at a particular age, how theory informed a student teacher's teaching philosophy, how a student teacher became knowledgeable of history of the profession. For instance, ST 16 mentioned that she knew the critical period hypothesis with regard to benefits of theory: "language acquisition theory taught me that the more input you give in the critical period, the better the child learns a language". In the same vein, ST 1 also talked about how theory expanded her/ his cognition:

These theories give us some ideas about how things work. For example cognitive development theory gives us hints about how to approach a child and what to expect from him. I have personally, sometimes tried to figure out actions of small children around me referring to the developmental theories that we have covered.

In this sense, the most striking answer belongs to ST 3 who conceptualized theory as the history and background of the teaching profession: "I have always validated the necessity of knowing the history and background of your occupation. The history of teaching should be known by all future teachers so that they can benefit from those and make appropriate adaptations and upgrades".

Student teachers' expressions on how they actually applied theory in their teaching revealed a misconception of theory in ELT as in what theories they know in ELT. Four student teachers gave references to methods or approaches in ELT as a theory. For instance, ST 5 talked about communicative teaching as a theory: "I used mostly communicative teaching techniques in my teaching because they are student-centred and I believe result in more permanent knowledge in students' mind and more fun. I created discussions, storytelling, games as activities according to students' developmental stages." In the same fashion, ST 14 referred to Total Physical Response (TPR) which is actually a method in language teaching as a theory: "I take the ideas that supposedly will work for my classes from different methods in my teaching. For example, with my teenage learners I do not want to use TPR activities. Instead I prefer to use communicative activities".

On the other hand, seven student teachers explained how they benefitted from learning theories in their teaching practices. ST 11 talked about the benefits of the cognitivist theory in her/his teaching: "I have benefitted just a little bit from the cognitivist theory as I used a concept map in that lesson. I asked them to think about the topic and asked each one of them to tell a word or a sentence about that topic". ST 9 narrated how s/he utilized constructivism and humanism in her/his teaching in a clear manner:

I have benefited from the constructivism theory in my teaching experiences. I addressed previous knowledge of my students at the beginning of my lessons and I tried to construct new knowledge on it trying to build a connection between them. In addition, I have tried to relate my lessons to students own world by asking questions about themselves and eliciting information from their private lives so that the new information would make more sense to them. Moreover, I have used humanistic approach in my teaching. For example, I haven't been a didactic teacher and I have tried to be as flexible as possible in my lessons. I always wanted my students to be active during classes.

Five student teachers made remarks on how they could not benefit from theory in their teaching. The reasons of finding theory not beneficial in their own context varied from having limited amount of

experience to believing that the whole system is already based on only one theory, which is behaviourism, so s/he could not benefit from other theories and to the perception that there is no correct theory.

For instance, ST 6 stated: “since we have not enough experience of teaching, we cannot benefit from them. However, being aware of it is good and when I realize some situations in which these theories are fulfilled, I will see their practical results”. Another student teacher, ST 18, claimed that he didn’t think there was a right theory on teaching, that is why s/he has not benefited from them.

### 3.2. Practicing Teachers’ Conceptualization of Theory

To answer the second research question, a brief likert-scale questionnaire was administered to the teachers. The items in the survey were either direct statements of student teachers or slightly modified versions of their remarks, which gave direction to the themes for the first research question.

With regards to the nature of theory, practicing teachers seem to be indecisive as it can be seen from Table 1. As for the more subjective view of theory, which is what you think or believe based on the accumulation of experiences, seven of them showed disagreement while six of them agreed with the statement, and three of them were undecided. Therefore, it could be said that half of the teachers accepted theory in a more subjective manner while the rest did not. In the same manner, while half of them (n=8) agreed with the perception of theory as a claimed idea that is not scientifically proven yet, the rest (n=8) did not. On the other hand, practicing teachers seemed to show a more consistent view on theory as observed facts and scientific statements. Ten of them agreed with this perception while five of them were in-between and only one of them disagreed. Only one teacher commented on the nature of theory. PT 10 claimed that “a theory is an abstract concept”. In general, it appears that practicing EFL teachers did not hold a strong unified view of the nature of theory even though they had a tendency to consider it more from the positivist and objective point of view.

