



COVID-19 THROUGH THE LENSES OF TURKISH STUDENT TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract:

This article aimed at unearthing the opinions of teacher candidates of English on Covid-19 and how it has affected their future career plans, current educational endeavours and also investigated how and in what way their English proficiency could be related to the phenomenon. A total of 127 prospective English language teachers enrolled in ELT department at a state university participated in the study. Data were collected through three open-ended questions. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings showed that the current pandemic has led some student teachers to review or postpone some of their educational plans while some were encouraged to learn technology-related new skills. Findings showed that participants somehow have become 'pandemic-literate' by following the news from international sources and they have grown sensitivity toward global issues that they feel responsible to integrate these topics into mainstream English courses when they start teaching.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Turkey, student teachers of English language, ELT

1. Introduction

The current research attempts to reveal the opinions of prospective teachers of English language on Covid-19 pandemic in the first place. More specifically, the study aims at how pandemic has affected prospective English language teachers' future career plans and their current educational endeavours. Additionally, the study has investigated how and in what way teacher candidates' English proficiency could be related to the phenomenon. Lovecraft (1973), in his article starts with a very striking sentence that reflects the globe's tackling with pandemic Covid-19 today very well. "*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.*" (p.1). Serious global threats such as transnational and cyber-terrorisms,

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pandemic, health insecurity, use of chemical weapons and overwhelming humanitarian crises create chaos not only physically but also emotionally as such threats create uncertainty. Similarly, New Corona virus pandemic spreading from the state of Wuhan, China, has become a global threat and its outcomes are unpredictable. Just like butterfly phenomenon effect which is primarily based on the idea that small strings of events and occurrences accumulate thereby imposing unpredictable impacts on any human and natural system. The chaos theory is associated with a butterfly fluttering its wings and causing typhoon. A butterfly here, is only the metaphor representing small events which serve as catalyst and cause unpredictable conditions similar to coronavirus.

The notion of uncertainty is well articulated in epidemic psychology that uncertainty causes anger, shock, sadness and anxiety. Anxiety, in turn, affects our decisions. Fear and anxiety of outbreak can be overwhelming exerting strong emotions in human beings. To NATO's report of 2008, disasters result in severe mental health problems and dysfunctional attitude behaviors with long lasting effects. According to Charleton, the fear of unknown may stand as a fundamental fear underlying anxiety (cited in Charleton, 2016).

The fear is seen as a fundamental source of all negative feelings and the fear that we have today finds its place in Maslow's hierarchy Model. Maslow's hierarchical pyramid is one of the best models showing the priorities of human and the extent how people prioritize their basic needs such as food, shelter and safety. Food and physical and emotional safety are placed at the bottom of the pyramid and is considered as priorities for living. If these essential needs are not adequately addressed, according to Maslow, then one cannot proceed and get satisfied with the needs that are placed higher on the pyramid. While we feel hungry and feel unsafe, we will not be thinking of being promoted, successful, progressive and personally developed. In a nutshell, if we do not have basic needs such as emotional and physical safety along with the other ones addressed adequately, we, humans, cannot function properly. According to a report released by NATO in 2008, these priorities usually become obvious in people's lives after disasters. And consequently, such feelings may be emotional rollercoaster for the students in particular.

As corona virus spreads around the world, we can clearly see its threatening global impact not only on social life and economic rout, but also on education. More than 290 million students have been disrupted and affected worldwide by Covid (CBS news 2020). The United Nations has warned of the unparalleled scale and speed of the educational disruption being caused by corona virus, (McCarthy, 2020) and the countries have taken immediate steps to find new ways of tackling with corona virus. All countries have prioritized their responsibility to protect their citizens, mitigate the effects of the severe pandemic. However, this is not the whole picture at all. One essential necessity is to protect mental health of the citizens and especially those of young generation as is stated in the discipline of psychology. Within the realm of psychology, it is believed that "*fear is the basic cognitive process underlying all anxiety disorders*" (Clark and Beck's (2010; Ormel et al., 2004; p. 906; cited in Charleton, 2016) which may affect future hopes, plans and expectations. To Geher (2020), the uncertain future effects of Corona virus are weighing

heavily on our minds. That is, we are not only anxious about the current situation, but we are nurturing anxiety projecting into the long-term effects of the pandemic in our future lives. In terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we all have gone from working on love needs to safety needs at the drop of a hat (Glenn, 2020). And such an abrupt and unanticipated change in one's basic needs can, of course, be stressful.

