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Examining Theory-Practice Connection in a Pre-Service English Teacher Education Project

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Examining Theory-Practice Connection in a Pre-Service English Teacher Education Project*

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ABSTRACT

The disconnection between theory and practice in teacher education has been an important issue which partly stems from the lack of real classroom practice. There are attempts to overcome this problem and the Project "Give me a Hand" is one of them. This case study aims to determine the impacts of the Project regarding theory-practice connection. The findings derived from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations revealed that teaching experience, mentoring, and self-evaluation were the activities promoting theory-practice connection. Also, the teacher candidates' transferring the theoretical knowledge into practice, questioning the practice, explaining the theoretical ground for their practice were found to be other promoting aspects of the Project. However, some shortcomings were determined which hinder the theory-practice connection. Some suggestions were proposed by the participants to correct these shortcomings. The Project might provide new insights to teacher educators who seek ways to bridge theory and practice.

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Theory lacking attachment to practice is insignificant yet practice without the underlying principles is of no significance either. This makes the integration of theory and practice vital in teacher education programs (Widdowson, 1979). Teacher candidates are expected to make use of research findings and theories related to language, learning, and culture in their teaching practices (Newby et al., 2007). Therefore many countries are trying to improve theory-practice connection in pre-service teacher education (Allen & Wright, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Day, 1993; Fradd & Lee, 1997; Hennissen, Beckers, & Moerkerke, 2017; Marcondes, Leite, & Ramos, 2017; van Batenburg, 2013) so that their

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graduates do not experience “reality shock in which the ideals that were formed during teacher training are replaced by the reality of school life” (Farrell, 2003, p. 95).

It is difficult to connect theory and practice in language teaching and teacher education due to the nature of language acquisition process (Baecher, 2012; Day, 1993; Ellis, 2010). Foreign and second language teacher candidates have to form connection between theory and practice on the basis of pedagogic knowledge, content knowledge, and the cultural structures of the community using the target language. This process, which can be complicated and difficult to handle even for experienced teachers, is extremely challenging for teacher candidates.

The disconnect between theory and practice in the pre-service education of foreign language teachers in Turkey has been a major issue for a long time (Çelik & Arıkan, 2012; Seferoğlu, 2004). One of the factors which makes it difficult to build theory-practice connection is that beginning teachers, after receiving an education either at undergraduate programs or pedagogical formation certificate programs, teach students, from pre-school to tertiary levels, in different stages of development. In pre-service education, undergraduate programs offer insufficient amount of practice; pedagogical formation certificate programs with only one teaching practice course are not adequate to form theory and practice connection. In this context, teacher educators need to find creative ways in order to solve this problem. Ege University, School of Foreign Languages runs a Project with the teacher educators and the teacher candidates who are students in the pedagogical formation certificate program. In this study, the impacts of the project, regarding theory and practice connection were analysed.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Rationale for Theory-Practice Connection in Pre-Service Teacher Education

The fundamental reason behind the need for theory-practice connection in pre-service teacher education is the adaptation problems of beginning teachers. Research shows that English Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education programs fail to prepare teacher candidates for real students; therefore, beginning teachers encounter difficulties in connecting theory and practice (Baecher, 2012; Baniasad-Azad, Tavakoli, & Ketabi, 2016; Bulut Albaba, 2017; Güvendir, 2017; Hennissen et al., 2017; Öztürk, 2008; Salli-Copur, 2008; Seferoğlu, 2006). In a recent study, 93% of the teachers in their initial years of profession stated that university education did not reflect the real world (Güvendir, 2017). Research also reveals that pre-service teacher education programs are theory-oriented and fail to offer sufficient teaching experience in different practice settings (Balbay, Pamuk, Temir, & Doğan, 2018; Güvendir, 2017; Salli-Copur, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). Yanpar-Yelken (2009) ascertained that English teacher candidates in Turkey, Denmark, and Germany expect pre-service teacher education programs to be more balanced in terms of theory and practice. Thus, universities should strengthen the link between theory and practice.

Another reason for theory-practice connection is that teacher candidates are expected to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge before entering the profession (European Commission, 2005). In one of the approaches to convey this knowledge, first the theory is taught and then practice takes place. In this approach, which is employed in most teacher education programs, it is presumed that teacher candidates need to test theoretical knowledge in practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Fradd & Lee, 1997). Nevertheless, in this approach, understanding of pedagogic content knowledge is limited to learning the theory (Day, 1993; Dewey, 1927). The second approach, in which teacher candidates first gain practical experiences through which they reach theoretical knowledge, is called “rapid introduction to practicum experience” (p. 135) (Russell, 2005). This approach is based on the idea that teaching is a practice-oriented profession (Dewey, 1927). Application of this approach requires practices for theory-practice connection.

Final reason is that theory-practice connection is qualified as a key feature of pre-service teacher education programs. Some accrediting bodies (e.g. Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of

Education Faculty Programs, 2016; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008) address standards concerning theory-practice connection. Therefore, one of the key features of the exemplary pre-service teacher education programs is theory-practice connection (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Fradd & Lee, 1997; Freese, 2005; Marcondes et al., 2017; Zeichner & McDonald, 2011).

2.2. Key Features of Theory-Practice Connection Focused Teacher Education Programs

In theory-practice connection oriented programs, teacher candidates are offered long term, theory concurrent with teaching experience which start in the early stages of their education (Freese, 2005; Ünver, 2014). Russell (2005) finds teacher education programs in which theory is taught first then the practice takes place limited since “images in context are more powerful than words out of context” (p. 146). Teacher candidates can enhance their theoretical understandings and their teaching skills only when they learn the theory in connection with the practice throughout the curriculum (Freese, 2005).

