

LANGUAGE LEVEL AWARENESS OF TRAINEES IN TEFL MICROTEACHINGS: A CASE STUDY

İngilizce Öğretmen Adaylarının Mikro-Öğretimlerde Dil Düzeyi Farkındalığı: Bir Durum Çalışması

İskender Hakkı SARIGÖZ¹

Abstract

This case study was designed to increase the language level adjustment awareness of the teacher trainees who were microteaching English as a foreign language in methodology courses conducted in ELT (English Language Teaching) departments. Although there is a predetermined language level during any microteaching, there may be unintended mismatch between the levels of teacher talk and class interlanguage. If such an inequality occurs and persists in a class, the teacher and the students may experience communication problems in the interactive setting of the classroom. In this respect, methodology courses should direct pre-service teachers to pay utmost attention to this subject and offer training. This case study displays a research on microteachings where ELT trainees act as students who are learning Russian, and Russian language trainees act as teachers and perform microteachings. They teach beginners level daily Russian in twenty-five minute sessions. ELT department teacher trainees who are the subject group try to learn Russian and observe the language level adjustment performed by the Russian language teacher trainees. Shortly, this study focuses on the reflections of the interaction between two teacher trainee groups. According to the data gathered in this case study, the level of teacher talk performed by teacher trainees in microteachings must be among the important methodological aspects to be focused on during teacher training. In the preparation, presentation, and assessment stages of microteachings the minor and major factors affecting the adjustment of teacher talk must be handled in an applied manner as well as theoretical.

Key words: English language teaching, language level, micro teaching, teacher trainees, teacher talk.

Özet

Burada sunulan durum çalışması yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretecek öğretmen adaylarının yöntembilim derslerinde gerçekleştirdikleri mikro-öğretimlerde İngilizce seviyelerinin sınıf aradiline uygunluğu konusunda duyarlılıklarını geliştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, az tartışılan ve kritik bir konu olan öğretmenin kullandığı yabancı dile bu açıdan yansımali bir yaklaşım getirmektedir. Çalışmada iki adet anket yer almaktadır. Bunlar yirmi-beş dakika süren başlangıç düzeyi mikro-öğretimlerde İngilizce öğretmen adayları Rusça öğrenirken öğretmen dilinin sınıf aradil seviyesine göre ayarlanmasında ortaya çıkan problemleri ve performansı etkileyen faktörleri belirlemek için tasarlanmıştır. Başlangıç seviyesindeki Rusça dersleri yabancı dil öğretim yöntemlerini öğrenen Rus dili öğrencileri tarafından verilmektedir. İngilizce öğretmenliği bölümlerinde yürütülen çeşitli yöntembilim derslerinde yapılan mikro-öğretimlerde önceden belirlenen bir aradil seviyesi olduğu halde öğretmenin konuştuğu İngilizce ve sınıfta öğrenci rolü üstlenen diğer öğretmen adaylarının kullandıkları İngilizce arasında yapay bir düzey farkı vardır. Bu tür bir ortamda bile düzey uyumsuzlukları çokça yaşanabilir. Böyle bir uyumsuzluk gerçek sınıfta olduğunda öğretmen ve öğrenciler sınıf ortamı içerisinde iletişim sorunları yaşamaktadırlar. Bu çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre, yansımali biçimde öğretmen adaylarının İngilizce öğretimi mikro-deneyimlerinde sınıf aradiline göre kullandıkları dil düzeyini ayarlama alıştırmalarına gereksinimleri vardır. Ayrıca bu sonuçlara göre, kavramsal olarak dil düzeyi ayarlama olgusu dilbilimsel olan ve olmayan diğer etkenler açısından irdelenmelidir. Mikro-öğretim etkinliklerinin planlama, sunum ve değerlendirme sürecinde bu konu kesinlikle çok boyutlu olarak ve yaparak öğrenme yolu ile ele alınmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngiliz Dili Eğitimi, dil düzeyi, mikro-öğretim, öğretmen adayları, öğretmen dili.

¹ Doç. Dr. Gazi Üniversitesi, e-posta: iskender@gazi.edu.tr

1. Introduction

Teacher talk is a high priority subject in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) since it is the basic tool for the delivery and facilitation of the lesson. Teacher trainees have to operate many teaching skills during the microteaching. Language level adjustment is one of the major and most challenging tools of instruction. Keeping it at a class-specific level is not an undemanding task in a microteaching class where there is no real interlanguage. For the success of their future teaching experiences in real classes, the trainees have to experience how to adjust it in order to make instruction understandable by the students.

