Use of the case-based method in getting prepared for young learners' EFL classes

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the difficulties in linking theories and practices in the course titled "Teaching English to young learners" (TEYL) related to the "Use of case-based method" in an English Language Teacher Education program of a state university in Turkey. Focusing on this difficulty, the study investigates the use of case-based method in the 'teaching English to young learners' (TEYL) course. The study adopted qualitative research design. The participants of the study were composed of 20 (14 females, 6 males) teachers of English at public primary and secondary schools, and 70 3rd year students in the ELT Department of a state university who were taking the TEYL 1 course. The participants were selected via purposive sampling model and on voluntary basis. The data were collected and analyzed The data were collected and analyzed using the data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification method (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The results revealed that the participant teachers reported 40 cases in young learners' classes with no case reports for the assessment procedure. In addition, after the cases were analyzed by the prospective teachers, their resolutions were based on three main issues: theories/principles of child learning and language teaching, their language learning histories, and their beliefs. Studying cases from real teaching contexts reinforced prospective teachers' thoughts in various ways, such as interpreting L1 influence better, how to treat young and very young children learning a foreign language, and understanding developmental sequences better. Further, the prospective teachers were of the opinion that they mostly benefit from those cases in various ways such as raising their awareness about the real situations in teaching contexts, guiding them when they experienced similar situations, and providing different perspectives.

Keywords: Case-based method, teaching English, young learners, prospective language teachers

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1. Introduction

There have been different approaches to teacher education, which have their roots from different epistemologies. "Case-based pedagogy is an innovative sociocultural approach to second language teacher education, that forces participants to grapple with exactly the kinds of dilemmas and decisions teachers confront every day" (Gooden & Zlateva, 2018, p. 1). Case method, one of the characteristics of case-based pedagogy, is defined as "a teaching approach that consists of presenting students with a case that puts them in the role of a decision maker facing a problem" (Gooden & Zlateva, 2018, p. 1). As Shulman (1992) puts it, case method is engaging, demanding, intellectually exciting, and stimulating by helping prospective teachers learn to think like a teacher.

Case method immerses participants (prospective teachers in this context) into real teaching contexts and activates their thinking processes in critical issues. Cases illuminate prospective teachers in terms of occupational, professional, and emotional considerations. While dealing with a case, they approach the situation from multiple aspects and develop multi perspectives on the side of the teacher, student(s), learning – teaching process, and the school context. Case-inquiry process is regarded as a successful pedagogical tool in "allowing participants to mediate their role as teachers responsible for adhering to professional standards [and] furthering their appreciation of the various occupational roles that are entailed" (Cherubini, 2009, p. 232).

A major use of case method in teacher education is to link theory and practice in specific fields of study. Cases provide opportunities for prospective teachers to practice being a teacher. Case discussions can be based on three main steps as getting to know the context of situation in the case; taking action/decision making for resolution; and generating further thoughts on the situation. Discussions on the cases support prospective teachers' thinking in two dimensions: First, they familiarize with real school contexts, classroom issues or student behaviors in a teacher's shoes; second, they notice how theory can feed their decisions/actions against a real challenging situation, and the possible consequences.

As for the present study, it is observed that there is a difficulty in linking theory and practice in one of the courses in language teacher education program: 'Teaching English to Young Learners' (TEYL). During the term, participants of this course are equipped with theories and principles of child learning and language education through lectures, classroom discussions, and hands-on activities. However, as the instructor of the course, the researcher wanted to see whether prospective teachers refer to theories and principles (covered in the course) when they encounter critical situations in young learner classes; and if they do so, how their thinking processes work. Focusing on this question in mind, the researcher planned to use case-based method in her TEYL classes and engage prospective teachers in a work that creates the opportunity to link theory and practice. Therefore, the primary aim in researching the use of case-based method is to see

if this method makes it possible to link decisions/actions of prospective teachers and theories/principles of child learning and language teaching. The secondary aim in using case-based method in TEYL classes is to provide a platform for prospective language teachers to be familiarized with real classroom situations and generate ideas on them, raise awareness for other perspectives, and evaluate outcomes of different actions. Further, the researcher examined prospective teachers' reflections about using case-based method in language teacher education. To this end, this study tries to address the following research questions:

