

Developing Communication Skills of EFL Teacher Trainees

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Abstract

Higher Education Council of Turkey has added a one term course named as “Effective Communication Skills” to the curriculum since 2006 in Foreign Language Education Departments because of the crucial importance of communication in the information society. In order to test the effectiveness of this course, a research project was developed by looking at the pre-and post course interviews conducted with first year teacher trainees about communication skills compared with the fourth year students’ ideas who did not take the course. This paper describes both the significance of effective communication skills and the benefits of the course for developing teacher trainees’ effective communication skills. The implementations and suggestions for teacher education has also been discussed.

Key words: Effective communication skills, teacher efficacy

Özet

İletişimin bilgi toplumundaki hayati öneminden dolayı Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu 2006 yılında Yabancı Dil Eğitimi Bölümlerinin müfredatına “Etkili İletişim Becerileri” adı altında bir dönemlik yeni bir ders eklemiştir. Bu dersin etkinliğini ölçmek için birinci sınıf öğretmen adaylarıyla ders öncesi ve sonrası olmak üzere etkili iletişim becerilerinin gelişimini kapsayan iki görüşme yapılarak sonuçların bu dersi hiç almamış olan dördüncü sınıf öğretmen adaylarıyla karşılaştırmasından oluşan bir araştırma projesi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, hem etkili iletişim becerilerinin önemini hem de öğretmen adaylarının etkili iletişim becerilerini geliştirmeyi amaçlayan bu dersin faydasını vurgulamaktadır. Aynı zamanda öğretmen eğitimi üzerine uygulamalar ve öneriler de tartışılmıştır.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well recognized in teacher education literature that most pre-service teachers have an already possessed well-developed set of beliefs (Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Anderson, Blumenfield, Pintrich, Clark, Marx & Peterson, 1995; Wubbels, 1992; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). These beliefs and attitudes were constructed based on cultural and personal beliefs,

some of which may be long standing (Holt-Reynolds, 1992), stable, deeply entrenched and resistant or difficult to change (Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Kagan, 1992; Marso & Pigge, 1989). It is possible that they have some presuppositions about communication and communication skills which are considered to be one major factor in becoming an effective teacher. According to Dettmer, Thurston, and Dyck (1996), West and Cannon (1988), and Carl Rogers (1962) communication is among the most important skills for educators to possess. The role of communication is emphasized also by Lunenburg & Ornstein (1996, p. 176) as: "Communication is the lifeblood of the school; it is a process that links the individual, the group, and the organization". A gap in meaning between the intended and the received message can cause problems in the outcome of even the best teaching decision. Poor listening skills, ambiguous use of verbal and nonverbal language, poor semantics, and differing values are all items that can distort a message. To become effective communicators, educators must be aware of these potential problems and consciously work to eliminate them from their classroom interactions. They must also become knowledgeable about the importance of language in the learning process which gives a vital role to language teachers. This paper tries to reveal the benefits of the course named as Effective Communication Skills offered by The Council of Higher Education for the first year English Language Teaching (ELT) teacher trainees. The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. What are the beliefs of first year English teacher trainees about communication and communication skills before 'Effective Communication Skills' course?
2. What are the effects of the course on the first year English teacher trainees' perceptions about the necessity of effective communication skills in their future teaching practices?
3. Are there any differences between the first year and fourth year English teacher trainees in terms of their self-efficacy beliefs about the use of effective communication skills for their profession?

This study hypothesizes that:

- All ELT teacher trainees come to pre-service education programs with previously formed belief structures about communication and communication skills in their minds.
- Effective communication skills can be taught through a course resulting in changes in students' already existing belief structures about communication.

- Taking the course will cause a positive influence on teacher trainees' self-efficacy beliefs regarding the use of effective communication skills in their future teaching practices.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Subjects

The study included a total of 40 subjects divided into two groups: 20 freshman year students who attended the course and 20 senior year teacher trainees who did not take the course in the ELT department at Gazi University.