Littlewood (1984) argues that early stages of second language learners' speech are 'reduced systems' or 'simple codes' that resemble language acquisition and pidgins. They include reduced vocabulary, simplified grammar and some omissions and they correspond to reduced range of communicative needs. Language becomes more elaborated as the level rises. Although learners communicate with limited resources, they may be using some kind of universal linguistic base which is possessed by everyone before language learning begins.

The concept of interlanguage was introduced by Selinker in 1969 and further discussed in 1972 (as cited in Corder, 1981) as the observed language output of the student's attempted construction of the target language norm. Norm refers to an individual student's language development in continuum. Cook (1991) reminds that teachers must be aware of the different input sources such as the teacher, teaching materials, peer communication, and the sources outside the classroom. The input is broader than the sentences students encounter. Since classroom input affects students' language intake, the teacher should adjust the amount and appropriateness of the input.

Classroom discourse, on the other hand, is an interlanguage based social transaction which has both planned and improvised parts. The theoretical and applied components of the lesson are operated through teacher talk. Class communication facilitated by teacher talk is limited to what has been learned in the lessons but it is still a full social event with speakers, messages and interactive simulations. Widdowson (1984) explains discourse as an interactive communicative process and its situational result is an alteration in a state of affairs: conveying information and making intentions clear. Widdowson (1979) argues that contextualization of target language items in situational settings in the classroom may not supply the communicative function of the language. In this vein, meaning can be divided into two groups; meaning of the language system elements and meaning of the language items in operation.

Nunan (1991) points out the pedagogical importance of the amount and type of teacher talk. The following are among the important features of teacher talk; monitoring of questions teachers ask in terms of creating expected responses, giving students enough time to think before they answer, offering appropriate feedback and error correction. Jones (1980) highlights the role of the teacher in organizing the constructive talk in the classroom. For many learners talking with the foreign language teacher can well be the only contact where they can express opinions and receive professional response.

2. Problem

Normally, great attention is attached to the level adjustment in teacher talk performed in TEFL microteaching sessions conducted by teacher trainees in ELT departments. Nevertheless, when an ELT trainee is teaching, problems of language mismatch may

occur due to lack of real interlanguage that stems from the advanced English level of the ELT teacher trainee group who act as students for the sake of microteaching. This case study was conducted in order to raise their awareness of teacher talk level adjustment. Trying to learn beginners level Russian was totally a new experience for ELT trainees. They were taught by Russian language trainees specifically instructed to pay attention to adjusting the language level of the Russian they speak according to the interlanguage level of their students.

When we look at the whole picture again, the ELT group was learning English in Turkey as a foreign language, and the Russian language trainee group were learning Russian as a foreign language in Turkey. The former group was beginner level Russian learners from the latter group in microteaching sessions. The case study was designed in order to focus on language level problems that emerge in microteaching sessions. In a sense, this was a 'learning by doing and discovering' experience to show the need to practice how to balance language level in teacher talk right in the beginning; during teacher training. This research was conducted in Ankara.

3. Method

The following two sections describe the two groups of participants in the case study and list the parts of the research. These sections are followed by the analysis and evaluation of the whole process.

3.1 Participants

ELT Trainees: This group consists of forty-three teacher trainees attending the third year of the college program. They perform several microteachings in the ELT methodology courses where they teach main and sub-language skills. These microteachings take generally twenty-five minutes. They are instructed to pay extreme attention to the level adjustment of their teacher talk. In this case study they act as students who learn Russian and the whole experience has been designed to develop their awareness to the fine tuning of teacher talk. They have to attain higher levels of awareness by observing and evaluating the teacher talk performed by Russian language teacher trainees.

Russian Trainees: This group consists of Russian literature Department students attending Pedagogical Information program which offers them a foreign language teaching methodology course along with other courses of pedagogy. They attend this program in order to become Russian teachers. During the case study, their instruction level of Russian was beginning and conducted microteachings with the ELT trainees described above. The group included thirteen trainees and their microteaching sessions were completed in two weeks.

3.2. Analysis of the Case Study

The main stages of the case study based on 'language level awareness in teacher talk' were sequenced as follows;

Step 1: The Russian teacher trainees attending FLT methodology course were asked to deliver beginners level microteachings. They attempted to teach ELT trainees basic daily Russian such as *introducing oneself, talking about what they read, shopping, and recognizing jobs*. Both trainee groups were expected to approach this simple experiment with great care.

