

Special Issue

Stepping into the World of Young English Learners through Experiential Learning: Proactive Practical Action Research on Pre-service Teachers' Perception Evolvement and Professional Empowerment

Şakire Erbay-Çetinkaya

Foreign Language Education, Trabzon University, Türkiye

Erbay-Çetinkaya, Ş. (2025). Stepping into the World of Young English Learners through Experiential Learning: Proactive Practical Action Research on Pre-service Teachers' Perception Evolvement and Professional Empowerment. *Journal of New Advances in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, Special Issue*, 56-78. **Doi:** 10.22034/Jeltal.2025.special issue/3

*corresponding author: sakirecetinkaya@trabzon.edu.tr

Abstract

Today, like the Aladdin's magic lamp, English proficiency offers avenues for education, career development, communication, entertainment, and partnerships. Coupled with the possible benefits of an early start, this situation has turned teaching English to young learners into a truly global phenomenon. The abundance of studies with in-service teachers as research site has yielded to recent calls to complete the existing understanding with pre-service teacher perspective. Responding to those calls and informed by the Experiential Learning Theory and Reflective Practice, the current action research aimed at exploring 34 pre-service English teachers' views and experiences regarding the impact of a TEYL course accompanied by collaborative mock lesson experiences, teacher educator feedback, and reflective entries to offer suggestions for further cycles. The findings underlined almost complete agreement on the role of such an experiential and reflective process on their awareness of the rewarding yet arduous nature of the profession, young children's world, and teaching skills, thereby the development of a self-confident teacher identity. Particularly classroom management including managing the time, L1 use, classroom space, resources as well as student roles and acts emerged as the primary concern. It ends with pedagogical implications informed by the participant and researcher insights.

Keywords: *Early start, Experiential learning, Pre-service teacher training, Teaching English to young learners, Action research*

INTRODUCTION

English is regarded as “the passport to global communication and therefore to increased personal and national prosperity” (Arnold & Rixon, 2008, p. 39), and thus various measures are taken to ensure successful learning outcomes, among which teaching English to young learners (TEYL, hereafter) stands out. It has gained strength through prioritising governmental attempts, language policy development at macro level as well as the rise of related publications (Butler, 2015; Johnstone, 2019; Rich, 2014). Pre-schooler or pre-primary children aged 2 to 5 are identified as very young learners or early starters, and those aged 6 to 11 are classified as young learners (YLS, hereafter) although sometimes those until 14 are treated as young learners (Ellis, 2014). Despite the vagueness surrounding the age range, within the scope of this article, TEYL should be interpreted as the attempt of instructing English to those aged 5 to 12 (Cameron, 2001).

The Nature of TEYL

The role of English for education and employment as well as the possible benefits of an early start (Shin & Crandall, 2013) are set for the status of TEYL as a truly global phenomenon. To use a metaphor, English proficiency is like Aladdin's magic lamp offering avenues for business, education, career development, communication, entertainment, tourism, partnerships, to list but a few (Crystal, 2003). Additionally, the rationale behind the popularity of the belief that the younger is the better and TEYL as a consequence is associated with the Critical Period Hypothesis by Eric Lenneberg, referring to a specific time window when individual learn a language easily and effectively. After puberty, it is believed to be challenging, for the brain loses its neuroplasticity, i.e., the ability to adapt to new situations and create neural connections, thereby making it difficult to achieve native-like proficiency (Cameron, 2001; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). Furthermore, various advantages of an early start documented by the related

literature have consolidated the position of TEYL around the world. However, the issue with advocates as well as sceptics currently stands as a debated topic, for there is a growing consensus that socio-affective factors including quantity and quality of experience, time, exposure, a real need for English, input variety, and meaningful input rather than solely maturation determine success (Moon, 2000; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019).

Despite TEYL as a truly global phenomenon, a range of related problems and concerns have been reported: shortage of well-equipped young learner teachers; challenges teachers face to implement communication-oriented methods and techniques due to overcrowded classrooms, lack of teacher training, and conflict with the local culture of learning; lack of children- and teacher-friendly teaching materials and activities; no funding for required equipment, infrastructure, and facilities; low teacher language proficiency and self-confidence; difficulty to motivate students who cannot understand the relevance of learning English; and incompatibility between policies and curricula and assessment practices (Cakır & Gungor, 2017; Copland et al., 2014; Othman & Kiely, 2016; Uztosun, 2026; Yıldız & Savascı, 2024). The comparative empirical study of Copland et al. (2014) between the global vies and local perspectives adds up to the already identified challenges, including less concern about test and examination, concerns about learning new teaching methodologies, concerns about teaching speaking, struggle with discipline problems and classroom management, concerns about student differentiation, the need to motivate students, teaching writing and grammar, and classroom size.