Purposefully designed and well-structured field experiences contribute to theory-practice connection (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Stenberg, Rajala, & Hilppo, 2016) more than haphazard teaching experiences (Day, 1993). In this way, teacher candidates can find a chance to put specific and different theoretical knowledge into practice. They can plan their own practices and they can be aware of which theoretical knowledge they apply in their practice. In theory-practice connection oriented programs practicum takes place in real educational institutions with real learners (Freese, 2005; Ünver, 2014; Zeichner & McDonald, 2011). Teacher candidates can modify their educational plans after they apply them with their students (Dewey, 1927). For example, in Dilit (Divulgazione Lingua Italiana) Teacher Education Center, the context in which the language is used is given utmost importance; therefore, teacher candidates practice with real students and gain experience which help them solve problems in real teaching and learning contexts (Lampert, Beasley, Ghouseini, Kazemi ve Franke, 2010).

Hascher, Cocard, and Moser (2004) indicated that when only focused on experiencing teaching, the theory-practice connection cannot be formed, and as a matter of fact the connection gap gets deeper. Thus, many researchers suggest reflective practice in order to strengthen the theory-practice connection (Day, 1993; Dewey, 1927; Ellis, 2010; Freese, 2005; Hascher et al., 2004; Marcondes et al., 2017; Ünver, 2018). According to Day (1993), reflective practice ensures that second language teacher candidates gain pedagogic, content, and pedagogic content knowledge through their experiences. For example, in The International Degree in English and Education, a four-year program at University of Amsterdam, reflective activities that can be given as good examples are class observations, personal theories activity, and background reading (Van Batenburg, 2013).

Universities, in order to enhance theory and practice connection need to form cooperation with other educational institutions. This cooperation is suggested for teaching practices and mainly tried to be formed in such practices (Allen & Wright, 2014; Hascher et al., 2004). On the other hand, in theory-practice connection oriented programs, the cooperation is not limited to practice only, but it is also maintained for theoretical courses, especially methods courses (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Ünver, 2014). In such programs, instead of conventional supervising, all the stakeholders cooperate in order to learn together (Freese, 2005).

2.3. English Language Teacher Education in Turkey and Theory-Practice Connection

Turkey ranked 26th out of 27 European countries, and 62th out of 80 countries in Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East in the English Proficiency Index with its very low score of 47.79 points (Education First, 2018). One of the factors leading to this failure was identified as teachers' incompetency in teaching English (Coşkun Demirpolat, 2015; Sezer, 1987). In the review study of Özkan &

Arikan (2010) English teachers were found to be inadequate in language teaching, especially at primary education level.

Pre-service foreign language teacher education in Turkey is given either in four-year undergraduate programs or in less than a-year-long pedagogical formation certificate programs both which are established by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE). Graduates of these programs are qualified to teach from pre-school to tertiary levels. At state universities, compulsory courses in undergraduate and certificate programs are the same, but elective courses show some differences (CoHE, 2007, 2014, 2018).

Undergraduate programs have been revised three times over the last 20 years. The ratio of practice hours to total course hours in the program was 11% in 1998, it was 7% in 2007, and in 2018 it was 10% (CoHE, 1998, 2007, 2018). In pedagogical formation certificate programs, only one teaching practice course (six hours practice and two hours seminar) is offered (CoHE, 2014). These figures show that after 2007, early initiated teaching practices were abandoned. It is also noticeable that, although practice activities in methods courses were promoted, the hours are not officially determined in 2018 (CoHE, 2018). In undergraduate and pedagogical formation certificate programs, the number and length of practicum are insufficient and in the last program revision not enough betterment concerning theory-practice connection took place. These programs, especially the certificate programs, fail to enable teacher candidates to learn teaching theories, how to put theory into practice, and gain practical knowledge. Hence, a number of studies reveal that pedagogical formation certificate program graduates feel themselves less adequate compared to undergraduate program graduates when they enter the profession (Seferoğlu, 2004).

In recent years, it is observed that there have been several programs aiming to build theory and practice connection in Turkey (Aydoğan & Çilsal, 2007). Teaching practicum is considered as an opportunity for theory-practice connection (Atay, 2007; Mirici & Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017) and it is suggested that more time should be allocated for practicum in the program (Kanat, 2014; Katırcı, 2014; Ministry of National Education, 2017; Salli-Copur, 2008). Some private universities offer more practicum in teacher education faculties than the state universities, and they start the teaching practices in the early stages of their programs (e.g., Bahçeşehir University, 2015; MEF University, 2018). To illustrate, MEF University (2018) offers four practice courses (50 ECTS in total) in the fifth semester of ELT program.

The number of studies which aim to enhance theory-practice connection in English language teacher education has increased over the last ten years (Altay, 2015; Coşgun-Ögeyik, 2015; Kurt, 2012). For instance, in a study she conducted, Altay (2015) found that after taking part in a training on mentoring, cooperating teachers started to transfer theory into practice more. In Kurt's (2012) study, curriculum aiming at enhancing technological pedagogical content knowledge was found to be significantly important for teacher candidates who reflected this knowledge to their teaching practices. Coşgun-Ögeyik's (2015) study showed that teacher candidates find micro teaching activities supportive in connecting theory and practice. Nonetheless, there is still a need for further studies investigating the ways to enhance theory-practice connection in teacher education.

3. Method

3.1. Aim of Study

Universities in Turkey need to find and offer ways which are different than but allowed within the legal limitations of the official curricula for the betterment of theory-practice connection in teacher education (CoHE, 2014, 2018). The Project "Give me a Hand" run by Ege University, School of Foreign Languages may serve as a good example of this. The aim of this study is to determine the impacts of the

project's teacher education aspect on theory-practice connection. With this aim in mind, the study sought answers to the following questions:

RQ1: What are the activities conducted in the project regarding theory and practice connection?