**Table 1.** Summary of the Results of Likert Scale Items in Practicing EFL Teachers’ Questionnaire Regarding the Nature and the Role of Theory

Practicing Teachers’ Questionnaire Items on Nature and Roles of Theory	Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Undecided (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly Agree (5)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	1. Theory is what you think or believe according to what you have accumulated throughout your life and experiences.	3	18,75	4	25	3	18,75	4	25	2	12,5	16
2. Theory is an idea or a discovery that is claimed but not scientifically proven or refuted yet.	3	18,75	5	31,25	0	0	7	43,75	1	6,25	16	100
3. Theory is the observed facts and scientific statements suggested by the professors or experts of a specific era.	0	0	1	6,25	5	31,25	5	31,25	5	31,25	16	100
4. Theory has an explanatory power.	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	62,25	6	37,5	16	100
5. Theory functions as guidance.	0	0	0	0	1	6,25	8	50	7	43,75	16	100
6. Theory forms a base for generating ideas and opinions.	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	31,25	11	68,75	16	100
7. Theory does not offer practical suggestions.	3	18,75	7	43,75	3	18,75	2	12,5	1	6,25	16	100

On the other hand, as far as the functions of theory are concerned, their responses demonstrated strong directions (Please see Table 1). For instance, all of the teachers agreed with the function of theory as a way of explanation (item 4) and a base for generating ideas and opinions (item 6). In a similar vein, 15 of them thought of theory as guidance, only one of them was in between (item 5). With the item which states theory does not offer practical suggestions, 10 of them were in disagreement, three of them were unsure and three of them supported this perspective. Teachers' further comments also corroborated these results. Six of them made remarks on the function of theory. Five of them underscored the guiding characteristics of theory. For instance, PT 7 wrote that: "I believe theory in ELT is the basis of the practice" and PT 6 claimed that: "It's like a recipe, it gives me an idea". One teacher put emphasis on the feature of generating ideas: "For novice teachers they provide a basis for their teaching with an inventory of ideas and techniques".

As in student teachers' questionnaire, practicing teachers were also asked to specify the theories they know in the list of items which were considered as theory by student teachers, then state how valuable they found those theories.

The results of the second questionnaire reveal that only quite a limited number of teachers considered approaches and methods related to language teaching as theory (GTM (n=1), CLT (n=1), Natural Approach (n=1), Eclectic Approach (n=1). More than two thirds of them specified theories of learning as theory: Behaviourism (n=15), Cognitivism (n=15), Constructivism (n=14), MIT (n=14), and Humanism (n=11). In terms of theories of second language acquisition, an average number of practicing EFL teachers regarded them as theory: Universal Grammar (n=10), I+1 (n=10), Input and Output Hypothesis (n=7), Critical Period Hypothesis (n=4).

Parallel to the numbers of practicing EFL teachers who considered specific items as theory, the value they attached to them also varied. On a likert-type scale continuum of value which is positively geared (1: Not Valuable, 2: Slightly Valuable, 3: Valuable, 4: Very Valuable), practicing teachers found all the theories of learning as the most valuable theories: Constructivism (M=3.31, SD=1.40), Cognitivism (M=3.25, SD=1.06), MIT (M=3.18; SD=1.37) Humanism (M=2.43, SD=1.78) and Behaviourism (M=2.31, SD=1.01). These teachers also found I+1 Theory (M=2.18, SD=1.83) and Universal Grammar (M=2.12, SD=1.85) also quite valuable. What is noteworthy about these results is the relatively lower degree of value they attached to Behaviourism although it was, with Cognitivism, the mostly-stated theory by practicing EFL teachers.

As Table 2 clearly indicates, with regards to how theories can be beneficial to teaching, all of the teachers agreed with their benefits in terms of shaping their teaching philosophy and strategies (item 1) and providing the historical background of the profession (item 2). Practicing teachers also showed 100 per cent agreement with the item that they also make use of communicative teaching techniques like story telling. It seems that nearly all (n=15) found multiple intelligence theory helpful in terms of meeting the needs of different learners (item 4) and they (n=15) found constructivism useful because it enabled them to address their students' previous knowledge (item 5). Likewise, 14 of them found theories useful to set up teacher roles (item 6) and create classroom atmosphere (item 7). Only two of them were undecided about previous two items. Overall, practicing teachers, like student teachers, made use of theories in practice in quite the same manner.

