

TEACHER QUALITY: EPICENTRE OF THE LEARNING PROCESS AT HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing importance attached to teacher quality, lecturers at higher education institutions are increasingly expected to know not only subject knowledge, but also pedagogical knowledge, which entails many different aspects of teaching and learning processes and practices. The purpose of this qualitative study is to report on a research project aiming to improve the university lecturers' classroom teaching performance. There is a detailed description of the in-service training program offered to university lecturers, and an analysis of the main set of data from the feedback collected from the participant lecturers, leading to more general implications for university lecturers' pedagogical skills in higher education institutions.

The teacher is at the epicentre of the learning process...learning, therefore, depends first and foremost on the quality of the teacher. (Schwille et al, 2007:15)

INTRODUCTION

Due to the recent developments in the field of education, as well as the growing competitiveness in the world regarding quality of learning, teacher quality has become a key concern in the academic arenas. As pointed out by Henard and Roseveare (2012:3) "higher education institutions are complex organisations where the institution-wide vision and strategy needs to be well-aligned with bottom-up practices and innovations in teaching and learning". Therefore, universities are now required to continuously review the quality of teaching and learning they provide and seek ways of improving teaching. This, in a general sense, means increasing knowledge about processes and practices of teaching and learning, classroom management, lesson plan development and evaluation, student evaluation; and in a deeper sense, increasing knowledge about how students construct knowledge and acquire skills. The critical question is "how far do university lecturers possess this kind of pedagogical knowledge?"

Rationale

A growing body of research conducted in higher education settings both in Turkey and abroad has foregrounded the need to address lecturers' lack of pedagogical competencies (Taylor, 1990; Green, 1994; Rice, 1996; Gül, 2010). This issue originates from the lack of any requirement for university lecturers to undergo a pedagogical training, and thus, subject area knowledge is seen as sufficient for effective teaching at university level. In other words, "knowledge of subject matter" is given priority in the selection of university lecturers. In addition, the requirements for being a lecturer are purely based on academic productivity, which generally refers to research, publications, and conference presentations. As such, the pedagogical skills of lecturers are de-emphasized. This applies to higher education institutions in Turkey. When National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education is examined, it can be seen that none of the Framework criteria of "knowledge", "skills" and "competencies", relate directly to pedagogical competencies. Studies by Hativa (1997) and Korkut (1999) pointed out a gap between lecturers' teaching objectives and actual student learning, emphasising the lecturers' need for pedagogical training to improve their teaching.

Students, the direct beneficiaries of instruction, also voice issues that concern the quality of instruction and provide valuable feedback, spending a great deal of time with lecturers (Northedge, 2003). Many studies conducted on student evaluations of teaching/lecturers also support the view that there is a need for pedagogical knowledge in lecturers (Allan, Clarke and Jopling, 2009; Delaney et al.2010). Research by Üstünlüoğlu (2016) suggests that more work is needed to meet the high expectations for teaching quality in higher education, through well-designed in-service training programs offering professional development activities with particular emphasis on reflective practice, improvement of teaching skills, as well as innovative teaching methods.

Considering all these concerns, it appears that there is a clear need for research identifying areas for improvement in lecturers' pedagogical knowledge and addressing these within a structured in-service training program. The study at hand describes an in-service training program for university lecturers aimed at increasing the effectiveness of their classroom teaching and measuring the impact of the program on the participants' perceptions and practices.

The Research Project

The training program in focus is part of a scientific research project carried out at a foundation university in Turkey. The project was entitled “Increasing the Effectiveness of Classroom Teaching in Higher Education based on Lecturers’ Pedagogical Competencies”, which had the following aims:

- identifying the university lecturers’ perceptions of their own level of pedagogical competencies,
- identifying students’ perceptions of their lecturers’ level of pedagogical competencies,
- identifying differences between the perceptions of lecturers and students,
- identifying the areas for improvement in terms of pedagogical competencies,
- setting up an in-service training program based on the identified needs of lecturers,
- conducting and evaluating the effectiveness of the training.

The ultimate aim was to foster teaching quality and student learning in higher education through an in-service training program focusing on university lecturers’ identified pedagogical needs. This project was initiated and carried out by three researchers from the fields of English Language Teaching and Educational Sciences.