Method

The data sources were the three audio-taped interviews. The data was collected through four phases: 1. pre-course interview, 2. the performance and portfolio assessments of effective communication skills course, 3. post-course interview, and 4. final interview with the fourth year students

1. *Pre-course interviews* were conducted before the course with the first year teacher trainees to answer the first research question. The results were used as a base data of the students' already existing knowledge about what constitutes communication and communication skills, and their perceptions about the relationship between this knowledge and teaching.

2. *Effective communication skills course* was given for a semester. The course syllabus, course requirements and evaluation sheets were delivered at the beginning of the term (see Appendix A, B, C). The course consisted of both the theoretical and practical aspects of communication skills such as expressing oneself effectively in one's relationship with the administration, colleagues and students, forming teams, identifying their goals, working together, trust-building activities, empathy, awareness of body language and voice and effective use of intonation. The evaluation was done through performance and portfolio assessments. The students were required to present two versions of drama/conversation which exemplifies effective and ineffective communication for their mid-term exam. Their performances were assessed both by their classmates and by the teacher. (see Appendix B) At the end of the term the students were required to prepare a portfolio in which they are to keep a journal that includes the description of the activities of the course, personal competence and improvement (see Appendix C)

3. *Post-course interviews* were conducted at the end of the term. They were designed to ascertain trainees' changing perceptions of communication and communication skills, the benefits of the course to acquire the skills, and the relationship of these skills to effective

teaching. Students were given opportunities at the conclusion of each interview to discuss any other information they felt was relevant to the research. This step was for the second research question.

4. *Final interviews* with the fourth year trainees were designed in the second semester to elicit information about their perceptions of communication, communication skills, and the role of effective communication skills for effective teaching. Their self-efficacy beliefs regarding the use of effective communication skills in their future teaching practices were also asked to address the third research question.

3. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed after the data was collected and the performance and portfolio assessments were evaluated at the end of the course.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Pre-Understanding of communication and communication skills

Interview 1

The first year teacher trainees were asked to discuss their understanding of communication and communication skills under the headings of beliefs and the relationship of communication skills to teaching before the course.

1. Existing beliefs about communication and communication skills

Communication

The first year trainees were asked to define communication. The definitions reflected similar elements. All trainees acknowledged communication as being a transfer of knowledge, 5 of the trainees recognized that understanding the transmitted message was significant; however, they did not explain how this might occur. Only 3 participants expanded their concept of communication by indicating the importance of listening, feedback and imparting knowledge in more than one way. 2 out of 20 recognized that there is a relationship between the sender and the receiver of the knowledge.

Communication skills

Their definitions about communication skills were isolated and incomplete. 6 participants mentioned some of the skills that contribute to effective communication based on their prior experiences. Three of them mentioned that they were reading books about self-development, two of them were attending drama and speech courses, and one was doing untrained tutoring in English. The skills they uttered were using body language, active listening and speaking skills. There was no attempt to elaborate these skills.

2. Relationship between communication skills and teaching

Most of the participants thought that communication was their own ability to ‘perform’ and they showed little awareness of how the receiver (or students) might respond to their teaching. 10 out of 20 stated that there is not a direct relationship between communication skills and teaching. One participant recognized some aspects of the interactive nature of communication and teaching: “*Communication skills are the key to teaching, the number one skill.*”

The trainees’ concept of a teacher appeared to be one who stands up in front of a class and delivers the message. Martin and Balla (1991) support this finding that teacher trainees enter a teacher education course with the belief that teaching involved imparting knowledge to a class. While some of the teacher trainees were aware that they may need to do this in different ways, they did not give clear explanations about how they might do this.