This study in the first place gathered English language teacher candidates' opinions of the impact of corona virus pandemic on their future career plans. Secondly, the research aimed at exploring the relationship between English language proficiency and pandemic literacy. More specifically, the study explored as to whether knowing English somehow contributed to understanding and interpreting the pandemic any better.

Virus, pandemics or corona related issues, reports and researches are usually considered to be only a part of medical science and its sub-branches. However, considering the radical changes in schools due to corona virus pandemic, it is also well worth to capture the pandemic picture in the educational arena. With this in mind, the researchers argue that studies are needed to understand how students feel and how they are affected by pandemic. Since corona virus pandemic has also been associated with the human contacting of wildlife and destruction of nature it is also essential to understand how the young generation teachers will create awareness in their classrooms when they start teaching. This is very well articulated by the UN environment chief Inger Anderson in his interview in the Guardian Journal (dated March 25, 2020), Anderson says "*Covid-19 was a clear warning shot, given that far more deadly disease existed in wildlife, and was almost always human behavior that caused diseases to spill over into human and that today's civilization was playing with fire by contacting intact nature of wildlife and other human behaviors such as mining, destructing of nature for farming, mining and housing that drive wildlife into contact with people as well as selling and consuming wild animals will not only destroy the planet but will also bring the humanity to an end*".

Given that prospective English language teachers of future have the responsibility of creating awareness toward global issues, as is stated above by Anderson, it is hoped that they will make changes in their young students' minds in terms of betterment of the world. Teachers are expected to motivate students to learn and transfer to life what they have learned. In the related literature, motivation is accepted to be one of the key factors in learning. According to the motivation theory, motivation to learn is closely related to fear and anxiety. That is, if a person is motivated enough anxiety tends to decrease and motivation to learning can increase conversely. Seneca articulated the deep extent of fear as "*...we are often more frightened than hurt*". This quotation very well depicts our feelings during the natural disasters.

During such natural disasters, teachers face more challenges and find it difficult to support their students emotionally as they are seen "*the sources of emotional support for students*" (Norman, 2020). Besides teaching they also feel that they have to lift their students up, take the responsibility to engage them in learning. However, to Norman (web.2020) "*teachers have limited resources to deal with the full range of students' emotions, even in the best of situations. Educators must invariably struggle with a lack of experience and training,*

and are confronted by the need to use strained resources in the context of a chaotic, ever-changing environment. The rules seem unclear and constantly change – this is the very nature of disasters”. And during this time, due to circumstances teaching limits teachers. It is just at this point that educators need to invest time and effort to help their students but initially they themselves need to receive professional consultation training in regard to this matter. Rich sources to guide the teachers on the matter also become vital during such natural disasters.

2. Research questions

Survey method was utilized in the current research. In the survey, three open-ended questions were addressed:

- 1) How has Covid-19 pandemic influenced your future career decisions?
- 2) How would you relate your English proficiency to Covid-19 literacy? (for instance, reading and understanding the sources from the firsthand around the world /World Health Organization sources, following media related to Covid-19 pandemic).
- 3) As a teacher candidate of English language what would be your recommendations to your future students in terms of raising awareness toward globe threatening issues? (Covid-19 pandemic, recycling, waste management, and environmental issues etc.)

4. Material and methods

4.1 Data collection tool

To collect the opinions of the prospective English language teachers three open-ended survey questions were constructed by the researchers. As the schools and colleges were closed on March 16, 2020 following the first case of Covid-19 outbreak in Turkey, the students had to relocate from their dormitories at the time of the research. Therefore, the survey was mailed to the class representatives and asked to share in their groups. A total of 127 student teachers volunteered to participate in the study.