Three domains were included in this research study: Delivery, Communication, Assessment. The data was collected through the questionnaires, focus group meetings with both students and lecturers, as well as classroom observations carried out by the researchers. The questionnaire was distributed to 1651 students and 170 lecturers at the institution which was the site of the study.

The analysis of questionnaires suggested a significant difference between the perceptions of students and lecturers in terms of all three dimensions identified.

According to the overall results of the focus group meetings, there was a clear need for a greater variety of teaching methods and techniques in the courses, which were mainly delivered in a traditional teacher-fronted manner.

Regarding the communication aspect, there was again a mismatch between perspectives. The students suggested that they did not feel valued and respected, despite lecturers’ claims that they attached importance to these issues.

In contrast, there were no major discrepancies between the students and the lecturers related to the assessment aspect of the study.

According to the analysis of the classroom observations carried out by the three researchers, the lecturers did not in fact exhibit the desired behaviours related to the delivery and communication aspects of teaching, in contrast to their claims in the questionnaire. All these findings suggest a mismatch among the results of the questionnaires, focus groups and observations; and this indicates a noticeable discrepancy between students’ and lecturers’ the perceptions, in particular, in the dimensions of delivery and communications.

THE IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM FOR UNIVERSITY LECTURERS

Pre-Training Phase

As stated in the summary above, a significant component of the research was to design a training program. The purpose of the training was to guide lecturers on the pedagogical needs identified through the questionnaires, focus groups and class observations. Among the three domains, only delivery and communication were focused on in the training program; assessment was not identified as a major need during the focus groups and was therefore excluded.

The training program was announced through the university’s intranet e-mailing system. A total of 27 volunteer lecturers signed up, of which 16 attended regularly. The profile of the participants was as follows:

2 Professors

1 Associate Professor

5 Assistant Professors

2 Doctors

5 Lecturers

1 Research Assistant

Before the training program, an informative meeting was held, in which the researchers shared the details of the training program with the participants. In the meeting, the lecturers were given an opportunity to state in writing their expectations from the upcoming training program.

The expectations survey revealed participants' priorities for improving their teaching which were as follows:

- 1- Student participation (n=4)
- 2- Improving their teaching skills (n=4)
- 3- Creating a positive classroom atmosphere (n=3)
- 4- Learning how to teach generation Y (n=3)
- 5- Lesson Planning (n=3)
- 6- Using the existing in-house technology more effectively (n=2)
- 7- Reflective Teaching (n=2)
- 8- Increasing their pedagogical knowledge (n=1)
- 9- Learning about effective teaching methods/techniques (n=1)
- 10- Learning about adult education theories (n=1)
- 11- Increasing teacher-student interaction (n=1)
- 12- Suggestions for creative teaching (n=1)
- 13- Student evaluation (n=1)
- 14- Motivating students (n=1)
- 15- Being a good teacher (n=1)

The Training Phase

The design of the training program was based on the Reflective Practice paradigm, one of the most widely used approaches worldwide, and very commonly used in teacher training and teacher education programs (Farrell, 2008). Upon the identification of the focal areas, the sessions were planned; the main premise was to encourage the participant lecturers' critical inquiry into their teaching practice by the interpretation of collected data (Bailey 2006, Gün, 2011), leading to improvement of their classroom teaching performance.

The identified areas for improvement were as follows:

- Increasing variety of interaction patterns, and how to engage students
- Course planning and organization
- Teaching techniques and technology
- Giving clear instructions and feedback
- How to put theory into practice
- Focus on learners/ the next generation
- Creating a positive classroom atmosphere

Based on these areas, eight 2-hour sessions were organized, over a four-week period. These training sessions were notable in that the trainers in each session deliberately used the techniques that they were recommending to the participants during the delivery of their respective sessions. That is, the participant teachers were given the opportunity to directly experience the live applications of the recommended approaches, methods and techniques in the training sessions.

The aims and a brief content description of the sessions as presented to the participants can be found in the Appendix.

Post-Training Phase

Once the training was completed, feedback on the effectiveness of the training program was collected via a form consisting of open-ended questions.

The three questions on the form were as follows:

- 1- To what extent have your expectations of this training program been met? Please exemplify.
- 2- Considering the techniques/methods/ideas presented during the sessions; which ones would you use in your own classes? Please exemplify.
- 3- Do you think this form of in-service training program should continue in the future?

