

The Role of University Education in Changing the Gender Role Perceptions of Turkish ELT Student Teachers

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Abstract

Despite recent improvements in demographics and educational outcomes, it is still the case that traditional expectations and attitudes toward gender roles in the Turkish society have been preserved to a great extent. Given this current position of Turkey in terms of gender issues, the transformative power of education, especially of teachers, could be emphasized more strongly at all levels of education. Therefore, it is important that teachers are trained to identify and counter gender bias to help fight the problem of sexism prevalent in the country. The purpose of this study was to compare the gender role perceptions and gender role classifications of first-year and fourth year English language teaching (ELT) student teachers and to identify any difference between the two groups. The sample (N=204) for the present study was obtained from a large state university in western Turkey. Gender role orientation was assessed with the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem 1974). Findings have indicated that male student teachers still have a traditional perspective on gender roles and that university education does not seem to have a role in changing their existing value judgments in relation to gender. On the other hand, Turkish female students have adopted a more masculine gender role within the four years of their university education. Implications are included for teacher education institutions in Turkey.

Key Words: student teachers, English language teaching, gender role perceptions, teacher education

Introduction

The term “gender” and the closely related term “sex” are used interchangeably and the clear conceptual distinctions between the two words are often ignored, particularly in casual conversation. The term “sex” is related to our anatomy, physiology and neurology and may also have a role in our behavioral, cognitive and affective characteristics. In general, sex is considered a demographic category based on biological features. The term “gender” is both a cultural and individual concept and is related to an imposed or

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adopted social and psychological condition. In other words, gender refers to the psychosocial traits that characterize people as feminine or masculine. (Dökmen, 2004; Sunderland, 1994).

Gender characteristics are constructed through the socialization process. The family, the school, teachers, friends and the media can all be described as gendered institutions that shape what men and women, boys and girls do, occupationally and socially (Sunderland, 1994). Gender roles, the set of social and behavioral norms deemed appropriate within a specific culture, are carried out by individuals of each sex in their occupational and family roles. These gender roles, which are an important focus of socialization processes, become stereotypic of women and men.

Gender stereotypes express those characteristics that are considered socially desirable for women and men to possess and also define culturally agreed-upon notions of gender-appropriate behaviors and traits. (Dökmen, 2004; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Golombok & Fivush, 1994). Prentice and Carranza suggest (2002) that traditional gender roles can be highly prescriptive. The qualities they ascribe to women and men tend to be the ones that are required of women and men, often creating inequalities between the sexes. In other words, gender, as Sunderland (1994) puts it, "is not just an effect of different social practices, but also an effect of power and structural inequality (p.4)".

As "a melting pot of Western and Islamic values" (Özkan & Lajunen, 2005, p.105), Turkey has an outstanding position in terms of gender issues. In this religious yet secular country, women are still low-status in the society and are less educated. They are not equally integrated into the labor market or politics. In general, they do not disrupt expected norms of functioning or question male prerogatives (Arat, 2009; Kandiyoti, 1982). According to the United Nations Development Program 2006 Human Development Index, Turkey ranks 72 out of the 75 countries globally for which the relevant Gender Empowerment Statistics (GEM) are available. The GEM measures three dimensions in this area: political participation, economic participation and command over economic resources. In this regard, Turkey is followed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

A very recent survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2010) offers some encouraging findings, however. Surprisingly, it shows that 89 percent of Turkish people embrace gender equity. According to the same survey, 46 percent of Turkish women say life is better for men in the country. Only 19 percent of men say their sex has a better life, 38 percent say women do and 40 percent say there is no difference. Yet, the results also suggest that general support for equality does not always translate into support for equality in specific circumstances. In the developing countries such as Turkey with lower objective measures of gender parity, people have a more conditional definition of equality. For example, they say that during tough economic times, men should have more of a right to a job than women.