RQ2: What are the impacts of the Project regarding theory and practice connection?

RQ3: How could the Project be improved in terms of theory and practice connection?

3.2. Research Design

In teacher education there is a need for in-depth case studies (Day, 1993). In this qualitative case study, a holistic single-case design (Stake, 2000) was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews and classroom observations.

3.3. Case

In this study, the Project "Give me a Hand" was identified as the case and the teacher education aspect of the Project was identified as the unit of analysis. The aim of the Project is two-fold. The major aim is to support the students of EUSFL with low academic achievement by providing remedial classes on a regular basis. Also, to provide teacher candidates who are final year students at Ege University English Language and Literature, American Culture and Literature, and Translation and Interpreting Studies Departments and also attending pedagogical formation certificate program at Ege University, Faculty of Education with an opportunity to practice teaching in real classroom setting with the support and guidance of mentors. The Project, unlike the pedagogical formation certificate program, offers teacher candidates long term teaching experiences with students at tertiary level.

In this seven-month Project, the teacher candidates, who participate in the Project voluntarily, experience individual teaching (60 hour in total) or co-teaching (30 hours in total) practice for 20 weeks. Four experienced English instructors working in EUSFL take part in the project as mentors. The mentors are responsible for giving feedback to the teacher candidates' lesson plans, providing material for them, conducting classroom observations, and giving feedback on teaching performances. Teacher candidates are responsible for observing their mentors' classroom instruction for one week before the Project starts, designing lesson plans, revising their lesson plans based on feedback from their mentors, teaching classes, reflecting on their mentors' classroom observation feedback, and filling in self-observation checklists after each class.

3.4. Participants

Data were collected from four mentors, seven teacher candidates, and six EUSFL students who participate in the Project. One of the mentors is working as a coordinator at EUSFL, and two of them teach methods courses and serve as practicum supervisors in EU pedagogical formation certificate program. Teaching experiences of the four mentors range between 10-30 years. The teacher candidates are students in the pedagogical formation certificate program who are volunteered for the Project *Give Me a Hand*. All the mentors are female; six teacher candidates are female and one is male; three students are female and three are male.

3.5. Instruments

Data were mainly obtained by semi-structured interview forms formed separately for mentors, teacher candidates, and students. Draft forms were read through by two experts. Student interview form

was formed in the light of the other two forms towards the end of the Project. Both mentor and teacher candidate interview forms consist of 10 questions each. Mentors and teacher candidates were interviewed in two stages, at the end of the first and the second term of the academic year. Student interview form which consists of three questions was used only at the end of the second term. Here are some example questions from the interview forms:

- What kind of activities do you conduct in the Project concerning teacher candidates' education? (Mentor interview form)
- What are the features of this Project that makes it different from the practicum courses in pedagogical formation certificate program? (Teacher candidate interview form)
- Have you observed any changes in Project, teacher candidates' teaching skills from the beginning to the end of the Project? (Student interview form)

Apart from the interview forms, an observation form developed by Ünver (2014) was used with a few changes done. In this study, observation form was piloted by one of the researchers in one of the Project classes. Afterwards, the research team deliberated over the use of the form in this study and determined the points to consider in utilization.

3.6. Procedure

Data were collected during the academic year of 2016-2017. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted by two of the researchers in a vacant room in EUSFL. Interviews with the mentors and teacher candidates were conducted at the end of the first and the second term; student interviews were conducted only at the end of the second term. On average, the interview sessions with the mentors took 29 minutes in the first term, 19 minutes in the second; with the teacher candidates the sessions took 23 minutes in the first, 25 minutes in the second term; the student interviews took 12 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants.

Class observations were conducted by the three researchers. Before each observation, appointments had been made with the teacher candidates. Each one lasting approximately 80 minutes, 12 class observations were carried out in total. In four of them co-teaching, in eight individual teaching performances were observed. Observation results were noted down on the form, and then written up and expanded later in the same day.

3.7. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews and observations were analyzed through content analysis. Initial code list was formed by two of the researchers coding the same part of the data set and the third researcher did the code-checking for intercoder reliability. Working on different participant's transcript in each round, intercoder reliability was calculated as 37% in the first round, it was 57% in the second and third rounds, and 77% in the final round. Intercoder agreement in the fourth round was found close the 90% range suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994), and coding process proceeded with other transcripts. During the coding process, in order to improve internal consistency, each rendition was reviewed together until an agreement was reached by all the researchers. After first-level coding, patterns formed by the codes were determined and themes were constructed by the researchers. A matrix was created in Microsoft Excel, displaying the codes, themes, data sources, and data collection methods before the data interpretation phase. When presenting the findings, mentors were coded with the letter "M", the teacher candidates were coded with the letters "TC", and the students with "S". In direct quotations, data collection method and the stage of it were also stated.

In this study, some precautions were taken to ensure validity and reliability. In the data collection process, data sources triangulation (mentors, teacher candidates, and students), methodological triangulation (observation and interview), and investigator triangulation (one internal and two external) were employed. Furthermore, the interview forms were prepared based on theoretical knowledge, and expert opinion was appealed to for the forms. The internal researcher had no official or active role in the selection or supervision of the teacher candidates who participated in the Project. However, her being an instructor at EUSFL, and her relations with the mentors might have caused them to feel tense and anxious. On the other hand, being familiar with the context, the researcher might have understood the terminology they used, and interpreted it better. As for the reliability, as mentioned before, coding process did not proceed until the intercoder reliability had reached 77%. Throughout the data analysis process, regular meetings were held to maintain communication among coders.

4. Results

The findings of the study, which aims to examine the impacts of the Project activities regarding theory-practice connection, have been presented in relation to the research questions.