Theoretic Foundations and Justification of the Current Research

The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) by David Kolb and Reflective Practice (RP) (Schön, 1983) provided lens for the current research. Kolb (2015) suggests a four-mode idealised learning cycle, covering phases of Concrete Experience and Abstract

**Journal of new advances in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)
Special Issue: Embracing Compassion-Based Approach: Needs to Redefine Education in
Emerging Dawn for Gen Z Students (2025)**

Conceptualization for gaining exposure and experience and Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation for transforming them. The second pillar, on the other hand, encourages critical thinking including reflection-in-action requiring thinking on feet and reflection-on-action necessitating looking back for a better realisation of self and continuous professional development (Schön, 1983). In line with the cycle above and the potential of reflection-on-action, following a one- semester preparatory period, the researcher encouraged the pre-service teachers to devise and conduct lesson plans in a collaborative manner with their friends and then reflect on both their own and peers' experiences hopefully yielding to new understandings, realisations, and insights. Such experiential and reflective processes could equip future teacher with related knowledge and skills and increase their self-confidence (Bratoz, 2015; Sabgini & Khoiriyah, 2010).

In line with the English integration into Western European primary schools 25 years ago (Rich, 2019), Turkey did not lag behind this trend of lowering the age of foreign language learning (Damar et al., 2013; Kirkgoz, 2008, 2019) and contributing to the related literature. Yet, the abundance of global and local studies exploring views, professional development needs, understandings of innovations, instructional practices, challenges of in-service TEYL teachers (Copland et al., 2014; Gursoy et al., 2013; Incecay, 2012; Kirkgoz, 2008; Yıldız & Savascı, 2024; Zein, 2017) points to the need to complete the existing understanding with further studies on pre-service teacher perspective (Reynolds et al., 2021; Yaman, 2019). Review studies also document the research trend to take in-service teachers as the research context (see, Gungor & Eksi, 2019). To complicate the matter even further, the existing courses on TEYL are reported not to move beyond declarative knowledge to include procedural one, lack concrete teaching steps, do not model example lessons at the outset, do not offer feedback for mock lessons, and lack concrete grading rubric for those simulated practices, thereby lacking the potential to draw a realistic picture of the field (Gungor, 2016; Raya et al., 2024). However,

teacher is the most important factor in children's education (Shin & Crandall, 2013), and pre-service teacher training is one factor determining TEYL effectiveness (Kırkgoz, 2008). Studies exploring the perceptions and impact of reflective training models could furnish the needs of related parties, i.e., teacher educators, to take informed decisions to meet pre-service teachers' needs, address their concerns, reach desired outcomes as well as close the well-documented gap between theory and practice (Gungor, 2016; Gursoy et al., 2013; Raya et al., 2024). Therefore, guided by the following research questions, the current study aimed at implementing a TEYL course in line with ELT and RP, exploring the perceptions of pre-service teachers towards TEYL as well as the possible impact of a simulated classroom practice on their professional development, who stepped into the world of young English learners for the first time (Gungor, 2016), and suggesting practical implantations for teacher educators to turn their TEYL programs into active learning hemispheres:

1. How did the TEYL course influence pre-service English teachers' self-reported perceptions and conceptualisations of teaching English to young learners?
2. What were the self-reported contributions of the simulated classroom experiences to their professional development and emerging teacher identities?
3. What insights, challenges, and future-oriented understandings did they self-report?