Despite recent improvements in demographics and educational outcomes, it is well-known that traditional expectations and attitudes toward gender roles in the Turkish society have been preserved to a great extent. There is still too great an emphasis placed on the care-giving, nurturing and self-sacrificing roles of women. Having been carefully socialized into gendered division, most Turkish women still consider marriage and motherhood as the ultimate path to status attainment, which ensures the stability of sex roles and stereotypes in the society (Copur, Erkal, Dogan, & Şafak, 2010; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1982; Sev'er, 1999). In a country such as Turkey, distancing and "Other-nization" is coupled with the power frame in the society (Bilgin, 2004, p.37). In spite of the radical constitutional measures, as Doğramacı (2000) states, most women in Turkey, especially the ones in rural areas, do not have the right to social security and equal pay. Ger (2011), Chairwoman of TUSIAD Gender Equality Working Group, describes the parameter for gender equality in Turkey as follows: "A man equals 0.56 woman. That is, two women are equal to one man, which is an unchanging fact of Turkey for the last ten years".

Given the current position of Turkey in terms of gender issues, the transformative power of education could be emphasized more strongly in addition to the other attempts for a more gender equal society, as Göğüş Tan (2007) suggests:

The contribution of education to the perpetuation of sexism, as in many other countries of the world, with its structure, actors, processes, and its school life should be acknowledged and gender mainstreaming in an integrated and comprehensive manner should be taken as a goal in all of these aspects (p.41).

Schools are the sites where teachers, course books, classroom materials, activities, and attitudes of all members contribute to the cognitive and emotional formation of students through knowledge-based and value-laden practices. For student teachers, the university is the primary socialization institution where they come to understand their social identity relative to each other and relative to institution. The infinite number of messages or values passed on may turn into stereotypical thinking of students towards others in society, inevitably building onto the malpractices such as hatred, intolerance, belittling of others, which results in the erosion in societal peace and solidarity (Arıkan, 2005, p.38).

In the field of education, the teacher plays the most important role and functions as “the starting point and the key agent of change” (Baba, 2007) at all levels. It is, therefore, crucial that teachers are trained to identify and counter gender bias to help fight the problem of sexism prevalent in the country. Education of teachers seems to be of vital importance in infusing every stage of education with gender equality (Blumberg, 2008; Göğüş Tan, 2007).

The few scholars in Turkey who have explored university students’ perceptions of gender roles reported that university students still have a traditional perspective on gender roles (e.g. Vefikuluçay Yılmaz et. al., 2009; Vefikuluçay, Zeyneloğlu, Eroğlu, & Taşkın, 2007). Kızılaslan (2010) explored senior English language teachers’ perceptions of particular gender-critical points in primary level English language textbooks. She found that Turkish student teachers ignored the gendered presuppositions in the texts. The findings of these studies indicate that universities in Turkey are not able to provide young people with the type of knowledge and experience that is required for identifying and countering gender bias and for promoting gender equity in the classroom.

Civil and Yıldız (2010) investigated the opinions of 400 male university students about social taboos related to sexuality. They found that male students at the university do

follow social taboos and cannot escape the communal norms related to sexuality. Similarly, Coşkun and Yıldırım (2009) explored the value judgments of 392 university students in terms of some variables. The results indicated no difference between the value judgments of first-year and fourth-year students. According to the authors, this finding suggested that university education does not have a role in changing value judgments and that it reinforced the existing social value judgments.

However, ELT student teachers and others involved in language learning and teaching are expected to identify and challenge gender stereotyping as a result of their exposure to a number of western cultural contexts and issues. As Norton (2000, p.5) suggests, language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication, but is understood with reference to its social meaning. Therefore, the role of language is considered as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's identity. Atay and Ece (2009) also emphasize the role of English-teaching profession in reconstructing people's identities and roles, and state that the acquisition of English helps to change some personal traits. As Johnston (2003) succinctly puts it, "ELT involves efforts to change people; we assume that such change is meant to be for the better, and thus it is a moral endeavor" (p.18).

