Classroom management problems pre-service teachers encounter in ELT

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Abstract

Different ideas and different perspectives on classroom management have long been debated. This study opens a new horizon in classroom management issue by shedding light on the classroom management problems and strategies to overcome these problems by student-teachers at teaching practice courses. The research was designed with a mixed method by using both qualitative and quantitative data from the 4th year students at English language teaching (ELT) department at Balıkesir University. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with senior students. The main interest of the study was to understand the classroom management problems of ELT student-teachers and their strategies to cope with these problems. The results revealed that classroom management problems generally stem from the noisy and talkative students and crowded classes. The solutions of senior year students include using different teaching methods with well-organised activities and setting good relationships with the students.

Keywords: Classroom management, problems, teacher training, classroom management strategies.

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1. Introduction

Although classroom management is offered as a theoretical course in most of the faculties of education, it has been a difficult issue for the novice teachers to handle with the classroom management problems in practice (Hammerness, 2011). Evertson and Weinstein (2006) report that classroom management is one of the most challenging issues for novice teachers. Especially, when the classroom management problems are linked with the language teaching methods and strategies, the situation gets even harder (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). The main reason for such a situation stems from the foreign language use within the classroom setting. (Turk & Sari, 2017). While it is hard to cope with some specific classroom management problems speaking the native language of the students, it becomes harder in interactive language classes as the purpose of language classes is to maintain interaction between the students. Thus, applying classroom management strategies becomes more challenging while the interaction is the purpose of the classes. This hard situation leads the novice teachers to employ new classroom management strategies. Classroom management strategies are mostly shaped by the reactions of the student profile within the classroom settings. Not only the reaction of the students but also teaching experience, age and academic background of the teachers affect the classroom management problems and strategies (Luo, Bellows & Grady, 2000). Specifically, in language classes in which the students are active and student-centred methodologies are highly recommended, classroom management problems are more likely to occur. In such an environment, there are various suggested ways to respond to the unexpected situations and misbehaviours in a more effective and supportive way. These discipline strategies do not only maintain the effective learning environment but the relationship between the students and the teacher, which may end up a lot of beneficial consequences for the students (Psunder, 2005). Therefore, applying different classroom management strategies as effective as possible is the issue searched by the education researchers and the teachers for a long time.

By applying different classroom management strategies, teachers try to create the most effective learning environment. Language classes constitute a different aspect of teaching environment as language teaching requires employing different methodologies along with classroom management strategies. Thus, it is questionable which strategies let the teachers create the most effective learning environment for their students. The only way to learn this is obviously experience and setting good relationships with the students. In the lights of all aforementioned research, classroom management mostly has to do with experience. However, investigating the problems of student-teachers and their classroom management strategies may provide deeper insight into the research area. Therefore, this research is designed to elucidate the endeavour of the senior students at English language teaching (ELT) departments about classroom management strategies. The research questions for the study are:

1. What kinds of classroom management problems do senior year students from ELT department face within their school practice course?
2. What kind of strategies do they employ to overcome these classroom management problems?

2. Literature review

In reviewing previous studies on classroom management, it constitutes an important part of the research to conceptualise the term 'classroom management'. The reason behind this idea is to clarify the ideas and perceptions of student-teachers about classroom management. For long years, as classroom management is dependent on the discipline problems within the classroom setting, Wolfgang (1999) defines the term as the perceptions of teachers about autonomy and teacher-centred activities. However, Psunder (2005) approaches the term as a tool for balance between the rights of teachers and students in the classroom. According to him, classroom management should be used for the students to be prepared for their future rights and awareness as independent citizens. Although researchers seem to be divided into two in describing the term 'classroom management', very different ideas with countless conceptualisations are put forth by the educators. Another aspect

of classroom management is related to the views of students-teachers or novice teachers because according to Evertson and Weinstein (2006) it is regarded as a challenge by most of the novice teachers and it is not very easy to cope with the sudden chances in the flow of teaching environment. Realising the problem that bothers the flow of the course and deciding the correct strategy to cope with the problem and at least minimising the negative effects of this problem on the course content are very challenging and a matter of experience in most of the cases (Lai & Zou, 2018). Therefore, Evertson and Weinstein (2006) also emphasise on creating an ideal learning environment by surpassing all possible problems. Also, from a different perspective, Demirci and Yavaslar (2018) suggest that creativity and collaboration in a classroom setting are a must in modern educational systems, which shapes the classroom management perceptions.