In discussing the role of the teacher, the participants mentioned that the teacher was the source of student learning and therefore it was the teacher who needed the communication skills to impart the knowledge. The learner was a passive recipient for this information. Such perceptions of trainees’ about the role of the teacher and the student is in line with Wright’s (1997) findings who claims that most of the teacher trainees have no clear concepts of the socialisation process or of teacher influence—“only ideas about what is pedagogically correct as well as affinity to certain discourses about the human being”.

B. Development of communication skills

Interview 2

The teacher trainees were interviewed for the second time at the end of the semester when they had completed the course.

1. Perception of communication and communication skills

Communication

All the students defined communication in terms of teaching. They had a larger concept of communication unlike in the first interview when they felt it was transmitting knowledge. At this interview 18 trainees were aware of the mutual relationship between the hearer and the speaker. 15 out of 20 mentioned that knowing the features of the hearer is necessary for effective communication. 16 trainees stated that: *How you say something is more important than what you say.....*

Communication skills

All trainees were able to articulate more skills and to discuss the skills in greater detail. They progressed from isolated and fragmented descriptions they used for defining communication skills at the first interview to more complete explanations:

The nonverbal messages, conscious or unconscious, that are being sent by the speaker through appearance, attitude, gesture, and dress, are crucial to the communication of ideas.

In addition, the speaker's ability to read the audience and change speaking strategies accordingly will also impact the effectiveness of the transmission of the message.

Posture is important in conveying an assured presence: stand up straight, feet approximately shoulder width apart, weight evenly distributed on both feet, and hands relaxed at your sides.

The main categories of effective communication skills mentioned were: nonverbal language, active listening, empathy, non-violent communication. 18 participants stated that they were surprised when they learned that 93% of communication is nonverbal. 13 trainees mentioned that they used to avoid eye-contact before the course. 16 out of 20 mentioned their changing attitudes towards people. They added that the course effected their personal development and relations between the people around them positively: *"I learned my mistakes which cause ineffective communication..."*

2. Relationship between communication skills and teaching

At this interview all the trainees stated that there is a direct relationship between communication skills and teaching within a holistic view. 15 participants mentioned that teaching requires knowing a variety of communication skills. All of them suggested that the important role of language in communication puts a greater responsibility on language teachers. Thus, language teachers should use both verbal and nonverbal language in harmony. 17 out of 20 indicated that theoretical knowledge is not enough for good teaching and they expressed their changing perceptions about teaching and learning process: *" Knowledge is not enough for solving the unexpected problems that may occur"*. 18 participants mentioned the interactive nature of teaching by identifying the skills which contributed to the interaction such as listening, awareness of mutual understanding, clarifying ideas and feedback:

Teaching is more than just imparting knowledge to students.

Teaching is also about effective communication and without the capacity to effectively communicate to people of all age groups – well, you are a rubbish Teacher.

...classroom environment, giving feedback and the teacher's verbal and nonverbal communications should all work together to send the students clear and consistent messages about classroom expectations, goals, and challenges.

At the end of the semester, trainees' performance and portfolio assessments were evaluated. During their performance assessments, it was observed that 96% of the trainees successfully integrated the skills they learned from the course into their teaching practice. The other main indicators for this progress seemed to be through self reflection that they kept in the journals of their portfolios. All the trainees identified their weak points and told how they strengthened them during the course and assessments. They expressed that practice gave them more confidence for their future profession. 17 out of 20 emphasized that taking this course changed their perceptions of effective teaching and effective communication: *"By now I can go into classroom and act my role as a teacher for the students, as an advisor for the parents and as a peer for the colleagues."*

"The course would be beneficial both for professional and for social life."

"Being in front of people seems very difficult but from now on I know the ways of handling this fear."

The changing ideas of the trainees' on the issues of expectations and initial beliefs about their coming role as teachers after one term course training confirm the findings of Wright (1997) who states that one main topic in the educational discussions concerning teacher education today is the changing demands on teachers and the importance of giving all student teachers a good preparation for a changed teacher role during their teacher training

C. Final interview

Interview 3

The fourth year teacher trainees who will graduate with the diploma of teaching at the end of the second semester were asked to discuss their understanding of communication and communication skills.