1. Does the use of case-based method make it possible to link theories and practices in TEYL classes?

2. How do cases reinforce prospective language teachers' thinking in TEYL classes?

3. What do prospective language teachers think about the use of cases in TEYL classes?

1.1. Background to the Study

First, it is necessary to define what a 'case' is in the context of teacher education. A case, can be defined as a descriptive research document utilizing a real-life situation, presented in an unbiased, multidimensional fashion and a carefully crafted teaching instrument (Merseth,1992).   Grossman (1992) asks the question "what are the parameters of a definition for a case that could include the variety of cases?" and talks about the common properties of cases as being realistic, providing contextualized accounts of teaching, and being used for pedagogical purposes. She also mentions the differences of cases in origin, structure, and the amount of detail included in the cases. Furthermore, cases can be in the form of video-recordings of classroom teaching. Cases using multimedia representations of practice have been more common in recent years, which can also provide classroom artifacts, teacher reflections, and other classroom documents (Sato and Rogers; 2010). However, Carters, Sabers, Cushing, Pinnegar, and Berliner (1987) stated that video-recordings may be more difficult for novices to comprehend although they may capture the quality of teaching with greater accuracy (cited in Grossman, 1992).

Kagan's (1993) review classified the use of classroom cases in three different ways: cases "as instructional materials; as raw data in research on teacher cognition; and as catalysts that can promote change, particularly among experienced teachers." Similarly, Merseth (1991) differentiated cases according to the purpose of use: cases to educate students in skills of analysis, decision making and problem solving; cases for providing examples of established theories; and cases to provide personal study and self-reflection. In this study, cases were used as instructional materials of a language teacher education course and the opportunities they provide to link theory and practice were interpreted.

Studies that investigated the use of case method reported the advantages of it in different ways. For instance, Cherubini (2009) concluded that "the case dilemmas presented a kaleidoscope of considerations [for the participants] (…) and the case-inquiry process validated the importance of accounting for multiple perspectives." Levin's (1995) study which divided the participants in 2 groups as very experienced teachers and less experienced teachers together with student-teachers showed that cases served as a catalyst for reflection for experienced teachers; and for less experienced ones, cases allowed clarifying and elaborating their thinking. Maloch and Kinzer's (2006) study revealed that the use of multimedia cases was influential on learning and helping the respondents remember some particular strategies that can be used in teaching.

With a different aim, Alger (2006) used case writing to foster reflection in student teachers and reported that reflection took place and improved in cases that were supported with interviews. Another study that used case writing to explore in-service and pre-service teachers' pedagogical beliefs was done by Kagan and Tippins (1991). The study suggested that teachers reflected and illustrated their pedagogical beliefs in the cases they wrote; and pre-service and in-service teachers interpreted classroom problems differently. However, the study also suggested that teachers did not reflect their own beliefs when they responded to cases written by other colleagues, but included "overgeneralizations and prescriptions about teaching, students, and classrooms" (p. 288).

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how the use of case method works in TEYL course in a language teacher education program. The data were collected and analyzed with special reference to the framework suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). In that framework qualitative analysis consists of three concurrent streams of activity as data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Figure 1 displays how the data were collected and analyzed interactively, based on the Interactive Model (Miles and Huberman, 1994):