4.1. Activities Promoting Theory-Practice Connection in the Project

Findings related to projects' activities promoting theory-practice connection were presented under three themes (Figure 1). Within the scope of "teaching experience" theme, teacher candidates' planning their lessons and their revision of these plans in accordance with the feedback they received from the mentors were found to be the activities promoting theory-practice connection (Mentors, n=4). The teacher candidates (n=6) stated that preparing their lesson plans and teaching materials themselves enhanced their pedagogical design capacity. For example, in the first interview, TC2 specified being given the full responsibility of material design as a big challenge and stated that, as a result of this, his/her material design skills and use of teaching strategies improved. M4 and two of the students who observed this improvement in teacher candidates mentioned that as teacher candidates gained more experience, the materials they designed became more authentic. Also, in the second term, teacher candidates were observed to employ more pair work and group work activities and games and competitions which keep the students more active; they were observed to make better use of warm up activities and to give instructions more clearly compared to the observations conducted in the first term.

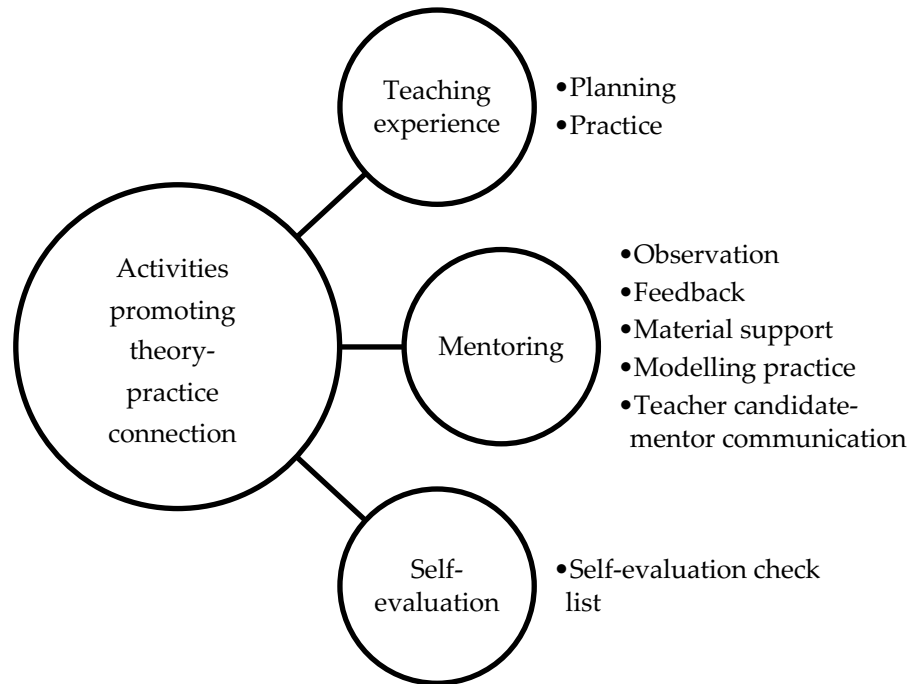


Figure 1. Activities in the Project Which Promote Theory-Practice Connection

Within the scope of “teaching experience” theme, the teacher candidates improved their classroom management, lesson plan adaptation, and giving feedback skills. In terms of classroom management, in the first interviews, TC5 and TC7 indicated that this Project, unlike the pedagogical formation certificate program, provided one-on-one interaction with students. TC3, on the other hand, stated that as he/she got to know the students better, he/she started to try different strategies for classroom management. M1, in her second interview, emphasized that as the time spent on teaching practice increased, communication between the teacher candidates and their students built up making them feel more comfortable in managing the classroom. During classroom observations, it was determined that the teacher candidates gave instructions clearly, observed their students closely, and reminded them the instructions if necessary.

In regard to lesson plan adaptations, when they confronted a problem while implementing the plan they designed, some of the candidates indicated that they had a chance to think about the adaptations which could be applied. TC7, for example, stated he/she learned how to improvise, while TC3 stated he/she even made adaptations on the activities suggested by the mentors before implementing them. Moreover, some teacher candidates, such as TC2, were observed to find alternative solutions to the problems emerged regarding teaching activities. In the interviews, some participants mentioned that teaching experience taught teacher candidates how to give context relevant feedback. To illustrate, TC6 stated he/she had the opportunity to detect students’ learning gaps, to give individual feedback by either writing on their papers or via emails; M4 and S5 stated that as the teacher candidates gained more experience, they began to give more explanatory feedback. Observation records also showed that teacher candidates provide the students with individual and explanatory feedback.

As seen in Figure 1, mentoring theme included the sub-themes of class observations, feedback, material support, modelling, and teacher candidate and mentor communication. Mentors (n=3) stated that they carried out classroom observations to track the improvements in teacher candidates’ performances

and impacts of the feedback they received from them. M3, for instance, mentioned that she took down detailed notes during the observations, and shared these notes with the teacher candidates at the end of the lesson.

Both the mentors and the teacher candidates considered the role of feedback regarding their lesson plans and practices in the improvement of their teaching skills to be very important. For example, M3 was observed to take detailed notes and share the notes with the teacher candidates right after the lesson. While giving feedback, she explained negative and positive sides of the practice by connecting them to the theory. The mentors (n=2) and the teacher candidates (n=6) found material support and different activity options, given under the guidance of the mentors, supportive in terms of theory-practice connection. TC6, for instance, mentioned that his/her mentor's suggestions helped him/her to overcome the difficulties in designing authentic materials. M4 stated that she provided the teacher candidates with some exercises that might be useful while teaching some grammar points. M1 and TC5 also mentioned that teacher candidates were free to put mentors' activity suggestions into practice. However, the mentors (n=3) indicated that the number and the frequency of the feedback given to teacher candidates regarding their lesson plans and practices decreased in the second term of the Project. The data obtained from the observations supported the findings derived from the mentor and the teacher candidate interviews.