1. Perception of communication and communication skills

Communication

The fourth year trainees had wider perceptions when compared with the descriptions of the first group before the course. 12 trainees defined communication as a way of transferring knowledge, ideas and emotions. The key words they used such as 'collaborate', 'share' and 'different' refer to their various perceptions of communication.

Much of teaching is about sending and receiving messages. Carefully planned and skillfully delivered messages can issue invitations to students that school is a place to share ideas, investigate, create, and collaborate with others.

... it is important to be aware that communication must be different for different audiences, different levels and different types of people.

Communication skills

Three trainees were attending speech and drama courses and five were individually dealing with personal development. 12 trainees expressed the various ways of transferring knowledge. For example, development of self awareness, knowing the features of the receiver, and listening skills. 11 out of 20 recognized the role of body language and empathy. Their perceptions about communication skills included the definitions they synthesized throughout their educational and personal development process. They had larger point of views on the subject when compared with the pre-entry knowledge of first year trainees since they had a teaching experience: *I can now make judgments about where kids are at as they come into the room and I can change my communication approach to them*

However, their definitions of communication skills didn't have a theoretical base unlike the knowledge of the first group in the second interview. The distinction is clear when the quotes are compared with those of the first group's in their second interview. (see B.1 *Communication skills*)

It gave me ideas and examples of teaching I would not have thought of and I had time to try them out

Effective Communication was so valuable – showed me what I was doing, why and how.

It heightens the social awareness rather than the academic

2. Relationship between communication skills and teaching

When the interview took place, the trainees had already taken two months of their practicum courses in which they gained some teaching experience. All the trainees were

aware of the vital role of communication skills and interactive nature of teaching. Depending on their short teaching practices, they complained about their inadequacy of using effective communication skills as a teacher. 16 participants said that they could not use nonverbal language properly:

Sometimes I don't know where to put my hands or when and how to look at their eyes.

Being in front of the class is a very difficult experience. Sometimes I think that they do not understand me, my posture, my glances and even my words.

11 of the trainees thought that effective communication skills could develop through experience and personal effort. Thus, there is no need for attending the effective communication skills course. 16 out of 20 believed in the necessity of the course adding their expectations about the content and timing. *“Instead of theory, we need more practice and it should be in the fourth year otherwise we could forget what we learned”*

5. CONCLUSION

The crucial importance of communication in the information society gives a special role to language educators who are in the unique position of teaching a subject where communication skills are at the core of the whole activity. The following conclusions came from the research project designed regarding these necessities:

A course in effective communications played a significant role in developing the first year trainees' communication skills. The skills the trainees learned during the course caused them to change their existing beliefs about communication, communication skills, and the relationship of these skills with teaching. Considering the second and third interviews it could be said that there is not a meaningful difference between the first and fourth year trainees' perceptions of communication and communication skills. The other courses they attended and teaching practices brought a wide range of perspective of the communication skills which is more practical rather than having a theoretical base necessary for interactive teaching to the fourth year teacher trainees. However, they had some doubts on their self-efficacy of using effective communication skills during their teaching practices. It was understood that it would be beneficial if they had the opportunity of taking the course.

Suggestions for ELT Teacher Educators and Curriculum Developers

The teacher trainees believed that they were not always aware of the teaching strategies used by teacher educators during the whole courses they attend. Trying to impose all the skills within a one term course could not be enough. Teacher educators might be more insightful in using communication skills in all courses. An effective communication skills course in language departments would be more beneficial if it were given in the fourth year for the immediate adaptation of these skills into trainees' teaching practices.

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APPENDIX A

Course Description

This course aims to develop communication skills considered to be one major factor in becoming an effective teacher. It will deal with theoretical and practical aspects of communication skills such as expressing oneself effectively in one's relationship with the administration, colleagues and students, forming teams, identifying their goals, working together, trust building activities, empathy, awareness of body language and voice and effective use of intonation.