Extending this line of reasoning, the aim of current study is to compare and contrast the gender role orientations of first-year and fourth-year ELT student teachers and to identify the changes in their gender role orientation. It is generally accepted that individuals with more years of formal education tend to be less stereotyped in their views about gender (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). Therefore, it was hypothesized that first-year male and female student teachers would score higher on the masculinity and femininity scales respectively. Fourth-year student teachers are expected to endorse both masculine and feminine characteristics, i.e., androgyny, as a result of the four years of foreign language education and culture they had at a university in western Turkey.

Method

Participants

The sample for the present study was obtained from a large state university in western Turkey. All 204 first-year and fourth-year ELT student teachers (143 females, 61 males) who ranged in age from 17 to 26 participated in the study. This proportion represented the high female-to-male ratio of education majors at this particular department. Student teachers were given extra course credit for their participation. Table 1 describes the class and sex distribution of participants.

Table 1. Distribution of participants according to class and sex

Group	Female	Male
1 st year	75	34
4 th year	68	27
Total	143	61

Instrument

Gender role orientation was assessed with the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem 1974). The BSRI is a widely used instrument that measures masculine and feminine gender roles and yields a measure of androgyny. Four common typologies are used to classify people based on scores on the BSRI: masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated. As Bem (1975) suggests, a masculine sex role represents not only the endorsement of masculine attributes, but also the rejection of feminine attributes. Similarly, a feminine sex role represents not only the endorsement of feminine attributes, but also the rejection of masculine attributes. On the other hand, an androgynous sex role allows an individual to engage freely in both masculine and feminine behaviors. It is accepted that individuals should be encouraged to be androgynous. That is, they should be encouraged to be both instrumental and expressive, both assertive and yielding, both masculine and feminine, depending upon the situational appropriateness of these various behaviors" (Bem, 1975, p. 634). Research has supported the benefits of psychological androgyny, including its

positive relationship with creativity, life satisfaction and achievement motivation (e.g. Erol Öngen, 2007; Jönsson & Carlsson, 2000; Keller, Lavish, & Brown, 2007).

The BSRI consists of 60 adjectives, (20 masculine, 20 feminine, and 20 gender neutral), which are rated by respondents on a seven-point scale that ranges from 1 (never and almost never) to 7 (always or almost always true). The masculine scale includes such items as strong personality, dominant, and assertive. The feminine scale includes items like emotional, sympathetic, and understanding. The neutral scale is composed of items such as reliable, conscientious, and unpredictable. The BSRI was adapted into Turkish by Kavuncu (1987), and its validity and reliability was determined by her as well: Cronbach alpha coefficients were .73 for Femininity scale and .75 for Masculinity Scale. Later in 1999, Dökmen tested the reliability and validity of the Turkish version of the BSRI. For the present study, the median-split procedure described by Bem (1977) was used to divide the subjects in high and low groups. Participants classified as masculine scored high on masculine items and low on feminine items. Participants who scored high on feminine items and low on masculine items were classified as feminine. Participants classified as androgynous scored high on both masculine and feminine items. Finally, participants classified as undifferentiated scored low on both masculine and feminine items.

Findings

A general summary of how women and men were dispersed to the different gender role categories can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 describes that the number of individuals with a feminine gender role orientation is higher in the first year of ELT education, as expected. Similarly, there are more individuals with an undifferentiated gender role orientation in the first year. On the other hand, the number of student teachers characterized as either masculine or androgynous is lower in the first year. In other words, masculinity and androgyny scores of fourth-year student teachers are higher than their younger peers.