Figure 1. Components of data analysis: Interactive model (Adapted from Miles and Huberman, 1994)
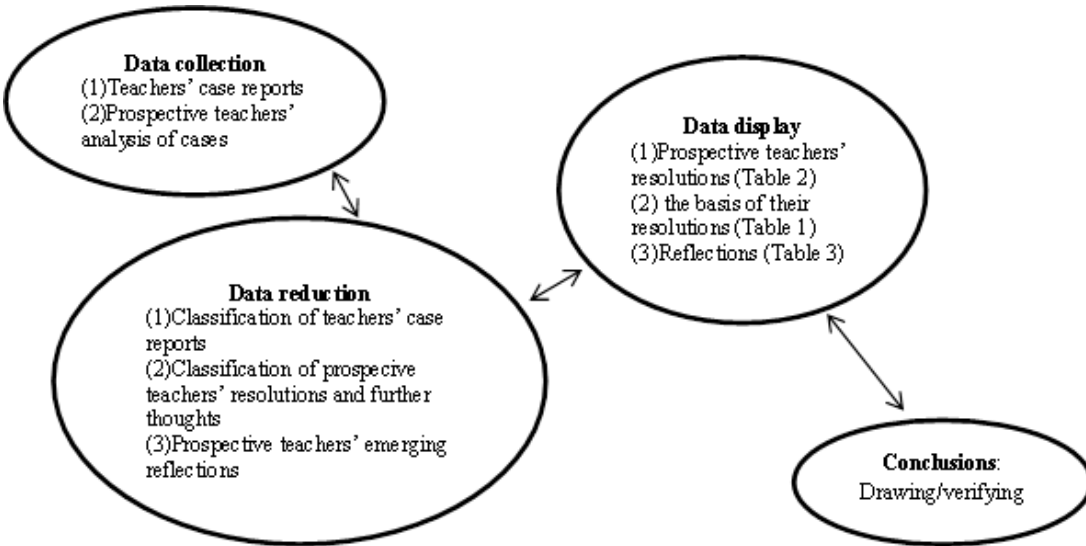
2.1. Participants

The data were collected from two different groups of participants on voluntary basis. The first group consisted of twenty teachers of English working at young learner contexts as public primary and secondary schools. Fourteen teachers were female and six teachers were male. The year of teaching experience ranged from two to ten. Three of them has M.A. degree. Purposive sampling was used and teachers of young learners were included in the study to collect case reports of their experiences in different aspects of teaching English to young learners. They were the alumni of the university in which the study was carried out and were reached via e-mails. The second group consisted of 3rd year students who were attending the TEYL 1 course in a four- year EFL teacher education program. Again purposive sampling was used to form this participant group. The age range of the participants was twenty and twenty-three; and none of them had any formal teaching experience. The students were seventy in number and the classes were conducted in two sections. The number of students who participated in each case analysis session differed due to absent students.

2.2. Procedure

The data for this study were collected in three stages. The first stage included the creation of cases to be used in TEYL course. Kleinfeld's (1992, p. 41) suggestion that "the logical person to write a case is an expert teacher" was considered and teachers of young

learners were asked to write case reports of their experiences in teaching English to young learners. The teachers were requested to write three case reports on different aspects of teaching English to young learners. The aspects which were readily given on the case report sheet were 'the characteristics of young learners, language learning processes, classroom management, L1&L2 use in the classroom, and young learners' assessment.' The case reports included detailed contextual information and the action taken by the teacher against the situation in the case. Forty case reports were collected from different young learner classroom contexts in different cities around Turkey. The case reports collected included the aspects of the characteristics of young learners, language learning processes, L1&L2 use in the classroom, and classroom management. Teachers did not provide any case reports for the assessment of young learners.

For the second stage of data collection, the researcher designed eight case analysis sheets based on the case reports which were provided by the teachers of young learners. Case analysis sheets were used in the practice hours of TEYL 1 course, after the lecture hours, to see if prospective language teachers can generate theory-informed solutions for the challenging situations presented in the cases. The case analysis sheets engaged the prospective teachers into work on three main stages: understanding the context, decision making/taking action, and generating further thoughts on the case. The stages are similar to those given by Merseth (1992) as "analysis, planning, decision-making, and action" (p. 51). The case sheets were aimed to "invite and legitimize the discussion of such matters in ways that conventional approaches to teacher education do not" (Kleinfeld, 1991, p. 41). Each session devoted to the analysis of cases lasted approximately two hours in duration. As for the focal points of the case sheets, Cases 1 and 2 dealt with language learning processes; Cases 3, 4, and 5 involved characteristics of young learners; Cases 6 and 7 addressed issues in classroom management; and finally Case 8 focused on L1& L2 use in young learner classes. The discussions of the cases were structured with the following guiding questions:

1. CASE ANALYSIS

Context:

   a. Where is the incident experienced? (The school type, grade level, rtc.)

   b. Who is/are affected? (Characteristics of learners, cognitive development, language learning style, etc…)

Instructional Issues:

   c. What is the incident/challenge about?

2. ACTION

Resolution:

   d. What would you do for resolution if you were the teacher? Why? Please support your response.

    e.   What guides your decision(s)/action(s) in this case? Explain.

  3. THOUGHTS

    f.   How does this case reinforce your thoughts about teaching? Discuss.

For the last stage, prospective teachers were asked to reflect on the use of case based method in TEYL course at the end of the semester. A blank sheet of paper was provided and they wrote down what they think about analyzing the cases from real young learner classes as part of the practice hours of the course. They were free to write in English or Turkish and they shared their ideas anonymously. Prospective teachers who took the course TEYL consented to allow the instructor/researcher to keep the case analysis sheets and the reflection sheets for use as data for this study.

2.3. Data analysis

The data collected from the prospective teachers as resolutions for the cases were subjected to a systematic coding process. An inductive approach was employed for data reduction and emergent themes were identified as codes. Then, the codes were critically examined for the second time and classified according to the basis of what prospective teachers referred to as the source of their resolutions. Frequency and percentage rates were calculated. For the second and third research questions, in-vivo coding (Strauss and Corbin; 1998) was done *using the participants' own words*. Then, the prospective teachers' thoughts that were stimulated by the cases and their reflections on the use of case method in a TEYL course were listed.

3. Results

The findings of the study are presented under the related research questions.

R.Q.1. Does the use of case-based method make it possible to link theory and practice in TEYL classes?

As part of the TEYL course, prospective EFL teachers studied cases from real young learner contexts and had resolutions for the situations in the cases. The analysis of their resolutions revealed that their decisions are based on three main issues: (a) theories/principles of child learning and language teaching, (b) their own learning histories as students, and (c) their beliefs. That's to say, prospective teachers referred to (a), (b), or (c) as the basis of their decisions/actions if they had been the teachers in the cases. Table 1 displays the frequency and percentages of the types of prospective teachers' resolutions.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the types of prospective teachers' resolutions and the topics of the cases

	Theory/Principles-based resolutions		Learning history-based resolutions		Beliefs-based resolutions		Total Resolutions
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*N*
Cases related to language learning processes	**49**	**60**	15	18	18	22	82
Cases related to the characteristics of YL	**43**	**51**	13	16	28	33	84
Cases related to classroom management	21	27	20	26	**36**	**47**	**77**
A Case related to L1&L2 use in the classroom	**30**	**63 %**	1	2 %	17	35 %	48

As seen on the table, prospective teachers mostly referred to the theory/principles in their decisions/actions against the situations in the cases. Theory/principles based resolutions have the highest percentage rates for cases related to language learning processes, characteristics of young learners, and L1 & L2 use in the classroom with 60 %, 51 %, and 63 % rates successively. Only for their decisions/actions against the situations in cases related to classroom management, prospective teachers mostly (47 %) referred to their preexisting beliefs.

The following extracts exemplify prospective teachers' resolutions and the basis of their decisions/actions for different cases.