4.2 Participants

A total of 127 student teachers majoring in English language teaching at a Turkish state university participated in the study. Of the participating students 70 % are female (N= 89) and 30 % (N= 38). Their ages range from 22-25.

4.3 Data analysis

Content analysis was conducted to analyze the data. Content analysis is defined as a systematic approach to categorize data based on codes (Weber, 1990). With respect to coding, current literature identifies two types of content analysis as emergent and a priori coding systems (Weber, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A priori coding works with pre-existing key words while emergent coding works with the emerging codes drawn from

the data. This study employed emergent coding system which detects the most common themes and expressions in the surveys. First the surveys were numbered. The researchers closely examined the data to identify the common patterns and ideas mentioned repeatedly in participants' answers. The most frequently repeated phrases and sentences that best describe the content of the questions were highlighted through coding. Then the carefully selected themes were categorized and interpreted. During the analysis, some of the vague codes were discarded as some of them were not addressing to the aim of the research and some were not used repeatedly.

5. Results and Discussion

Since its outbreak in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019, the pandemic named Covid-19 has influenced almost every country on the earth. As depicted in the news programs globally, the pandemic has influenced people socially, psychologically and economically. The current study aimed at identifying the opinions of Turkish student teachers of English on Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, the participants were asked three open-ended questions. Content analysis of the responses to these broad questions yielded to various subcategories.

Question 1: How has Covid-19 pandemic influenced your future career decisions?

All of the participants answered the question with no missing data. However, once the responses were analyzed three major sub-categories related to the first research question seem to have emerged. Below are these sub-categories presented with appropriate quotations.

1a. Postponing or cancelling study abroad/internship programs

Data analysis revealed that some prospective teachers have either applied or were planning to apply a study abroad or internship program before the outbreak of the pandemic. Of the participating student teachers 13 % (N= 17) stated that they had to postpone or completely cancel their educational programs. With regards to this issue one female senior student stated her changed plans and accompanying fear of contacting with foreigners as follows:

"...was planning to go abroad. Even if this pandemic is over, I don't want to go abroad as I fear to contact with foreigners." (S42)

Although the fear of contacting with foreigners was not voiced by the other participants it might call for a further in-depth and large-scale research in terms of nurturing xenophobia toward the people of the countries where the pandemic has relatively witnessed many deaths.

Similarly, another female student teacher mentioned the changes she made in her career plans:

"...I would go to Europe to pursue a Master's Degree and teach there. Now, I think that it is safer to stay here with my family and study for the KPSS exam (a national exam delivered once a year by the government to select teachers to appoint..." (S18)

As can be seen, Covid-19 pandemic influenced Turkish student teachers' career plans in some way. Taken as a whole, the influence seems to be on short-term or immediate career goals. More specifically, the overall impact of the pandemic on career plans has been depicted as either 'no impact' at all or, if there were any, then it was stated as related to short term goals such as cancelling or postponing study abroad programs.

1b. Concerns related to unemployment

Of the participants 15 % (N= 19) stated their concerns regarding possible unemployment among teachers including English language teachers. Since the outbreak of pandemic many countries including Turkey have initiated restrictions in every area of life including education. In Turkey, schooling suspense has started on March 16, 2020 and was remedied by a teaching network program, EBA, developed by the Ministry of National Education. The education at colleges is being provided by selected learning management systems via distance education. The fact that distance education practices have flourished and gained momentum at all educational levels since mid-March 2020 this situation has been associated with unemployment by some participants. Regarding the issue, a male senior student expressed his feelings:

"...online courses might get our jobs from our hands. In future, they might replace us..." (S30)

In the same vein, a female student depicted her feelings of fear regarding envisioned potential unemployment:

"...at first, I thought it is good...no need to go to school no attendance...we can follow online courses but, later I started to think another way...what if machines or online courses replace teachers and we are not going to need teachers anymore..." (S122)

A female student teacher expressed her need of security relating the issue to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

"...security is one of the basic needs as depicted by Maslow. During the pandemic we have witnessed that teachers who are working at private schools have almost lost their jobs... Although I was planning to work at a private school as I find those schools more resourceful, I have changed my mind. I will try to obtain a government-supported post..." (S97)

Similarly, another female student teacher expressed her concern about private schools:

"...now I know what type of school I would like to work...I don't want to work at a private school...there might be unemployment issues..." (S73).