Two teacher candidates stated that observing their mentor's teaching practices were very beneficial in terms of theory-practice connection. Especially, observing the classes of the mentors who were also their instructors at pedagogical formation certificate program were found more educative. TC4 expressed his/her opinion about this and the benefit of observing different mentors as follows:

"... For example, M3 was using the methods that she had taught us in her class. We experienced it at first hand. She was using the methods she taught in her formation certificate course. I saw how it works in practice ... With M4 we observed grammar teaching, with M3 we observed how material was prepared, what kind of activities were carried out and how they were managed. Therefore, it was very beneficial." (TC4, Int. I)

The mentors, on the other hand, stated that the teacher candidates made use of the modelling practices at the beginning of the Project, however, during the process this practice could not be maintained. M3 pointed out that before the Project started teacher candidates seemed to have only a slight awareness of theory-practice connection, and observing their mentors' teaching practices played a significant role in raising awareness:

"...In the first term, all my students (teacher candidates) came in my classes (for observation). It was a nice experience, it was good for me, too. At the weekends (in the pedagogical formation certificate course) while I was teaching them the theories, I told them that I wasn't teaching them anything that I wouldn't employ in my own classroom, anything that wouldn't work" (M3, Int. II)

The teacher candidates' getting the mentor support they need during the planning stage through various communication channels was considered an important factor for theory-practice connection. While TC5 identified the situation as follows: *"... for an inexperienced person (teacher candidate) being in a continuous one-to-one communication with a mentor is a big plus."* (Int. I). M1 stated that her positive communication with the teacher candidates and her being accessible through technology were effective on the candidates' taking her feedback into consideration.

Last activity which was considered useful in terms of theory-practice connection was self-evaluation (Figure 1). The teacher candidates and the mentors mentioned the use of self-evaluation checklists in the Project to improve reflective thinking skills. M4 stated that teacher candidates evaluated themselves on the basis of problems they encountered with their students during practices, and use the results of self-evaluation in their lesson plans and teaching practices. Two mentors indicated that teacher candidates were guided to reflect on their teaching:

"I gave the teacher candidates some points to reflect on at the end of their teaching practices... In the next day or two, orally, they evaluated themselves focusing on those point, saying for example: 'Madam you wrote teacher

talking time here. This was about how much I talked. Yes, I talked alot during the lesson, I should have got the students to talk more' or as such." (M1, Int. II)

The teacher candidates mentioned the benefits of self-evaluation checklists they filled in right after their teaching practices regarding theory-practice connection. The teacher candidates (n=3) indicated using this checklist they realized some theoretical knowledge that they did not know of before and they began to question how this theoretical knowledge could be transferred into practice. TC5 stated that items in the checklist helped him/her to evaluate his/her teaching practice from those perspectives and to improve it. Thanks to the self-evaluation checklist, TC4 understood the tasks that he/she had to undertake as a teacher and started to seek different ways of teaching:

"... (In the self-evaluation checklist) there are some items, for example ... error correction. Frankly speaking, I didn't know that there are different ways to error correction. I had a chance to search it on the internet. I learned that there are different techniques for correcting errors, and I can correct them in different ways." (TC4, Int. I)

4.2. Impact of the Project Regarding Theory-Practice Connection

The findings in relation to the second research question were presented in two themes; promoting aspects and shortcomings of the Project in connecting theory and practice as seen in Figure 2. It was found that the Project promoted the theory-practice connection in terms of the transfer of the theoretical knowledge into practice. The first term interviews with the mentors (n=3), the teacher candidates (n=7), and the students (n=6) revealed that teacher candidates were able to transfer the theoretical knowledge of lesson plan design, material and activity design, time and classroom management, learner characteristics - they acquired in the Educational and Developmental Psychology, Teaching Principles and Methods, Methodology in the Area of Specialization, and Instructional Technology and Material Design courses in pedagogical formation certificate program - into practice in a real teaching setting. For example, TC4 indicated that he/she experienced finding quick solutions to the problems that arose in the classroom and TC1 indicated he/she experienced choosing the teaching methods which were appropriate to his/her students' age group. TC1 added that with the Project he/she was given the opportunity to apply freshly learnt knowledge in the formation certificate courses into practice. According to M3, in the Project, the teacher candidates find the opportunity to apply and test the theoretical knowledge they have about all the stages of a lesson and teaching strategies for different learning styles. In the interviews carried out in the second term, all the mentors and the teacher candidates and four students highlighted the improvement in the teacher candidates' performances regarding transfer of the theoretical knowledge into practice. TC2 stated that as he/she gained more teaching experience, he/she started to conduct lesson planning and implementation process more consciously and appropriately. S6 indicated that the teacher candidates made an improvement in employing different teaching methods and strategies. M1 summarised the teacher candidates' approach shift from teacher centered to student centered as follows:

"They (teacher candidates) started to pay more attention to the individual differences of the students. They realized and accepted that not all the students enjoy the same activities, or learning pace of the students are not the same. In the beginning they assumed that all the students understood the exercise and moved onto the next one. However, the slow learners didn't grasp how to do it yet. In the second term, they paid more attention to this. ...Apart from this, I also realized that they engaged the students more by including them all and letting them choose what they want to do." (M1, Int. II)

Observation records regarding the transfer of the theoretical knowledge into practice supported the findings from the interviews. The teacher candidates were observed giving the right kind of feedback at the right time. Also, the teacher candidates' using instruction checking questions after giving the instructions to check if they were understood by the students, and if not, giving the instructions again by simplifying them or using visual aids was considered an important evidence of the transfer of theory into

practice. To illustrate, one of the teacher candidates (TC2, Obs. I) handed out prompt cards to the students, gave the instructions and before the pair work he/she asked instruction checking questions. He/she realized some of the instructions were not understood so he/she paired herself with one of the students and did the exercise as an example. Teacher candidates designed and implemented fun activities which were appropriate for their students' age group, interests, and readiness. When designing these activities it is obvious that they aimed to study different skills. When studying "Modals", students' creating posters (TC2, Obs. II), when studying "General Questions" (Yes/No Questions) students' playing "Who am I" (TC7, Obs. I), and when studying "Adverbs" the use of spinner board (TC3, Obs. II) were some of the examples illustrating this aim.