Table 2. Women and men subdivided into the different gender role categories

Group	Class	Count / %	Feminine	Masculine	Androgynous	Undifferentiated	Total
Female	Year 1 st year	Count	17	11	15	32	75
		% of Total	11,9%	7,7%	10,5%	22,4%	52,4%
	4 th year	Count	15	16	18	19	68
		% of Total	10,5%	11,2%	12,6%	13,3%	47,6%
	Total	Count	32	27	33	51	143
		% of Total	22,4%	18,9%	23,1%	35,7%	100,0%
Male	Year 1 st year	Count	7	6	4	17	34
		% of Total	11,5%	9,8%	6,6%	27,9%	55,7%
	4 th year	Count	1	11	5	10	27
		% of Total	1,6%	18,0%	8,2%	16,4%	44,3%
	Total	Count	8	17	9	27	61
		% of Total	13,1%	27,9%	14,8%	44,3%	100,0%

Examination of gender role classification for first-year female ELT student teachers in the sample yielded the following group membership: feminine (n=17, 11.9%), masculine (n=11, 7.7%), psychologically androgynous (15, 10.5%), and undifferentiated (32, 22.4%). For fourth-year female student teachers, the distribution was as follows: feminine (n=15, 10.5%), masculine (n=16, 11.2%), androgynous (n=18, 12.6%), and undifferentiated (n=19, 13.3%).

Examination of gender role classification for first-year male ELT student teachers in the sample yielded the following group membership: feminine (n=7, 11.5%), masculine (n=6, 9.8%), psychologically androgynous (4, 6.6%), and undifferentiated (17, 27.9%). The fourth-year male student teachers were categorized as follows: feminine (n=1, 1.6%), masculine (n=11, 18%), androgynous (n=5, 8.2%), and undifferentiated (n=10, 16.4%).

The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare femininity, masculinity and neutrality scores of the two groups. The masculinity mean rank of fourth-year student

teachers (M=101,30) is significantly higher than first-year student teachers' mean rank (M=81,26). Also, the femininity mean rank of fourth-year student teachers (M = 90,96) is lower than first-year student teachers' mean rank (M = 97,75). On the other hand, the neutrality mean rank of fourth-year students is higher than first-year students (Mean for the neutral = 100,84 , first-year students = 91,77, $p = ,258$), as Table 3 illustrates.

Table 3. The Mann-Whitney U test results

Variables	Year	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	P
Feminine	1 st year	98	97,75	9579,50	4091,500	,393
	4 th year	90	90,96	8186,50		
Masculine	1 st year	97	81,26	7882,50	3129,500	,010
	4 th year	83	101,30	8407,50		
Neutral	1 st year	102	91,77	9361,00	4108,000	,258
	4 th year	89	100,84	8975,00		

The T-test was used to compare femininity, masculinity and neutrality variables with the sex of student teachers. The results show that while there is a significant difference between two sexes in the femininity variable (the score for female = 108,6107 , for male = 99,6491) , there is a slight difference between males and females in the masculinity (the score for female = 93,2160 , for male =92,8182) and neutral variables (the score for female = 90,5597, for male = 90,5597). With the higher femininity score, females are more feminine than males. The approximate masculine and neutral scores show that females are as masculine as males.

Table 4. The T-test results for femininity, masculinity and neutrality

Variables	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Feminine	Female	131	108,6107	11,32565	,98953
	Male	57	99,6491	14,19695	1,88043
Masculine	Female	125	93,2160	11,45650	1,02470
	Male	55	92,8182	10,00942	1,34967
Neutral	Female	134	90,5597	7,73869	,66852
	Male	57	90,2807	7,77302	1,02956

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to compare the gender role perceptions and gender role classification of first-year and fourth year ELT student teachers. Contrary to our expectations, findings indicate that fourth-year male student teachers scored significantly higher on masculinity and lower on femininity than did their younger peers. There seems to be a significant tendency among fourth-year male student teachers towards masculinity. This finding supports previous studies on university students' perceptions of gender roles (e.g. Vefikuluçay Yılmaz et. al., 2009; Vefikuluçay, Zeyneloğlu, Eroğlu, & Taşkın, 2007; Yıldız & Civil 2010). It has been found out that student teachers, especially males, still have a traditional perspective on gender roles and that university education does not have a role in changing existing value judgments in relation to gender. In line with Baba's (2007) findings, the male hegemonic ideology is still strong among prospective teachers. Moreover, findings of the present study seem to indicate that male student teachers have adopted a more masculine gender role during their university education, which has far-reaching implications for teacher education programs in Turkey.