These possible problems and difficulties in classroom management might be related to 'larger class sizes, limited resources and increased student diversity, especially in urban schools (Kwok, 2017). Additionally, while listing the problems in classroom management, Goldstein (1995) emphasises on the noisy and distractive behaviours and emotional conditions of the students. Such school characteristics have a visible impact on the perceptions and actions of teachers in order to provide classroom management (McCarthy, Lineback, & Reiser, 2014). However, this might be a part of the problem related to providing an ideal learning environment (Kebede, 2018). Additionally, professional development of teachers has a significant place in classroom management (Behroozi, 2017). Therefore, different classroom management strategies are attempted to be employed in order to overcome the problems that are originated from different reasons.

There are few studies exploring the reactions and strategies of novice teachers or student teachers and the reasons for these actions. Within these studies, one of the most attention-grabbing ones is by Bullough and Richardson (2014), who declares that especially novice teachers excessively emphasise on the students' reaction rather than classroom management strategies, which is an important reason to experience problems in classroom management. Another reason for the difficulty that novice teachers face with is clarified as the lack of multicultural competence for 'increased student diversity' problem (Weinstein, Clarke & Curran, 2004). All these factors create a need for change and organisational shape of the classes (Muluneh & Gedifew, 2018).

When the issue of classroom management is narrowed to the ELT environment, the research findings by Korukcu (1996) yield that motivational problems of the students are a significant factor affecting classroom management, while Incecay and Dollar (2012) focus upon the willingness of teachers for the appropriate implication of classroom management strategies. Lasly, Merc and Subasi (2015) categorise the problems in ELT setting as noisy students, lack of participation and unmotivated students.

Additionally, Brousseau (1997) creates a term called 'didactic contract' to cite the negotiations in academic environments. From this perspective, classroom management strategies might be regarded as a part of 'didactic contract'. Thus, with regard to the didactic approach, in the same vein with some other researchers, Hastie and Siedentop (1999), especially in interactive classes like language classes teachers maintain interaction rather than theoretical demands of instruction.

As seen in the previous studies, novice teachers and students-teachers may encounter various problems regardless of their speciality. However, when the ELT setting is concerned, motivational problems seem to be the most commonly accosted one. Thus, this study aimed to reassure this problem of student-teachers from ELT department and shed light on the strategies they employ in response to the problems they face with.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 44 students from the ELT Department, Balikesir University. All of the participants were the 4th year students and they were enrolled 'Teaching Practice' course as a must course to complete their graduation requirements. The participants took courses to teach all levels of English from beginner level to advanced level and from young learners to adult learners. The important point about the participants was that they have just completed their theoretical classroom management courses and recently started their in-class practices. The in-class practices do not only include their mini teaching presentations in their own classroom but the participants taking 'Teaching Practice' course go to a public school and assist a more experienced teacher in their teaching activities. The participants also take the 'Classroom Management' courses. The main objective of this course is to raise the awareness of student teachers about the significance of classroom management and to teach classroom management based on ethical issues. The students taking this course practiced and were preparing to teach in all levels of schools like the primary, secondary or upper secondary. In the frame of this course, students are expected to learn the communication skills, common classroom management problems and solutions to these specific problems (also see https://obs.balikesir.edu.tr/oibs/bologna/dersler_ext.aspx?lang=tr&infopage=1&curProgID=4866).
Ages of the participants varied between 20 and 26, also while 15 of the participants are male, 29 of the participants were female, which is supposed to create a difference between the classroom management strategies employed by the student-teachers.