**Table 2.**Summary of the Results of Likert Scale Items in Practicing EFL Teachers' Questionnaire Regarding the Benefits of Theory

Practicing Teachers' Questionnaire Items on Benefits of Theory	Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Undecided (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly Agree (5)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	1. Theories are helpful since they shape my own teaching philosophy and my strategies.	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	37,5	10	62,5	16
2. Theories are necessary since they provide the history and background of my profession	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	37,5	10	62,5	16	100
3. I used communicative teaching techniques in my teaching such as discussions, storytelling and games.	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	31,25	11	68,75	16	100
4. Multiple intelligences theory is helpful in terms of meeting the needs of students who have different learning styles and preferences.	0	0	0	0	1	6,25	5	31,25	10	62,5	16	100
5. I made use of constructivism in my teaching experiences. I addressed previous knowledge of my students at the beginning of my lessons and I tried to construct new knowledge on it trying to build a connection between them.	0	0	0	0	1	6,25	7	43,75	8	50	16	100
6. Theories are useful to decide on teacher roles. For instance, based on humanism, I am a facilitator in the classroom not a didactic teacher.	0	0	0	0	2	12,5	4	25	10	62,5	16	100
7. Theories help me to create classroom atmosphere. I adopt student-centered teaching in my classes.	0	0	0	0	2	12,5	7	43,75	7	43,75	16	100

Besides, the comments they further made on how they benefitted from theories were also similar to student teachers' practices. For instance, PT 1 underlined that theories are effective in making decisions about instructional processes: "I think theories really help us about our way of teaching. They play an important role in deciding on what kind of materials, techniques or activities we use in our classrooms". PT 9 focused on theory as a base for teaching: "Theories provide a rationale for my practice of teaching". Only PT 14 clearly expressed how she made use of theory in her teaching by mentioning the name of the theory:

I particularly use I+1 and communicative competence theories in the class. When I choose a text that is only one level above students' level, they won't get lost. I really see the difference when I choose a much more difficult text. Overall, theories are quite helpful to shed light on my teaching and positioning some in the class.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study revealed both student teachers and practicing teachers' perceptions of theory in ELT in terms of three features of theory: its nature, its function and its relevance or benefits for practice. In this study, the conceptualization of theory by student teachers is mostly situated into the objective side of the objective-subjective continuum. Defining it either as a claimed idea that is not scientifically proven yet or as a set of scientific statements/rules proposed by professors or experts in the field is rooted in the positivist approach to theory. Looking for verification, refutation or valid observation is more associated with the objective approach. Similar results are also found by Sjolie

(2014) who claims that such a scientific view of theory derives from its being separate from practice. This kind of view positions the self and individual experiences detached from what is considered as truth or facts. Consequently, this may lead student teachers to criticize theories of being separate to what they do in the class and it may be difficult for them to theorize what they practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Only two student teachers regarded theory from the point of personal theories. In terms of empowering teachers in their own teaching practices, it is of great importance to celebrate their own opinions and beliefs based on their experiences. To achieve this end, the concept of personal theories or ‘unofficial theories’ (Farrell, 2015) or theories-in-use is very useful (Yaman, 2008). In this respect, student teachers should also develop the concept of personal theories when the term theory is conveyed. More subjective nature of theory should be integrated into the second language teacher education programs since personal theories enable student teachers to make meaning of events much more easily, giving way to professional development. In that sense, in addition to the presentation of theory from the positivist and scientific point of views, Pring’s (2004) definition of theory as “the articulation of the framework of beliefs and understandings which are embedded in the practice we engage in” (p. 78) can be acknowledged and introduced in pre-service education courses. On the other hand, practicing EFL teachers also displayed similarities to student teachers in terms of their conception of theory. Half of the practicing teachers considered theory from the subjective perspective whereas the other half disagreed with the personal interpretation of theory. They also conceptualized it within the more scientific positioning.

As for the functions of theory, EFL student teachers’ understanding of theory seems more promising than what literature suggests. Most of the studies (Allen, 2009; Emsheimer & De Silva, 2011) reveal that student teachers do not appreciate theory, they prioritize practice over theory since they approach theory as a concept which does not provide any practical solutions to the problem. In those studies, student teachers either regarded theories as some sorts of a problem solver, focusing only the prescriptive nature of theory (Emsheimer & De Silva, 2011) or they valued theory to the extent it could be applied in practice, in other words, to the relevance to practice (Knight, 2015). With the accumulation of experience, they started to realize different roles of theory like forming a basis for reflection and making sense of events. However, in the present study, student teachers appreciated theory at the very beginning of their professional experiences by assigning it multiple roles like explanation of ideas and classroom events, and generating ideas. In this study only two student teachers claimed that theory is not practical, and did not notice the connection between theory and practice. Similarly, nearly all practicing EFL teachers appreciated the functions of theory. Furthermore, they strongly believed in its role as guidance, a way of explanation and generating ideas. Hence, it could be suggested that not only student teachers but also practicing teachers acknowledged the benefits of theory, and attached a great amount of value to it.