Step 2: The ELT trainees were given a seven item questionnaire aiming to disclose their opinions about the teacher talk performed by the Russian department teacher trainees. (See table 1)

Step 3: The trainees who presented Russian microteachings were given a questionnaire about their student's responses to Russian teacher talk which was totally new to ELT trainees. (See table 2)

Step 4: Data analysis and evaluation – In this part the responses gathered through questionnaires were analyzed and evaluated.

4. Results

4.1. ELT Trainees' Observation

The responses 'agree' and 'strongly agree' were accepted to be positive. The responses 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' were considered as negative. Sixty-five percent of the ELT teacher trainees observed that the trainees who presented the lessons did their best not to use higher-than-beginning-level Russian. Only 16.3% were undecided and 18.6% disagree. Twenty-eight percent of the learners think that it was not difficult for them to adjust to beginners' level; nevertheless, 58.4% think that it was difficult for them, only 11.6% were undecided. A high percentage of learners seemed to be using body language to support target language content (79.1%), yet 7 % did not use body language, and 14% were undecided. The item "Using pictures, flash cards and realia contributed to instruction" was the common perception with a 90.7%. The percentage of trainees who did not observe such a contribution was 2.3%. Seven percent are undecided. According to the majority of the ELT trainees (86.1%) being a teacher trainee and acting as a beginning level learner in a microteaching presented by other trainees was a reflective activity. Fourteen percent were undecided, but none of them disagreed. During the microteaching sessions, 97.7% of the ELT trainees observed and comprehended the importance of multidimensional factors that affect performances of students and the teacher trainee from the perspective of language level adjustment in real foreign language lessons. Only 2.3% are undecided. This simple experiment helped almost all trainees better conceptualize the notion of 'level adjustment in EFL' which has linguistic and non-linguistic elements. (See Table 1)

4.2. Russian Trainees' Impressions

Of thirteen Russian language trainees 10 pointed out that performing teacher talk and adjusting language level were demanding tasks in the class because learners were real beginners. Two of them were undecided, and one were opposing. According to the 92.3 % of the trainees, they had to be well prepared to deliver a communicative microteaching due to the very limited interlanguage that developed during the case study. The common

idea was that the teaching aids such as pictures, flash cards and realia offered great assistance in balancing the language they produced in the class.

In addition, 92.3% uttered the necessity to oversimplify their teacher talk. Only 7.7 percent are undecided. More than 92 % think that the learners who were ELT department teacher trainees needed observation in terms of teacher talk and language level adjustment during microteaching experiences. Only 7.7% were undecided. (See table 2)

5. Discussion

5.1. Evaluation of ELT Trainees Observation

The findings indicate that for the trainees it is a demanding task to concentrate on language level adjustment during target language instruction, and the majority of ELT trainees revealed the similar problems. This is a precious awareness of raising observation and analysis for the teacher trainees. More than half of the observers pointed out that it was a complicated task to gear instruction to beginners' level, and more than one fourth of the observers felt that it was not as difficult as they expected. A great majority observed that body language was useful to support language content. This finding shows that there is an awareness of non-linguistic tools which can make teacher talk more comprehensible. More than ninety percent realized the importance of using pictures, flash cards and realia and observed their role in classroom communication. Constructing the desired linguistic concepts during the presentation and teaching them requires non-linguistic aids. Mediation of the lesson definitely requires such materials in order to contextualize and simulate real-like communication. This observation may leave permanent impressions which will remind ELT trainees how to make teacher talk more interlanguage centered and learner friendly by the help of the non-linguistic teaching tools.

According to the great number of ELT trainees responses, this case study offers a real reflective experience which gives them the chance to question the importance of adjusting the language level of teacher talk according to the class interlanguage. Observing similar experiences carried out by other trainees can be very beneficial. During the microteaching sessions, almost all of the subject group better observed and understood the importance of multidimensional factors that affect performances of learners and the teacher trainee from the perspective of language level adjustment. The finding shows how important the experiences of this sort can be for trainees' future teaching in real classes.

5.2. Evaluation of Russian Trainees' Impressions

The great majority of Russian trainees believe that adjusting language level in teacher talk is a demanding task in a class for beginners. The subject (ELT) group findings about this matter are in the same way. This shows the efficiency of the observational interaction in the case study between two groups of teacher trainees. Almost all participants in the teaching group and the learner group think that the teaching aids such as pictures, flash cards and realia provided methodological assistance in adjusting the teacher talk in the class. Teaching aids of this sort supports the comprehensibility of teacher talk and offer the practitioner extra semantic support.