"I would wait and wouldn't get panicked about the issue. Because in SLA there is a natural order and there are developmental sequences which means that the correct use of 3rd person singular –s is learned after being exposed to the language in an extended period of time, even for native speaker children the necessary time is about 13 months. They have to practice more and should be exposed to the target language as much as possible." (Prospective Teacher (PT) 3)

"If I were the teacher in this case, I would make them practice more. I would provide them with more examples and help them use it in real-life conversations with their friends. I would offer them more speaking activities. My previous experiences as a student and behaviors of my past teachers helped me to decide in this way." (PT 21)

"I believe that if we think in Turkish, we can have some problems so we should try to speak English all the time and provide such environments through playing games, singing songs, dramatizations, and with explanations in Turkish." (PT 30)

In the first extract, PT3 mentioned the natural order and developmental sequences in second language acquisition as the basis of his/her decision. In the second one, PT21 referred to his/her previous experiences as a student; and in the last one, PT21 used the

phrase "I believe" and fell back on what s/he believes to take action for the situation in the case. Classification of prospective teachers' resolutions according to their sources and the types of cases are summarized as keywords on Table 2.

Table 2. Types of prospective teachers' resolutions for different cases

	Theory/Principles-based resolutions	Learning history-based resolutions	Beliefs-based resolutions
Cases related to language learning processes (Cases 1 and 2)	Following the natural order, providing more exposure to the TL, providing meaning-oriented practice, giving the required time to master the structure, noticing the developmental phase, L1 transfer of the word order, providing corrective feedback, recasting, detecting L1 influence	Repeating the answers a few times, using more examples with friends, making them memorize, using videos and songs, giving homework, rewarding, giving worksheet, explaining the syntactic order, reading aloud, repeating after the teacher	Teaching implicitly, repeating again and again, providing visual support, carrying out exercises, drama, role-plays, funny & memorable activities, using imitation, explaining in Turkish.
Cases related to the characteristics of YL (Cases 3, 4, 5)	cognitive development, developmental stages (stage theory), here-and-now principle, both teaching and caregiving, supporting pupils, (negative) attitudes, contextualization,	punishment, enforcement, my teacher's bookshelf application, preparing flashcards.	awareness raising in terms of the importance of course materials, explaining the importance of learning a language, raising cultural awareness.
Cases related to classroom management (Cases 6, 7)	creating a positive learning atmosphere, communicating the rules clearly by giving concrete examples with their consequences, managing the classroom climate, creating rapport with the students, co-constructing the rules	scolding up the kids, punishing the students, making the misbehaving student apologize, shouting at the students	talking to the parents, talking to the school counselor, directing the students to the principle/discipline committee, guiding the problematic child.
A Case related to L1&L2 use in the classroom (Case 8)	feeling and evidence of progress in L2, dealing with affective filter, using cognates, modifying/simplifying T-talk, building classroom routines in English, using L1 only for complex expressions or instructions, using body language	translating	first L1 then L2, code switching, buiding trust, dealing with students' prejudice

R.Q. 2. How do cases reinforce prospective language teachers' thinking in TEYL classes?

As a secondary aim of this research, seeing how the cases reinforced prospective teachers' thoughts in teaching English to young learners was considered noteworthy to further understand the use of case method in language teacher education.

Prospective teachers reported that cases related to language learning processes (cases 1 and 2) reinforced their thoughts in 'interpreting L1 influence better', 'treating young and very young children learning a foreign language', and 'understanding developmental sequences better'. Cases involving situations about the characteristics of young leaners (Cases 3, 4, and 5), strengthened their ideas in the following ways:

- There is a need for parental cooperation, parental support in young learner contexts,
- Teachers need to be patient enough,
- Being a teacher is not only about teaching but also supporting students in every dimension,
- Extra effort can be needed for some teaching contexts,
- We wouldn't deal with the whole class all the time but with individual students as well.

Cases dealing with the management of young learner classes (cases 6 and 7) awakened the following thoughts in prospective teachers:

- I should be ready for unexpected situations,
- Establishing rapport with students is very important,
- Kids can be very difficult to cope with,
- Bullying is hard to deal with,
- Teachers need to have not only the content knowledge but also the knowledge of child, psychology to deal with difficult situations,
- Teachers need to maintain discipline but in a very kind and implicit way,
- Working at a primary school is difficult.