Another promoting aspect of the Project was determined as the teacher candidates' questioning the practice. In the first and the second term interviews, three mentors mentioned the teacher candidates question their practices in accordance with the self-evaluation checklists and the feedback they received from their mentors. Interviews showed that the teacher candidates (n=4) evaluated their teaching performances and reflected on what they learnt in their practices. In the quotation below, TC6 questions the appropriateness of his/her choice of material:

"...when transferring theory into practice, we have to transfer, adapt it according to our class. That's what I understood most. In my first listening lesson here in the Project, the listening exercise I designed was found very difficult by the students. However, when I was listening to it before, I thought it was too easy. But an elementary level exercise didn't work in this (university) class. I realised that it should be just a little less difficult." (TC6, Int. I)

The teacher candidates' explaining the theoretical ground for their practice was the last promoting aspect of the Project by three teacher candidates and a mentor. Being able to explain theoretical ground was an indicator of their awareness of which theoretical knowledge to use and why when creating the lesson plans (choice of material, designing activities, determining the steps of the lesson) and implementing them in the classroom. M3 stated how the teacher candidates explained the theoretical ground as follows:

"The teacher candidates are very conscious about this (theoretical knowledge). I mean, they have a specific idea about the stages of a grammar lesson in their mind: 'I have moved from one stage to another now. I'm drawing a timeline, why do I do that? to teach meaning. And after this, I'm going to ask concept check questions to see if they have understood. Then, I need to elicit the form from the students...' something like this..." (M3, Int. II)

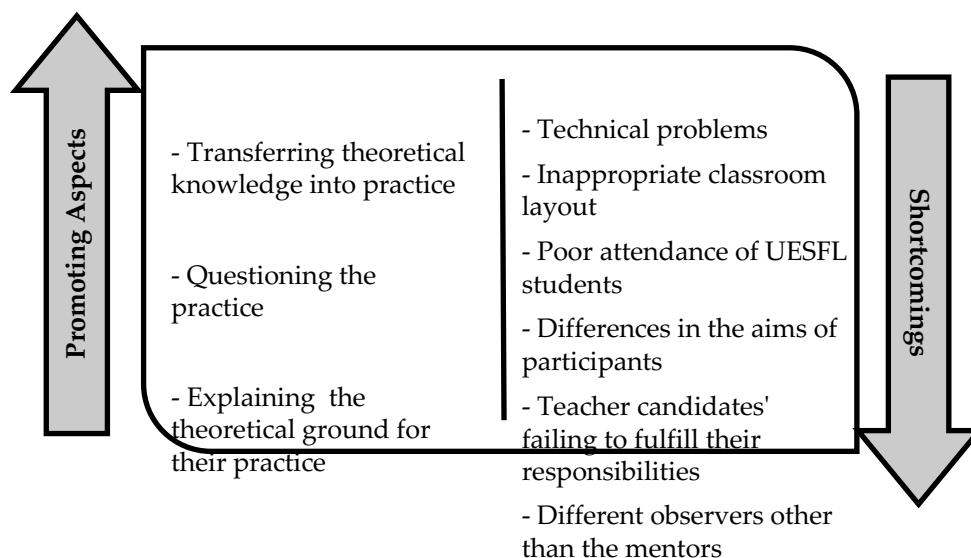


Figure 2. Promoting Aspects and Shortcomings of the Project in Connecting Theory and Practice

On the other hand, however, the interviews revealed some shortcomings of the Project which hinder the theory-practice connection. Projection machine malfunction and access to photocopy and print service were two technical issues which stand out as milieu related shortcomings. All the teacher candidates and two of the mentors expressed their complaints about the access to photocopy service and four teacher candidates and two mentors about the malfunctioning of the projection machines in the classrooms. Another shortcoming pointed out by the teacher candidates was ill-suited classroom layout. They stated that the layout of the classrooms were not suitable for ELT classes.

Some participant related factors were also found to hinder the theory-practice connection of the Project. Poor attendance of EUSFL students was identified as the most significant factor limiting the theory-practice connection by both mentors (n=2) and the teacher candidates (n=5). It was indicated that students' poor attendance prevented the teacher candidates from implementing the group activities they had planned leading to a decrease in their teaching motivation. It was also stated that poor attendance problem was resulted from the differences in the aims of the Project participants. For example, TC6 indicated that the teacher candidates were asked to incorporate integrated skills into the classroom. However, as it is seen in the quotation below, students of EUSFL expected that their learning gaps in grammar would be remediated:

"In fact our students' intentions do not coincide with the project's aims. Students want to do grammar exercises because they have problems with the grammar. They want academic support classes which help them improve their grammar skills, but Give me a Hand offers integrated skills practices. When these two do not overlap, we experience a decrease in the number of students. ..." (M1, Int. I)

Teacher candidates' failing to fulfill their responsibilities, most importantly failing to submit their lesson plans on time, was determined as another participant related factor limiting the theory-practice connection. This problem was stated by three mentors in the interviews conducted in the first term and by one mentor in the second term. M4 explained the problem as follows:

"Some of the teacher candidates in the first group do not send us their lesson plans... Actually only two of them send... This creates serious problems, the mentors go to the classrooms for the observations but do not know what is going to be implemented." (M4, Int. I)

The last shortcoming identified was classroom observations conducted in the first term, under the school administration auspices, by the instructors who work in EUSFL yet do not take part in the Project as official mentors. This created inconsistency according to both the mentors (n=2) and the teacher candidates (n=4) due to the use of different criteria employed by different observers for giving feedback. In the meeting held at the end of the first term, it was decided that classroom observations would be carried out only by the mentors. In the interviews conducted in second term, M1 and TC5 indicated that the decision made the teacher candidates feel less stressed, and boosted their self-esteem. However, TC2 by stating *"In the second term, none of our mentors observed my lessons. I would like to have mentors who would dedicate themselves to the Project as much as we do."* he/she pointed out this decision also might have caused some other problems.