Student teachers’ references to approaches and methods as theory are actually predictable. Seven out of 18 student teachers specified either approaches like Lexical Approach, Communicative Approach or methods like Direct Method, Grammar-Translation Method as theory. Since ELT on its own does not have a specific theory and it relies on theories from other disciplines, such a result may be expected. What is more, the term approach in itself includes theory as its component. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) put it “approach refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching” (p. 20). In this regard, it may be understandable why student teachers referred to approaches as theories. The nuance between theory and approach can be better conveyed to student teachers by teacher educators through meta-level discussions about theory as Sjolie (2014) suggests. Such an association can be observed in practicing teachers’ responses with a limited way. Only two practicing EFL teachers considered approaches as theory. In this sense, it would not be a wrong interpretation to assume that the more

experience teachers gain, the more aware they become of the difference between theory and approach. In addition, the results of how valuable practicing EFL teachers found theories also revealed that constructivism (M=3.31, SD=1.40), cognitivism (M=3.25, SD=1.06), MIT (M=3.18; SD=1.37) are the theories they attached importance the most although behaviourism (M=2.31, SD=1.01) is the one with the highest number of frequency (15 practicing teachers) for acknowledgement as theory. This illustrates that even though behaviourism is a quite well-known theory among both student and practicing teachers, its value to practice is not appreciated. Likewise, the examples they provided for how they benefit from theories in their actual teaching generally entail incidents supported with references to constructivism. Similar findings were also present in Emsheimer and De Silva (2011). While constructivism was favoured, behaviourism was found not much useful by student teachers.

With respect to how they benefited from theory in their practices, both student and practicing teachers seem to be quite cognizant of how theories are at work in teaching. While as suggested in literature (Allen, 2009; Emsheimer & De Silva, 2011) teachers mostly criticized theory as remote from and irrelevant to practice, the participants of this study stated their appreciation of theory in their educational engagements such as deciding teacher roles, preparing lesson plans or materials, designing classroom activities. In this sense, it could be argued that both student and practicing teachers can see the connection between theory and practice, in other words, how theory can enrich practice.

## 5. Conclusions

Overall, the present study tried to provide a large picture of how theory is conceptualized by both student and practicing teachers with regards to its nature, functions and relevance to practice. Although the study can be regarded as successful to show a case which is unique in terms of selecting participants who actually appreciate theory, it has limitations. The data were collected from participants via only one tool, which is an open ended questionnaire for student teachers and a questionnaire with likert-scale items for practicing teachers. In this regard, triangulation of data was not fulfilled. Yet, it could be said that the researchers tried to triangulate the student teachers' results by using their responses to form the basis of the data collection tool used with practicing teachers, to see if they were consistent. A further study can make use of both questionnaires, interviews and teachers' diaries to obtain their further insights on the conceptualization of theory. Future researchers can design a longitudinal study through which they can deeply investigate how teachers change and develop their understanding of theory from pre-service education to in-service teaching in relation to the contexts they work and the experiences they have. Besides, a follow-up study can be conducted to seek out in which ways teacher educators in this very specific context present theories since the student teachers are able to see the link between theory and practice and appreciate theory, which is not common in teacher education.

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## Teorinin İngiliz dili öğretmen adayları ve İngilizce öğretmenleri tarafından kavramsallaştırılması

### Öz

Genellikle öğretimde, özellikle de öğretmen yetiştirmede teori öğretmenler tarafından uygulamaya ol(may)an faydası ve ilgisi hakkında oldukça fazla eleştirilir. Bu eleştiriyi detaylı bir şekilde anlamak için, bu çalışma teorinin öğretmen adayları ve öğretmenler tarafından nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığını incelemeyi hedefler. Bu amaçla, bu çalışmada veri 18 kişilik bir öğretmen adayı grubundan ve 16 kişilik bir öğretmen grubundan toplanmıştır. Öğretmen adayları grubuna açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan bir anket uygulanmıştır ve öğretmenlere de likert-tipi sorulardan oluşan bir anket uygulanmıştır. Sonuçlar hem öğretmen adaylarının hem de öğretmenlerin teoriyi daha objektif ve daha bilimsel bir bakış açısıyla ele aldığını göstermiştir. İki grup da teoriye uygulamaya rehberlik etme, fikirleri açıklama, ve düşünce üretme gibi roller atfetmiştir. İki grup da uygulamalarında teoriden faydalandıklarını dile getirmiştir. Alan yazımının önerisinin aksine, sadece öğretmen adayları değil öğretmenler de teoriyi takdirle karşılamışlardır. Bu anlamda, bu çalışma öğretmen yetiştirme programlarının geliştirilmesi açısından ümit vadeden sonuçlar ve öneriler ortaya koymuştur.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Teori kavramsallaştırması; öğretmen adayları; öğretmenler

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