Prospective teachers were critical of the issue of L1&L2 use in young learner classrooms (case 8) and drew the following conclusions:

- Teachers should be consistent in using L2 but be careful not to create a negative atmosphere,
- Teachers need to explain the aim in using L2 to students clearly,
- There should be a balance between the use of L1 and L2 ,
- Sometimes L1 can be needed to respond to students' psychological needs.

Briefly, studying cases from real teaching contexts reinforced prospective teachers' thoughts in various ways. Therefore, it can be said that the use of cases enabled activation of their thinking processes.

R.Q. 3. What do prospective language teachers think about the use of cases in TEYL classes?

Prospective teachers reported positive views on the use of cases in the TEYL course. They think that they mostly benefited from the cases in various ways. For instance, cases raised their awareness about the kinds of situations they can experience and guided them for such situations. Discussions on the cases provided different perspectives. Some of the prospective teachers even reported that this method should be used in other field courses as well, and working on the cases prepared them for the realities of teaching profession. Only one prospective teacher reported that s/he did not benefit from the cases. Table 3 displays how they benefited from cases together with the frequency and percentage rates.

Table 3. Reflections of the prospective teachers about the use of cases in the TEYL course

	f	*%*
Raising awareness about the kinds of situations I can experience	17	29
Guiding when we encounter such situations	14	23
Providing different perspectives	11	18
This method should be used in other field courses as well.	8	13
Preparing for the teaching profession.	3	5
Effective in understanding course topics.	2	3
More effective than learning only the theories.	2	3
Creating a chance to know myself and my reactions as a teacher.	1	2
Teaching what not to do.	1	2
Not beneficial	1	2
TOTAL	60	100

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study offer considerable insight about the use of case method in a language teacher education course: Teaching English to Young Learners. The conclusions drawn from the study are as follows:

· The use of case based method provided opportunities to link theory and practice in a considerable way,

   o prospective teachers' thinking processes are marked by the theory/principles related to language teaching and child learning, their learning histories, and their beliefs;

· the cases reinforced their thoughts and awakened their ideas in essential aspects of teaching English to young learners;

· they benefited from the use of cases in various ways like awareness raising, guiding, and providing different perspectives.

The results of the study find support from the existing literature on case based method in teacher education. Most of the studies reported favorable impacts of case method on both in-service and pre-service teachers (Cherubini, 2009; Maloch and Kinzer, 2006; Levin, 1995; Alger, 2006; Kagan and Tippins, 1991 among others). Likewise, this study concludes that the use of case method in TEYL course is beneficial for prospective language teachers.

According to the implications that can be drawn from this study, the use of cases as a teaching tool for teacher education is valuable since cases used in TEYL classes served as a basis to create a link between theory and practice; raise awareness on the issues in real teaching contexts; and provide different perspectives. It is also valuable because it enables prospective teachers "to test their theoretical knowledge presented in class against real problems" (Easterly, 1992; p. 196). In teacher education courses, "instead of the best solutions, talking about the alternatives" would work better for prospective teachers (Easterly, 1992; p. 197 my emphasis) and the use of cases can provide a structured framework for bringing alternatives to the classes and discussing on them.

The design of this study does not offer an entirely new way of case based instruction in language teacher education. However, it is innovative in the way the TEYL classes are carried out, the framework of case discussions, and prospective teachers' reflections on studying teaching English to young learners through cases, all of which are efforts to improve the quality of language teacher preparation.

For further research, experimental/quasi-experimental studies can be carried out to see the influence of case-based method on the development of teacher knowledge. Along with what Sato and Rogers (2010) and Levin (1995) suggested long ago, studies examining the transfer of what is learned to practice are still rare. Therefore, studies

designed to examine the effects of case based method on prospective teachers' micro-teaching practices and teachers' classroom applications would contribute a lot to the field. Moreover, studies that focus on how the classroom procedures work in the use of case method are needed to inform the process in both dimensions of teaching and learning with cases.

Acknowledgements

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