The aim of the first question was to find out whether expectations were met, and 13 out of 16 participants were positive. They reported that the training helped them to improve their professional behaviour, specifically in the areas of peer-observation, reflective practice, student involvement, use of technology, and creating a positive classroom atmosphere.

The second question was about how much of their learning could be transferred to their own teaching practices. Their answers were as follows:

1. Use of technology (n=9)
2. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere (n=5)
3. Reflective Teaching (n=5)
4. Increasing classroom interaction (n=4)
5. Giving feedback on students' work (n=4)
6. Pair/group work activities (n=3)
7. Giving instructions (n=2)
8. Increasing student participation (n=1)
9. Lesson Planning (n=1)
10. Teacher Research (n=1)

The last question was about the continuation of the training. 12 participants agreed that such training programs should continue, and made the following suggestions for improvement:

1. Enriching the sessions on new generation learning
2. Including illustrations of effective and ineffective lessons
3. Focusing more on classroom interaction patterns
4. Adding sessions on assessment and evaluation

The following are extracts from the teachers' feedback responses from covering all three questions:

"Most of my expectation have been met. The methods the trainers used in the sessions were so good. I learnt so much"

"I strongly believe that the courses of this kind should continue with the involvement of more lecturers"

"This course helped me improve my teaching techniques. Most importantly, though, I learnt how to reflect on my teaching performance. I came to realize that some of the things that I thought were correct were actually not correct"

"I will definitely use all the things we learnt in the technology sessions"

"I had been waiting for such an in-service training course for 12 years! It was so useful. Thank you!"

"I saw that my colleagues were also having similar problems that I have been having. About students, timing, classroom management. It is good for me to know I am not alone".

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main aim of this study was to determine the effectiveness of in-service training programs for university lecturers in Higher Education institutions. Conducting and evaluating the in-service program was a part of a larger research project originating from the perceived need to increase lecturers' pedagogical competencies, as concluded in many studies both within and outside Turkey (Gül, 2010; Green, 1994; Rice, 1996; Taylor, 1990).

The results indicate clear evidence of a considerable impact on the beliefs and practices of the participant teachers, and that such training programs are effective in improving the quality of HE. As also mentioned in Yürekli's (2016) study, regardless of status, all university faculty staff can benefit from pedagogical training to improve the quality of classroom instruction. While the majority of university instructors have well-developed research skills, unfortunately, they do not necessarily have an equal level of skill in conducting effective classes. Therefore, it is important to create a more even balance between being a productive researcher and being an effective classroom instructor. It is apparent that these are two separate professional skills and should be treated as such.

The study showed that "delivery" and "communication" are the major areas for improvement. Thus, special emphasis should be placed on these when designing an in-service training program specific to HE. This study also highlighted the importance of reflection in professional development. Involvement in professional talk and sharing experiences both contribute to lecturers' increased awareness of their teaching performances. Therefore, reflective practice should be a major component in the design of training programs, highlighting the need to understand the importance of examining beliefs about teaching.

Language teachers collaborate with colleagues on the basic assumption that this will be more effective than reflecting alone, and after participating in development groups, teachers can adjust their thinking about their work and become more confident (Richards and Farrell, 2005) Ashraf and Rarieya (2008) also pointed out the value of reflective conversations in enhancing the teachers' professional development.

Teaching the new generation learners requires updating teaching skills, approaches and methods, thus, continuous professional development in HE seems to be inevitable. Biggs and Tang (2011) note that quality in education needs to be reconsidered, taking into account the current learning environment and students' changing needs, which require ongoing training and development. Therefore, for sustainability purposes, regular in-service training programs should be offered to university lecturers. Experts in educational sciences working through University teaching-learning centres, should be responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating such training programs. As Borg (2011) suggests, these kind of in-service training programs have strong, long-term impacts on teachers' professional practices.

Providing the university lecturers with continuous training on effective classroom delivery might have implications for recruitment, as well as institutional performance evaluation systems. This study highlights the importance of effective pedagogical classroom teaching skills for candidates applying to be university lecturers. The requirement to present a demo class could be integrated into the recruitment process. Those who need to improve their skills could be offered an in-service training program prior to hiring. In many performance evaluation systems at tertiary level, little or almost no emphasis is currently placed on the effectiveness of classroom instruction. Administrators could therefore consider putting greater emphasis on this aspect in revised performance evaluation systems.