Another important finding of the present study is that fourth-year female student teachers scored higher on masculinity and lower on femininity than did their younger peers, as expected. This change in masculine and feminine traits of women seems to be in line with Özkan and Lajunen's (2005) results, which suggested that Turkish female students have adopted a more masculine gender role within the last 10 years. Furthermore, this finding is congruent with Karakitapoğlu Aygün and İmamoğlu's (2002) suggestion that Turkish women attribute more importance to universalism, and men attribute more importance to normative patterning characterized by traditionalism. According to the authors, women play a significant role in the progression from traditionalism to modernism, which may point to the impact of sociocultural change on the Turkish women's outlook and roles. Today, it is well recognized in the Turkish society that women endorse both masculine and feminine characteristics, i.e., androgyny. As mentioned earlier, this finding can be explained by the recent changes in women's gender roles in the society, as Erol Öngen (2007) rightly puts it:

Turkish female university students have adopted some modern norms of gender roles as an outcome of Turkey's modernization. There is a strong emphasis on liberalization and emancipation of women in today's Turkey and universities are the milieus where this emancipation process is best observed (p.116).

The findings also pointed to a significant decrease in the number of senior male and female student teachers with an undifferentiated gender role orientation. Research has shown that individuals who are undifferentiated in terms of gender role (low on both masculinity and femininity) tend to be less adaptable (as cited in Holt & Ellis, 1998). Bem's (1977) study on the distinctions between those individuals who score high on both masculinity and femininity and those individuals who score low on both showed that low-low scorers were significantly lower in self-esteem and self-disclosure. Therefore, the decrease in the number of individuals, both females and males, can be considered a positive change created by university education, to a large extent.

In particular, the finding that masculinity scores of male student teachers have increased significantly deserves the most serious attention. This noteworthy increase highlights the continued centrality of traditional definition of masculinity for male ELT student teachers. It is apparent that the prejudiced perceptions and attitudes of male student teachers have not been changed by the four years of education they got at the education faculty.

It should be noted that the problem of unconscious sexism in teacher attitudes and classroom behavior are a result of their gender perceptions. Naturally, teachers trained to identify and counter gender-bias would not be gender-blind in the future, which would help create a gender-equitable atmosphere in the classroom. Therefore, it is essential that teacher education period give enough attention to the issue of changing the traditional gender role perceptions of prospective teachers. Creation of a gender-aware climate seems to be an urgent need for all departments of education faculties. (Baba, 2007; Blumberg, 2008). To that end, the following recommendations could be taken into consideration:

Participatory, interactive courses on gender mainstreaming should be included in the curricula of teacher education institutions and in-service courses should be designed for teachers who have not taken this course at school (Göğüş Tan, 2007). Such a course would help student teachers develop an understanding of the issues, debates and concerns surrounding gender and in particular, women's experience. The course should also address strategies to alleviate those inequalities in contemporary society.

It is important that education faculties equip prospective teachers with the necessary knowledge and experience that is required for identifying and countering gender bias in textbooks and other education materials. In courses on materials design and evaluation, emphasis should be given to gender bias currently present in such materials. In addition, steps that can be taken by teachers to minimize or eliminate gender bias should be discussed within the framework of the lesson.

Special attention should be given to gender issues on the campus through the activities or publications of student associations and clubs (Göğüş Tan, 2007). A gender forum could be created to bring together all academicians and students who are interested in gender and women's studies. Through discussion and collaboration, the members can organize activities and projects for a more gender-sensitive campus.

The present study has some limitations that should be taken into account. The sample of the study included only ELT student teachers at one specific university in western Turkey, which limits the generalizability of results. It is very likely that student teachers from different departments of other universities located in less developed parts of the country have a more traditional view of gender roles than do the student teachers in the sample. Since Turkey displays wide regional differences, it would be interesting to concentrate on the varied perceptions and compare them with the findings from the present study.

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