3.2. Data collection tools

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions included three main parts: the first asking about the perceptions about the perceptions of student-teachers regarding the concept of 'classroom management', the second asking about the classroom management problems that student-teacher face within their teaching practice course and the last part asking about the classroom management strategies to handle with these problems.

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of two parts through the borders of the mixed method. First part included the qualitative data analysis part in which data gathered through the interview questions were labelled as themes and patterns suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994); (Seferoglu, 2006) as 'depict common themes'.

The second step of data analysis included a quantitative analysis of the themes and patterns that were labelled in the first step of the qualitative analysis. For the quantitative analysis of the themes and patterns, statistical package for social sciences 21.0 computer program was used and descriptive analysis was run to get the quantitative values of the data gathered through interviews.

4. Results

The findings of the study will be presented under three main patterns which are in the same vein with the research questions. Direct quotations from the participants will be demonstrated with the patterns and themes.

• Definition of the concept of 'Classroom Management'

The definitions exclusively agreed by the student-teachers throughout the study can be categorised as:

1. Classroom management is how the teacher runs the classroom by forming an ideal class environment to facilitate learning.
2. Classroom management is about motivation, teacher activities and discipline.
3. Classroom management is interaction and relationship between teacher and students.

In this part, direct quotations from the participants in the same direction with the themes will be presented:

1. Classroom management is how the teacher runs the classroom by forming an ideal class environment to facilitate learning.

Statistical analysis of the data indicated that 61.4% of the participants have agreed upon the idea that classroom management is about forming an ideal classroom environment to facilitate learning. Another important point about this view is the fact that while 65.5% of female participants have described the term as about the methods that teachers use to run the classes, 53.3% of the male participants have shared the same idea. The participants have reported their ideas:

'Classroom management may be defined as forming an ideal classroom environment in order to facilitate the learning process for learners and the person who is responsible for this arrangement is the teacher….'(P2)

'Classroom management is linked with the environment, atmosphere in the classroom. Students should feel flexible. Classroom management is a tool to make the students ready for the class…'(P6)

'…to create an effective classroom environment where the students understand the lesson clearly; to manage the activities in class…'(P12)

2. Classroom management is about motivation, teacher activities and discipline.

According to 25% of the participants, which constitutes an important percentage of participants, classroom management is a concept which can be related to motivation, teacher activities and discipline. Throughout the interviews, the aforementioned participants have advocated their ideas by stating:

'It is mostly about motivation of the students and the teachers. Teacher activities are important in that point…' (P16)

'…In lesson, both of them (students and teachers) should share their thoughts, feelings and a teacher should be guide but at the same time the teacher needs control…'(P20)

3. Classroom management is interaction and relationship between teacher and students.

13.6% of the participants think that the concept of classroom management is related to the relationship between the teachers and the students within the classroom setting. The participants have said that:

'…classroom management can be defined as cooperation of students and teachers…'(P29)

'…it is the relationship between teacher, students and lesson…'(P18)

'Classroom management is the term that is necessary for learning and teaching atmosphere.

Teacher and learners need interaction… It is the connection in teachers' and learners' interaction…'(P14)

• Problems encountered in teaching practice school

The second important point implied and stated by the participants was mainly the problems that they face within their practice school. The problems were mainly stated under four labels:

1. Organisation problems
2. Crowded and noisy classes along with talkative students
3. Unmotivated, bored students disturbing the other students within the classroom setting
4. Problems about the interaction and relationship between students and teachers

1. Organisation problems

For the participants, organisation of the activities in the classroom setting is an essential part of effective classroom management. Therefore, concerning this significant point of classroom management, 9.1% of the participants have stated the importance of organisation problems that interferes the teaching environment. The participants have reported that:

'…for example, large classrooms are hard to organise. Teacher may feel like s/he is not enough.

This may cause some problems…'(P44).

'…learners' levels are different from each other. So, the teachers need to organise different activities and this is really tough…'(P39).