Yet, a few other participating students depicted the *luxury* provided by distance education. As the study sample is relatively small, every repeated opinion of several times might be considered to be important. It is obvious that home office work is attractive for some student teachers. A senior male student expressed this:

"...teaching profession has become more promising for me as it can be managed from home." (S112)

In the same line, the ease secured by home office was expressed by a female student teacher in those words:

"... online teaching fits in my nature, I don't like the idea of being in crowded classrooms..." (S114)

1c. A need to improve digital skills

Need for digital literacy in the first place and its appropriate application was voiced by the participants repeatedly and made its place as another emerging sub-category under the broad category of Covid-19 influence on career plans. This finding might be considered as awkward given that the subjects fall in what Prensky (2001) calls 'digital natives' generation. The responses clustered under this sub-category include student teachers' self-evaluation with regards to their technology literacy. It is true to say that however threatening its existence might be, it seems that Covid-19 pandemic has definitely given birth to various unprecedented blessings in a number of areas. Education-wise, the findings of this paper have showed that some of the participants have questioned their skills with technology. With regards to this point, a senior male student stated:

"...when the pandemic started our education has changed from face to face to remote learning. I thought that teachers should have technology literacy. We should be ready for everything and we should always have B and C plans..." (S31)

The same point was interpreted by another male student teacher as *"rapid transfer into digital learning life"* (S43). It can be said that distance education practices during pandemic ignited an interest and curiosity toward technological literacy among the student teachers.

With regards to the same point a female senior student teacher stated how she plans to improve technology-related skills:

"...before this pandemic I was thinking technology is rarely used in educational area. Now I came to realize that technology is everywhere... I will improve skills about this area and will prepare myself as a good teacher..." (S102)

Question 2: How would you relate your English knowledge to Covid-19 literacy?

The second open-ended question asked the participants to write down their opinions as to how they would relate their professional education to pandemic literacy. All of the student teachers responded to this question. It was evident that the participants thought themselves fortunate as they were able to follow the media sources in English from the first hand. Instrumental value of knowing English was mentioned by 17 % of the participants (N=22).

2a. Instrumental value of knowing English

The participants depicted their content that they are enrolled in English language teaching department. With regards to this point a female participant declares:

"...during this pandemic period, my undergraduate department was very beneficial. Following news in English was not difficult at all. I thought that we are very lucky compared to other people that we can read and understand everything from the first hand..." (S27)

Following pandemic-related news from the first hand in English, participants stated, have made them feel relieved, confident, and secure:

"That I know English has helped me stay away from misinformation...I haven't relied on only local sources...as I knew English, I was able to compare any news with multiple sources..." (S68)

Instrumental role of English was voiced by a number of participants in various ways. A male participant (S74) stated *"...following the news from different sources relieved my panic..."*.

Some participants stated as to how *fulfilled* they have felt when they provided pandemic-related information with their family members and neighbors. Regarding to this point, a female participant stated:

"...I have been following pandemic news from all different sources and sharing it with my family." (S11)

In the same vein, a female participant stated how her professional education helped her:

"...thanks to my proficiency in English I am able to reach trustworthy sources...I can cross check the news from multiple sources...I think I am fulfilling my mission and illuminating my environment..." (S102)

As can be interpreted from the sentences, this student teacher feels responsible to share what she has learned from international sources with respect to the pandemic.

A senior male participant emphasizing the significance of information expressed how he managed to check the trustworthiness of news:

"Information is critical in this kind of extreme situation and being proficient in a global language provides me with variety of news, sources of information which I cannot reach otherwise ...use it to compare and contrast with my other sources in order to sort out the false information or news." (S87)

Question 3: As a teacher candidate of English language what would be your recommendations to your future students in terms of raising awareness toward globe threatening issues?

