A Head-Start to Teaching:
Exploring the Early Field Experiences in Pre-service EFL Education in Turkey

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ABSTRACT
This study explored the experiences of pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, cooperating teachers, and university collaborators in a structured early field experience course. Qualitative methodology including data sources of interviews, observations, focus groups, audio and video recordings were used. The results of the study indicated that the exposure of pre-service teachers into real school contexts provided them with the necessary foundations of becoming reflective practitioners. The benefits of the structured early field experiences outweighed the challenges. Early field experiences are critical in forming the pre-service teacher beliefs and philosophies of pre-service teachers, so they should be designed carefully to meet their needs.

KEYWORDS
English Language Teaching (ELT), Field Experience, Pre-Service Teacher Education, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

INTRODUCTION
Sociocultural turn in the field of TESOL has addressed the issues of teacher learning, second language teacher education and its knowledge base (Canagarajah, 2016; Johnson, 2006, 2009). Addressing such issues has challenged the taken-for-granted assumptions, which historically viewed second foreign language teachers as technicians, and these teachers were expected to employ pre-packaged methods with their underlying strategies and techniques (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Prabhu, 1990). Further work on teacher learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), characteristics of language teachers and their cognition (Borg, 2003, 2006) and identity formation in language learning and teaching (Peirce, 1995; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005) have called for a critical understanding of second language teaching and teacher education. With the sociocultural turn in the field of TESOL, Freeman and Johnson (1998) rightly suggest that

the core of the new knowledge-base must focus on the activity of teaching itself; it should center on the teacher who does it, the contexts in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Moreover, this knowledge-base should include forms of knowledge representation that document teacher learning within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it occurs (p. 397).

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Constructing the new knowledge-base for second language teacher education (SLTE) as suggested above focuses on how second/foreign language teachers learn to teach and grow as professionals in English language teaching. Second language teacher education programs are the environments in which pre-service language teachers construct their content knowledge, begin to form their professional identities and learn to teach. Their content knowledge professional identities and learning to teach emerge during the field experience courses and school practicum because in order to document how second/foreign teachers learn to teach in their diverse settings, field experiences continue to be an integral part of the curriculum of pre-service teacher (PST) preparation programs (Lux & Lux, 2015; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

Field experiences are generally offered in the final year of the second/foreign language teacher education programs at universities in Turkey. Field experiences at universities in Turkey are divided into two phases. In the first phase of the field experience, pre-service language teachers are required to carry out a set of classroom tasks during it. These tasks consist of observing the cooperating teacher’s lesson, compiling reflective journal, conducting mini-lessons, and reporting. In the second phase of the field experiences, pre-service language teachers are required to prepare teaching materials and assessment tools, to attend reflective sessions with the cooperating teacher(s) and faculty members, and to teach assigned topics under the supervision of a mentor teacher. Hence, field experiences are the environments in which pre-service language teachers face the realities of the language classroom and start to invest in their individual and professional capabilities in terms of language teaching (Ceylan, Uştok, & Çomoğlu, 2017). Although field experiences and school practicum courses offer one-year of engagement with the realities of language teaching and language classroom, they can have immense impact in (re)constructing pre-service teachers’ cognition about language teaching.

In addition to field experiences, some SLTE programs offer early field experiences. In these courses, pre-service teachers have a prolonged opportunity to explore and experience language teaching, and develop their sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) through ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975). In doing so, language teachers can be more capable of “adapting to the emerging issues in the changing ELT praxis” (Karataş & Karaman, 2013, p. 10). Thus, this study aims to document the experiences of pre-service EFL teachers, cooperating teachers, and university collaborators in a structured early field experience.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The literature review of this paper includes two sections. In the first section, we provide terminological underpinnings of the field experience and explain key terms of the study. In the second section of the literature review, although limited, we offer a review of relevant literature.

**Definitions of Field Experiences**

Different terminology has been used in the pre-service teaching programs to refer to the field experiences. Some have used clinical experience (Tasgin & Kucukoglu, 2016; Tok & Gehrke, 2012) to explain the nature of field experiences in terms of clinical practice which aims to equip practitioners with necessary skills, strategies, and techniques to improve their practice. It is believed that clinical practice during the field experiences create opportunities for pre-service teachers to improve their teaching skills (Grossman, 2010). While clinical experience sees pre-service teachers as technicians who are supposed to be equipped with necessary skills and master to perform the profession as in the case of medical doctors, Yuan and Lee (2014) use the term “teaching practicum” to refer to the teaching experiences of pre-service teachers in their final year of undergraduate studies. In teaching practicum, pre-service teachers are expected to master the content knowledge of the teacher education program. Upon mastery of the content knowledge, pre-service teachers are offered with the environments where they possibly face real-life classroom issues (Baltaci-Goktalay et al., 2014) and they are encouraged to (re)construct their content knowledge upon the feedback of their peers,
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