4.3. Suggestions for the Improvement of Theory-Practice Connection

In the scope of the third research question of the study, the teacher candidates' (n=4) and the mentors' (n=2) first suggestion was to hold regular and frequent meetings where the lesson plans and the classroom practices can be discussed and evaluated. M1 explained how the teacher candidates' and the mentors' coming together and negotiating would lead to the development of new strategies in her following expression:

"To my mind, whole team (all the mentors and the teacher candidates) can hold frequent feedback meetings. This year we got into contact with only our mentees. Actually, the other teacher candidates could have consulted me or

the other mentors about the problems they faced in the classroom. We could have discussed these together and come up with new strategies..." (M1, Int. II)

In order to raise student attendance, M4 and TC4 suggested reducing the weekly class hours, M4 and TC7 suggested covering only the topics which are difficult for the students to learn rather than covering all the topics in the EUSFL curriculum. TC7 thought this would be challenging for them:

"I think it would more beneficial to design the content of program beforehand giving more weight to the topics which were found compelling by the students. We studied Modals three times which the students had already had knowledge of. The students wanted to study Passive Voice, but we could do that only once. It was the same with Gerund and Infinitives. Giving more weight to the compelling topics would be more beneficial to the students and to us as well. Because it is unchallenging to handle easy topics but to practice teaching compelling topics is more beneficial." (TC7, Int. II)

The first suggestion regarding the Project participants was about the selection of the participants (the mentors, the teacher candidates, and the students) for the Project. Two students, five teacher candidates and two mentors indicated that only the volunteers who can spend time and effort and fulfill all their responsibilities should be in the Project. According to M4 (Int. II), *"Instructors who are experienced, having full knowledge of formation courses, attended a training or at least to workshops on teacher training could be more effective as mentors"*. S3 suggested that EUSFL students taking part in the Project should be informed about it more clearly before the start-up. Participants indicated that the Project saddles the participants with a heavy work load and great responsibility; therefore, volunteer spirit alone does not suffice to fulfill the responsibilities and tasks given. Because of this, it is recommended for the teacher candidates to make more conscious decisions about their participation and for the school administration to evaluate the volunteer teacher candidates' degree of commitment, teaching skills, motivation levels before they are accepted into the Project. TC1 proposed holding interviews for selecting the students and the teacher candidates:

"... both the student and the teacher candidates participate in the Project on a voluntary basis. However, a teacher candidate dropped out in the first term. This opportunity should be given to the ones who really wants to be here, not to the quitters. There could be a preliminary interview and the volunteer teacher candidates could be asked 'Why do you want to take part in this Project?', 'It is going to continue like this (refers to heavy work load), are you ready for this?'..." (TC1, Int. II)

Another suggestion was mentor change during the process which was proposed by two mentors and two teacher candidates. In the beginning of the Project, teacher candidates are assigned a mentor and work with her throughout the Project. TC3 mentioned the possible benefits of working with different mentors:

"... we (refers herself and the other teacher candidate) learned from our mentor M1, but could have learned different things from M2 and M3. They have offered some suggestions but being your mentor is different. There is a different type of communication between you and the mentor. You are with her all year long. Maybe this could change. Getting different ideas, getting into different conversations would work for us." (TC3, Int. II)

The last suggestion made by M3 and TC2 was that the teacher candidates should be given more autonomy in the classroom. M3 based her suggestion on the ground that the students are best known by the teacher candidates so they are the ones who can design best instructional activities appropriate to these students. TC2 expressed the necessity of the autonomy for them to take the Project more seriously and for the students to accept them as their teachers.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that planning and implementing instruction, classroom observations, modelling, mentoring based on effective feedback and positive communication, and self-

evaluation were the activities in scope of the Project “Give Me a Hand” which promoted theory and practice connection. These activities enabled the teacher candidates to reflect on their teaching. It was also found that since they took part in the project voluntarily, the teacher candidates did not want to receive structured mentoring. Therefore, as stated by Freese (2005), instead of a supervisory mentoring, the teacher candidates could be subjected to a supportive mentoring process.

The activities conducted within the scope of the Project were found to be promoting mainly in terms of the transfer of the theoretical knowledge acquired in the pedagogical formation certificate program into practice. This might be the result of the teacher candidates’ stating their practices in the Project right after completing some theoretical courses in the pedagogical formation certificate program. Teacher education programs in which practice follows the completion of a period of theoretical study were found limited in terms of promoting theory-practice connection in the literature (Day, 1993; Dewey, 1927; Russell, 2005). Concurrent execution of the pedagogical formation certificate program and the Project “Give Me A Hand” might be a solution to this limitation. This solution requires the cooperation of UESFL and Ege University Faculty of Education.