2. Crowded and noisy classes along with talkative students

The second critical problem exclusively stated by the participants is crowded and noisy classes, especially including talkative students. This problem is voiced by 36.4% of the participants, of whom 37.9% were female participants while 33.3% were male participants. The participants regarding crowded classes and talkative students as the source of the problem for the classroom management have voiced their ideas:

'…Classes are very crowded and noisy. Children's motivation can be easily broken because of the noise in the classroom…'(P29).

'…when the teacher comes to the classroom, the students talk more… there is too much noise in the classroom. There are some talkative students who cause problem for the teacher…'(P1).

3. Unmotivated, bored students disturbing the other students within the classroom setting

Another important problem stated by the participants is unmotivated students disturbing other students during the lesson. This problem was stated by 36.4% of the participants who observe the problem affecting the learning process of the students. They have asserted that:

'…Generally, students do not want to learn English. They don't have any motivation to learn. Also, they disturb the other students who want to learn something. This a big classroom management problem…'(P3).

'There are some students who don't listen to teacher and block the learning atmosphere. Teachers spend a serious amount of time by warning these students and this is an important classroom management trouble…'(P25).

'…some students disturb the other students. They ruin the flow of the course…'(P26).

4. Problems about the interaction and relationship between students and teachers

As most of the participants have focused on the importance of relationship between the teachers and the students while describing the concept of the classroom management, 18.2% of the participants emphasised upon the interaction and relationship problems. These participants have uttered that:

'…that the teacher always shouts at the students is irritating. I think there is an interaction problem in the class and this causes classroom management problems…'(P30).

'…the teacher is really different with girls and boys. She is not trying to teach the boys as she does with the girls…'(P34).

• Classroom management strategies to overcome classroom management problems

The last remarkable point made clear by the participants is the classroom management strategies to overcome the aforestated problems and to create an effective learning environment for all types of learners. Several classroom management strategies were suggested during the interviews. However, five attention-grabbing will be listed:

1. Setting rules with the students at the very beginning and reminding these rules
2. Setting good relationships with the students and knowing the students well
3. Using different methods to teach and organise the activities before the class
4. Staying quite or raising the noise
5. Ignoring the misbehaviour

1. Setting rules with the students at the very beginning and reminding these rules

It is stated by most of the participants that to teach the classroom rules and routines to the students whether inclusively or exclusively constitutes an important part of classroom management. By advocating this idea, 13.6% of the participants have said that:

'…before the class, I prefer to set some discipline rules and be sure that the students obey these rules. Also, at the beginning of every class, I go over the rules…'(P40).

'…in case of such problems, teachers should be calm and rules should be given exactly.'(P23).

2. Setting good relationships with the students and knowing the students well

Another point that is important to the participants is the relationship between the teachers and the students. Therefore, just like considering this as a source of classroom management, 29.5% of the participants regarded the relationship and interaction as a good tool for a solution. Therefore, they uttered that:

'The teachers should be like friends with their students. Teachers should understand what the students think and want and the teacher should know their students very well to arrange the learning setting…'(P2).

'…being well prepared for every situation and concentrating on the emotions of students…'(P39).

'…students need to trust on the teacher. Being too harsh doesn't work with them and being soft and weak is also a problem…'(P38).

3. Using different methods to teach and organise the activities before the class

One of the most important sources of the problems was related to ignoring different types of learners; thus, considering this problem, 36.4% of the participants have suggested to use different methods and activities organised and prepared before the classes by expressing:

'…teacher should do something fun for increasing their attention. Teachers should be funny and organised…instead of loading too much homework, teacher should try different activities for different types of learners in the class…'(P37).

'…teachers should try to find pictures and games to make English more enjoyable…'(P3).

'Teacher cannot behave in the same way to all students. They should use different methods, techniques and activities so that the teacher can draw students' attention…'(P5).