The third open-ended question asked the student teachers to relate their pandemic experience to their future teaching profession. As a matter of fact, this question was added to the questionnaire with an intention to trigger some thoughts regarding the global issues. That is, it was intended that the participants would form some conscious opinions about world-threatening issues while they are still in the program and are receiving pre-service education. The majority of the participants stated that they would prepare classroom activities to raise consciousness in their students. Content analysis of the papers revealed that almost all participants are sensitive to the global issues and are willing to take proactive roles as teachers in their classrooms. To illustrate, a male student teacher expressed his feelings as follows:

"We are individuals, but we are part of communities and we are also the individuals of The Earth where we live together. Therefore, we should learn from what we have been through and teach our students the ways of empowering themselves. Thus, I would try to connect English teaching with these contents stated above. English teaching via CLIL would do very nicely in this manner. We would not only teach English to our students, but many aspects of living." (S 106)

The analysis revealed that the participants plan to create awareness by designing enjoyable lesson contents through videos, songs and other technology-supported visuals to attract and capture their students' attention. One interesting point was that the participants have repeatedly highlighted the importance of teaching these issues through attention-getting activities.

The world has turned to a big prison globally now. After a very short time, we all seem to be adapted to a new situation. Yet, as voiced in the participants' answers, we do have some concerns for future. The new world, as widely mentioned in the press, is

waiting outside of home no matter how hard we want to go back to our pre-corona times. The pre-corona time would be similar to what happens with Jake Epping in Stephen King's novel. Jake, an English language teacher, accidentally discovered time portal to travel back in time in the early 1960s to prevent the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as he believed it would have been a better world if Kennedy lived. He managed to save Kennedy but when he came to his own time, he found everything upside down that he wanted to travel back to the past and re-turn the clock back as it was before travelling in time, (Roese & Epstude, 2017). Post Corona era seems to be highly changing our world, beliefs, hopes and future careers and as a result of this we may receive more psychological consultation than it used to be. Unlike in King's novel that the rabbit hole was a door to the past (Lathan, 2016) Corona is the door to the unknown future accompanied by uncertainty. Therefore, special measures such as new courses, special training sessions to help students cope with anxiety of uncertainty should take part in all programs as anxiety may affect students' future plans, their mood and academic success and their motivation in participating in-class activities, continuing their education. Namely, every effort should be made by educators, pedagogues and teachers to ensure their students receive proper psychological aid along with academic courses to help them regain a sense of safety and emotional comfort. If we cannot give our students, this essential security feeling and sort of predictability there will not be learning. So, versatile education and multidirectional communication seem to be sine qua non of post-corona era education.

The current study surveyed 127 student teachers' opinions regarding Covid-19 pandemic. The first open-ended question asked the impact of the pandemic on their future career plans. Of the participants, 13 % (N=17) mentioned they had to make some changes in their study abroad /internship programs either by postponing or cancelling. Underneath this question were clustered the fear of the participants with the percentage of 15 % (N=19) regarding possible unemployment. In a cross-sectional study conducted on anxiety and accompanying depression related to the pandemic via an online questionnaire. The participants were found anxious and depressed above anxiety and depression cut-off points (Özdin and Özdin, 2020).

As an emergent teaching modality, following the pandemic, distance education practices were initiated by the Ministry of National Education in Turkey. Some of the participants associated the presence of distance education with unemployment. However, for some participants, distance education played as a motivating role in encouraging them to obtain and improve digital literacy.

The second question in the survey asked the participants to relate their English knowledge to the pandemic. Of the participants 17% (N=22) emphasized the instrumental value of knowing English in reaching international sources from the first hand.

Almost all participants stated the necessity of integrating global topics into mainstream English courses by emphasizing that the responsibility falls primarily on the teachers' shoulders. Along with other professional duties, this type of social responsibility of teachers as leading, guiding and being a role model figure were voiced by scholars (Ünal & Dımişki 1999; Gürsoy 2010).

6. Recommendations

Based on the lessons learned from the pandemic, the researchers argue that there need to be some new courses integrated into all undergraduate departments including the English language teaching departments. In other words, to the best of researchers' knowledge, courses like global issues, digital literacy or stress management are not usually offered in the English language teaching departments and these courses need to be integrated into the curriculum.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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