The second promoting aspect of the project is the teacher candidates’ questioning their practices. In the process, reflective teaching which included the candidates’ questioning their practices was found to be effective. The effect of reflecting teaching on theory-practice connection was highlighted in the literature (Day, 1993; Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018; Ünver, 2014; Van Batenburg, 2013). In the teacher training model proposed by Balbay, Pamuk, Temir, and Doğan (2018), for instance, reflecting teaching is one of the key elements. Holding meetings are found important in improving teacher candidates’ reflective skills and are frequently employed in teacher education (Coenders ve Terlouw, 2015; Clarke, Hollingsworth & Gorur, 2013). In this study, in order to boost reflection, it was suggested that regular meetings in relation to lesson plans and teaching practices should be held. Yet, in volunteer teaching practices such as “Give Me A Hand”, it might be difficult for the volunteer teacher candidates to spare time for regular meetings and reflection activities requiring systematical writing. Reflections, therefore, could be more feasible and effective when done through informal conversations. In this process, the mentor’s role, as mentioned by Freese (2005) is to display reflection examples in relation to his/her teaching.

The Project activities were also found promoting in terms of raising awareness of and explaining the theoretical ground for their practice. However, this impact was more limited when compared to transfer of theoretical knowledge into practice and questioning the practice. The findings might reveal that the teacher candidates think technical when transferring theoretical knowledge into practice. Nonetheless, they must think about which theory grounds their practice and which theoretical principle or method to use when solving problems.

One of the possible reasons why the teacher candidates experience limitations in explaining the theoretical ground for their practice might be that a-year-long pedagogical formation certificate program fails to build the student teachers’ pedagogic, content, and pedagogical content knowledge. Teacher candidates’ being expected only to support the current program by supplementary teaching could be another reason. The finding of this study indicating that the teacher candidates want to be given more autonomy supports this interpretation. Moreover, in this study, no evidence was found showing that the teacher candidates reach to theoretical knowledge through their practices. Becoming more autonomous might be beneficial in this respect as well.

The first participant related shortcoming of the Project limiting the theory-practice connection is poor attendance of the EUSFL students. The EUSFL students’ expectation from the Project is to be able to close their learning gap in grammar, whereas the Project’s aim is to equip the students with all four skills in the use of English language. As it is seen, the students’ expectations do not coincide with the Project’s aim and this leads to high absenteeism rates. It was found that student absenteeism affected the teacher candidates teaching performances in a negative way. The teacher candidates designed the instruction by

linking theory and practice. However, when they implemented their design with fewer students than the actual number of students, application of some skills was inhibited, and this was found to be limiting the theory-practice connection.

The teacher candidates' unproductive lesson planning process is another participant related shortcoming. In the first term of the Project, it was found that the teacher candidates' failing to submit their lesson plans caused flaws in the whole planning process. The mentors tried to control the process by reminding the teacher candidates of the submission deadlines from time to time. However, this problem seemed to disappear in the second term. Also, while the mentor feedback was more extensive and detailed in the first term, the findings of the study revealed that in the second term feedback process became a bit more flexible. This finding could be interpreted as a sign of improvement in the teacher candidates' lesson plan designing skills. Nonetheless, sustainability of the mentor feedback throughout the Project is very important in terms of helping the candidates to link theory and practice. In the literature, it is highlighted that the feedback they received on their practices is highly educative for the teacher candidates (Günay, Yücel-Toy & Bahadır, 2016; Özmen, 2008). Moreover, peer feedback in which the teacher candidates provide feedback to their peers on the strengths and weakness of their lesson plans could be suggested.

Another participant related shortcoming is the classroom observations conducted by instructors other than the teacher candidates' mentors. The findings showed that this situation led to a negative impact on the teacher candidates. A mentor was assigned to two teacher candidates at the beginning of the Project; however, some other instructors working in the EUSFL were included in the observation processes. This application created some problems for the teacher candidates in terms of receiving effective feedback and it was terminated at the end of the first term. In the second term, the teacher candidates were only observed by their mentors, yet it was determined that the number of observations declined. Classroom observations are of great importance for the teacher candidates as they may have a chance to see and correct their mistakes (Özmen, 2008). Therefore, though the frequency of the first term classroom observations may not be available, not performing them might hinder the teacher candidates' ability to form theory-practice connection.

Having no easy access to the materials they need to use and malfunctioning of some materials were also some limitations that the teacher candidates faced which hindered the theory-practice connection. Furthermore, according to the teacher candidates the classroom layout which was not appropriate for language teaching makes it difficult to establish theory-practice connection.

Although the teacher candidates and the mentors appreciate the Projects' voluntariness-based approach, they offer the selection of the participants among the volunteers using some criteria. According to them, for the project to improve the ability of the teacher candidates to form theory-practice connection, the participants' fulfilling all the responsibilities they undertake is of utmost importance. Besides, it was suggested that the teacher candidates should make more conscious decisions by considering their personality traits and also their ability to take responsibility, teaching skills, and motivation levels should be evaluated before involving them in the Project. These suggestions predicate the basic affective characteristics of the teacher candidates to transfer theory into practice, question their practices, explain the theoretical ground for their practices, and even to construct theory through their practice. Consequently, when selecting the participants for similar programs, these suggestions could be taken into consideration.

Another finding of the study was the teacher candidates' suggestion of working with different mentors. Although the teacher candidates indicated being observed by different instructors other than the mentors caused some inconsistencies, they do not ignore the benefits of getting feedback from different mentors during their learning processes. In this respect, holding reflective meetings with the participation of all the teacher candidates and their mentors could be suggested.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Project promotes teacher candidates' ability to connect theory and practice in terms of the transfer of theoretical knowledge into practice, questioning the practice, and raising awareness of the theoretical ground for their practice. Despite having some limitations regarding the participants and the physical environment, the Project is believed to set a good example for pre-service teacher education in terms of theory-practice connection. Thus, the pre-service teacher education institutions aiming to boost theory-practice connection could benefit from the results of this study. The main result which may be derived from this study is to implement practice-focused and development-oriented programs rather than inspection-oriented ones. Besides, teacher educators should continue to seek ways to boost theory and practice connection.

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