4. Staying quite or raising noise

Another effective way for classroom management is suggested as staying quite or raising noise as a response to the students' misbehaviour. Therefore, a small number of participants (6.8%) have voiced their suggestions as:

'…sometimes raising noise may be a solution so that they can hear me. But this is not always working. So, sometimes I prefer to stay quiet to attract attention…'(P4).

'At first, teachers' attitude is important. Teachers should be noticeable and audible….Until the class feels ready, the teacher shouldn't be silent, should try to make their voice heard by the students…'(P6).

5. Ignoring the misbehaviour

Another classroom management strategy suggested by the participants is ignoring the misbehaviour. 9.1% of the participants believe that ignoring the problematic situation could be an effective solution for classroom management problems. Therefore, they have voiced that:

'…if their results are not serious enough, teacher may act like she didn't realise it. We shouldn't say anything to break students' heart or no violence should be used….'(P12).

'…I would ignore the students who constantly speak in the class…'(P26).

5. Discussion

This study was an attempt to see the classroom management problems that student-teachers encounter in their teaching practice course and the strategies they employ to overcome such problems.

The study was started with an attempt to find a common definition to the term 'classroom management'. Although Psunder (2004) conceptualises the term as a way to provide the discipline rules in-class activities, according to Fowler and Sarapli (2010) classroom management is a process that is mostly shaped by the extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics of the students and the teachers.

As a divergent point of this study in relation with the aforementioned studies, this study explicitly made the connection between theoretical part of 'Classroom Management' courses with the implication part of 'School Experience' courses. Also, different from other studies in the literature, results have demonstrated the connection between theory and implication and suggested a new definition and perspective for classroom management.

Also, similar to this study, in their study, Merc and Subasi (2015) have reached the conclusion that noise is one of the most overwhelming classroom management problems while naughty students and organisation problems come as the other important problems regarding classroom management issue. Although in previous studies the main focus is mostly on the psychological factors of teacher candidates like readiness and classroom management efficacy (Incecay & Dollar, 2012), this study shed light on the practices of student-teachers and their reactions by opening a new horizon to the issue.

Although classroom management is acknowledged as a tough issue by Milner and Tenore (2010); they have concluded that the most effective strategy is keeping balance among the students and 'immersion into students' life worlds' as in the same vein with the strategy of setting good relationship with the students. It is explicitly seen in the results that the 'Classroom Management' course content along with the experience of the students largely effects the answers of the students as they have the opportunity to practice what they have learnt in theory.

Keser, K. & Yavuz, F. (2018). Classroom management problems pre-service teachers encounter in ELT. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Science. 13*(4), 511-520.

6. Conclusion

At the very beginning, the study started with the definitions of the participants regarding the concept of 'classroom management'. Different perceptions about 'classroom management' affecting the views about the classroom management problems and the strategies employed to overcome these problems. For a significant majority of the participants, classroom management is how the teacher runs the classroom by forming an ideal class environment to facilitate learning while some of the participants relate the concept with motivation, teacher activities and discipline. Another important conception of classroom management is classified as the interaction and relationship between teacher and students by the participants.

In relation to perceptions about the term, this research has revealed that student-teachers mostly encounter with four main classroom management problems. These could be categorised as organisation problems; crowded and noisy classes along with talkative students; unmotivated, bored students disturbing the other students within the classroom setting; problems about the interaction and relationship between students and teachers.

The last important point made clear in the study was the strategies that are employed by student-teachers to overcome classroom management problems. The most used strategies are classified as setting rules with the students at the very beginning and reminding these rules; setting good relationships with the students and knowing the students well; using different methods to teach and organise the activities before the class; staying quite or raising noise; ignoring the misbehaviour.

As the last words, classroom management is not directly related with the experience. Even most experiences teachers might be confused about this issue. Especially, when the rigour of language teaching is taken into consideration, it becomes even harder. Therefore, every single case requires different strategies to create an effective teaching environment. It is important for the teachers to know that no reaction or strategies write on the books or lectured in the classes. Therefore, the best strategy to overcome the problems seems to have a good relationship with the students and to have the ability for in-depth needs analysis of their students.

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