Again, nearly every trainee in the teaching group felt the need to oversimplify their teacher talk. This finding shows that methodological emphasis on the quality of teacher talk leads trainees to consider the interlanguage in the fine tuning of language produced during instruction.

More than ninety percent of the Russian language trainees conclude that ELT department teacher trainees should have had a rewarding observation in terms of teacher talk and language level adjustment. This observation may be considered significant because Russian language group acted as their teachers and directly felt the dynamics of the instructional interaction in the case study. (See table 2)

5.3. Conclusion

Foreign language lessons are micro social simulations involving all the actors in the classroom. Teachers facilitate real-like events which linguistically prepare students for the future situations where they have to use the target language for academic, professional and social purposes. Such an instruction requires mutually understandable communication between the teacher and the students. The findings obtained in this case study indicate that a reflective pre-service involvement as argued here gives trainees an insight into level adjustment in teacher talk. According to the findings obtained, the hypothesis of this extremely rare type of experience supports the establishment and maintenance of understandable classroom communication.

In terms of language adjustment, these findings point to a transition from the first difficult moments to a better adjusted teaching mode towards the end of the case study. In other words, getting better may take time and this course may not be same for every practitioner. However, methodological reflections from interactive studies between trainee groups such as the ones in this action research may provide guidance in better understanding the technical role of target language level adjustment by the teacher trainees or even by the inexperienced instructors in their talk during microteachings or real instruction.

In a way, learning a language from the teacher trainees of another language and observing their teacher talk is an uncommon experience for pre-service teachers but it provides detailed methodological feedback for better designing their own microteachings and future instruction. Furthermore, the teacher training institutions can launch similar interactive microteachings and discussion sessions for further feedback.

References

- Cook, V. (1991). *Second language learning and language teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Corder, S.P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, R. (1980). *An abc of english teaching*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Littlewood, W. (1984). *Foreign and second language learning: Language Acquisition research and its implications for the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology; A Textbook for Teachers*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall.

- Selinker, L. (1969). Language transfer. *General Linguistics*. 9 (2), 67- 92.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10 (3), 219-31.
- Widdowson. H. G. (1979). The Teaching of English as Communication In C.J. Brumfit and K. Johnson (Edts.) *The communicative approach to language teaching* (pp: 117-121). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1984). *Explorations in applied linguistics 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Table 1

Questionnaire 1 ELT Trainees' Observation

These statements are about Russian microteachings conducted by Russian department trainees. They taught beginning level Russian (as a foreign language) to ELT department trainees. The following findings disclose the opinions of ELT trainees who act as students in this case study.

Strongly disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly agree	
F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1- I observed that the trainees who presented the lessons did their best not to use higher-than-beginning-level Russian.									
		8	18,6	7	16,3	20	46,5	8	18,6
2- It was difficult for them to adjust the language to beginners level.									
2	4,7	7	16,3	5	11,6	17	30,5	12	27,9
3- They used body language to support target language content.									
		3	7,0	6	14,0	20	46,5	14	32,6
4- Using pictures, flash cards and realia contributed to instruction.									
		1	2,3	3	7,0	16	37,2	23	53,5
5- Being a teacher trainee and acting as a beginning level learner in a microteaching presented by other trainees is a reflective activity for me and the trainee who is teaching.									
				6	14,0	19	44,2	18	41,9
6- Now I better observe and understand the importance of multidimensional factors that affect performances of learners and the teacher trainee from the perspective of language level adjustment during real foreign language lessons.									

	1	2,3	19	44,2	23	53,5
7- This simple experiment helped me better conceptualize the notion of 'level adjustment in EFL' which has linguistic and non-linguistic elements.	1	2,3	15	34,9	27	62,8

Table 2

Questionnaire 2 Russian Trainees' Impressions

These statements reflect the impressions of Russian language teacher trainees about the microteachings they conducted in ELT department where learners were ELT trainees.

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly agree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. Teacher talk and adjusting language level were demanding tasks in this class since learners were beginners.	1	7,7			2	15,4	4	30,8	6	46,2
2. I had to be well prepared to deliver a communicative microteaching due to the very limited interlanguage that occurred.					1	7,7			12	92,3
3. The teaching aids such as pictures, flash cards and realia supplied great assistance in balancing the language I used in the class.							1	7,7	12	92,3
4. I needed to oversimplify my teacher talk.					1	7,7	1	7,7	11	84,6
5. During my microteaching, the learners who were ELT department teacher trainees should have had a rewarding observation in terms of teacher talk and language level adjustment.					1	7,7			12	92,3