Content of the course (given with syllabus)

1. Introduction to the course
2. What is communication?
3. Golden rules of communication
4. Raising body Awareness
 - 4.1. Training your Voice
5. Setting Outcomes (P.C. McGraw-Seven-Step Strategy)
6. Non-violent Communication
 - 6.1. Observing not Evaluating
 - 6.2. Expressing Feelings
 - 6.3. Acknowledging Needs
 - 6.4. Expressing Requests
7. Establishing Empathy and Trust
8. Active Listening
9. Rapport

APPENDIX B

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS (PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT)

DRAMA PRESENTATION

Work in groups of three and prepare:

- two versions of a conversation/drama,
- taking place between two lovers, husband-wife, parents-children, best friends, colleagues, neighbors, employer-employee etc ,
- present a conflicting situation because of ineffective communication skills.

STEP 1

Presentation (Part 1)

This will be an example of how miscommunication can take place because of many reasons such as:

- ⊗ Body language, voice tonality, proxemics, eye contact, chronemics etc
- ⊗ Engagement styles they use (porcupine, paws up, poser, drama queen, whiners etc)
- ⊗ Making moralistic judgments
- ⊗ Observing mixed with evaluating
- ⊗ Inability to express feelings effectively
- ⊗ Inability to acknowledge needs
- ⊗ Inability to express requests

An evaluation sheet for you to assess your peers will be provided.

STEP 2

Task: Have your friends identify the miscommunication behaviors. You can prepare a worksheet for them (Make your activity visual: it can be True /False, Speech bubbles, Charts etc.)

STEP 3

Presentation (Part 2)

- ❖ Present the second version of your drama in which you have removed all negative communication factors,
- ❖ Show us how communication could have been different (and of course better) when you use effective communication skills.

An evaluation sheet for you to assess your peers will be provided.

You are going to hand in:

1. Lesson Plan:

Step-by-step what you will do in the presentation: the introduction (names of the presenters, what you will do, introduce the context) + stages of the presentation (dialogue version 1+ task+ dialogue version 2).

2. Dialogue -2 versions (do not forget to write stage directions within parentheses. For ex: Ahmet without looking in the eye stands up.)
3. Task that you have prepared. Do not forget to prepare copies for your classmates.

Evaluation Sheet

Name:

Class:

Observe your friends' performance during the drama presentation. And circle the best choice according to the scale:

1: poor 2: fair 3: well 4: good 5: excellent

Presenter 1 Name: _____

Body language	1	2	3	4	5
Proxemics	1	2	3	4	5
Haptics	1	2	3	4	5
Posture	1	2	3	4	5
Eye contact	1	2	3	4	5
Voice tonality	1	2	3	4	5
Rate of speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Vocal Fillers	1	2	3	4	5

Timing	1	2	3	4	5
Command of Language	1	2	3	4	5
Instruction giving	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX C

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS (PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT)

In your portfolio, you are going to write about ten activities that we have done this term. The portfolio that you will hand in will have three parts. For each activity you are going to write:

1. **a description:** Write a short paragraph explaining the activity. Use your own words (how do you see the activity, from your own point of view) **(10 points)**

For example:

❖ In this activity,

2. **personal competence:** After the description section, write your personal competence about the subject. Support yourself with examples. **(30 points)**

For example:

❖ I can, because

❖ I can't, because

(give your reasons why you can / can't do it according to ECS)

3. **improvement:** Finally explain what you need to do in order to improve yourself (in **can't do** performances) for each activity or subject. **(30 points)**

For example:

❖ I need to

Command of English: 30 points

Total: 10 pts + 30 pts + 30 pts + 30 pts : 100 pts

For each activity, use the following style:

Activity 1

1.1. description

1.2. personal competence

1.3. improvement

Activity 2

2.1. description

2.2. personal competence

2.3. improvement

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