Based on the conclusions drawn from the study, as well as the implications made, it is apparent that, to improve the quality of education at tertiary level, there is a strong need for more attention to both the design of similar in-service training programs for the lecturers, and to further studies exploring the effectiveness of such programs.

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APPENDIX

1- CREATING POSITIVE CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

- OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the participants will be better informed about the basics and importance of creating a positive learning environment and its relation to teacher skills and motivation.

- CONTENT:

The content of the session covers educational psychology, stress, active listening principles, factors involved in composing effective messages during teaching, factors involved in student motivation, and general teacher characteristics that either hinder or promote positive atmosphere in the classroom.

2- LEARNERS AND NEXT GENERATION LEARNING-I

- OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the session, the participants will be better informed about ways to deal with fundamental changes in technology, how these affect teaching and learning, and the next generation as a whole.

- CONTENT:

The content of the session covers changes brought about by technology that affect our everyday lives, those that affect learner behaviour in class, and those that affect the entire teaching-learning process. The session also focuses on the definition of “knowledge” in the 21st century, the relationship between “know what, know why, know how”, and the elements of creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and effective communication within the new 21st century teaching learning setting.

3- LEARNERS AND NEXT GENERATION LEARNING II

- OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the session, the participants be better informed about ways to deal with fundamental changes in technology, the potential future effects of technology on teaching and learning, and how this affects the next generation as a whole.

- CONTENT:

The content of the session is a follow up to “learners and next generation learning-I”, and covers examples of classroom practice, and suggestions for dealing with the changes brought about by technology that affect our everyday lives, those that affect learner behaviour in class, and those that affect the entire teaching-learning process.

4- VARIETY OF INTERACTION PATTERNS AND HOW TO ENGAGE STUDENTS

- OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the session, the participants will be better informed about different types of interaction patterns in the classroom, along with the assumptions, values and beliefs concerning student-teacher roles.

- CONTENT:

The content of the session covers different interaction patterns that can be employed during teaching, the theories? of learning, and how these relates to curriculum, syllabus and classroom practice, the use of different teaching tools to promote different interaction types, the effect of emotions on learning, the ways students understand and retain new information, and the extent to which it is related to different teaching techniques and interaction patterns.

5-6- USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM I&II

- OBJECTIVES:

By the end of these sessions, the participants will be better informed about the technology in the classroom from past to present; will have increased awareness of the role of technology in teaching and learning; and will be able to use ready-made applicable technological tools.

- CONTENT:

The content of the sessions covers: “Frequently-used technological tools and programmes”, “Teachers’ attitudes toward using technology in the classroom”, “PolleEv: a student response system for surveys and data collection”, “Kahoot: an online service for classroom response which creates an engaging learning environment through a game-based digital pedagogy”, “Today’sMeet: a backchannel helping teachers conduct online discussions and many other activities, while channelling the results onto a web page or an Interactive White Board”, “Google Forms: a fast way to create an online questionnaire /survey, with responses collected in an online spreadsheet”, “Video Recording: how to record and upload a video immediately on YouTube”, “MeetingWords: a text editing program for the web which is intended for real-time collaboration between people”.

7- ENGAGING STUDENTS AND INTERACTION PATTERNS

- OBJECTIVES:

The session aims at familiarizing the participants with two models of learning – Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains, and The Unified Learning Model – and evaluating how these models apply to our teaching practices, and their implications for engaging students and interaction patterns.

- CONTENT:

Presentation of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains, with specific reference to the cognitive learning domain, and the pyramidal hierarchy of the cognitive processing required to move from lower to higher order thinking skills: from knowledge (memory), comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, to evaluation. Participants will discuss these domains in groups and share their experiences and practices with reference to course planning, syllabus design, teaching and assessment.

8- REFLECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

- OBJECTIVES:

This session aims at raising the course participants’ awareness of ‘Reflective Practice’ and becoming familiar with ways of being a ‘reflective practitioner’ for their professional development.

- CONTENT:

The content of the session covers the definition of “Reflection”; What is Reflective Practice? the need for Reflection Training, and how to become “reflective practitioners”. This is done with the help of videos and tasks. It further covers topics such as “From Teacher Learning Action Plan (TLAP) to Teacher Research” and encouraging the participants to reflect on their practice.