MATERIALS and METHODS

Research Design

The current study was devised as action research referring to the attempt of "acquiring new knowledge with using the knowledge to achieve a specific purpose" (Neuman, 2014, p. 30). The related literature has pointed to the problematic nature of TEYL pre-service training procedure, which cannot go beyond declarative knowledge to include procedural one, lack concrete teaching steps, do not model example lessons at the outset, do not offer feedback for

mock lessons, and lack concrete grading rubric for those simulated practices, thereby lacking the potential to draw a realistic picture of the field (Gungor, 2016; Raya et al., 2024). As a short-term and small-scale investigation addressing a particular concern and allowing making decisions on the findings (Neuman, 2014), in the current research, the researcher in the role of a pracademic, i.e., a practitioner and academician, attempted to find a solution for a well-documented problem. Overall, the current study could be qualified as a proactive practical classroom-based action research study (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019) due to the researcher's practical concerns to improve her teacher educator practice and enhance pre-service teachers' practical experiences within her own context, the cyclical and iterative nature of the study, and the participants' critical insights as the feedback mechanism shaping subsequent decisions and actions of the researcher.

Setting and Participants

The researcher working as a fully-fledged staff member at a 4-year full-time pre-service EFL teacher training programme at a state university in Türkiye collected the data from thirty-four 3rd grade pre-service teachers (F=20; M=14). To obtain a teacher's license, they were supposed to complete a 155-hour course programme (CoHE 2018a, b). The two-term core methodology course, i.e., Teaching English to Young Learners I and II, was offered in the V. and VII semesters and aimed at increasing their content knowledge. While in the first term, they gained knowledge on the distinguishing characteristics of young learners, related misconceptions, their learning styles, and possible activity types and visual-auditory materials, in the consecutive term, they were supposed to learn different types of programs, i.e., story-based, content-based, theme-based, and task-based, effective literature use, and principles of classroom management.

The documented limitations of the existing TEYL (Gungor, 2016; Raya et al., 2024) inspired the researcher to devise a syllabus that activated the pre-service teachers through the ELT by Kolb (2015) and RP (Schön, 1983). As initial teacher education is supposed to help “teachers think and act in informed, critical, purposeful, context-sensitive, and innovative ways” (Raya et al., 2024, p.6), a combination of theory and practice is needed. Therefore, while one term was solely dedicated to ensure a complete theoretical preparation, the pre-service teachers were expected to develop teacher autonomy and reflective teacher identity within a community of practice in the succeeding term.

Data Gathering and Analysis

The qualitative data were gathered through self-reports in the form of open-ended questionnaires and reflective entries. However, the current study reported the data from the former, which helped the researcher gather rich data with 3 questions on demographic and background information and 9 clarification questions (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2023). Although the total number of the sample was 46, thirty-four volunteers (F=20; M=14) filled in and uploaded their self-reports on the institutional Learning Management System.

Qualitative data analysis was used to analyse, classify, and interpret electronically stored linguistic data to explore participant experiences and identify the underlying meanings (Flick, 2014). The researcher conducted manual coding (Gupta, 2024; Julien, 2008). During the manual coding, in the first cycle, the researcher familiarised herself with the electronic data through reading the same answers of all several times line by line to start reducing and coded them question by question. She created related categories of those identified codes in the second cycle (Miles et al., 2014). Lastly, she used representative excerpts from the crude data to support her interpretations (Gupta, 2024).

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The results of the content analysis are presented in the order of the research questions.

Perceptions towards TEYL: Possible Perception Evolvement

The analysis yielded to four broad perception categories, as is tabulated with grand themes and participant codes in Table 1.

Table 1.
Perception evolvement

Theme/Category	Indicator	Participant Code
No Perceptual Shift yet Growth in Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills	-No change in overall views of TEYL yet increase in awareness and knowledge of learner characteristics and the techniques to be used	-P2, P6, P7, P8, P9, P11, P15, P17, P18, P20, P22, P23, P24, P25, P28, P30, P32, P34
The Arduous and Multifaceted Nature of TEYL	-Requires deep knowledge of YL characteristics, attention, dedication, and patience	-P12, P14, P16, P19, P21, P26, P27, P29, P31, P33
The Far-reaching Scope of TEYL beyond Grammar and Vocabulary	-The need to foster holistic language development	-P5, P10, P13, P19
The Pivotal Role of Engaging Tools, Activities, and Materials	-The need to gamify the whole process and incorporate drama for motivation, engagement, and learning retention	-P1, P4, P11

As is seen in the tabulated analysis above, more than half (n=18) highlighted that the process did not result in any perceptual changes yet underlined its role in increasing their knowledge regarding characteristics of young learners, lesson planning and material design, classroom management, and possible texts and tools to be used. Besides, they reported self-confidence increase in designing activities and materials in line with those of characteristics yet concerns due to lack of school practicum:

I must say that this lesson was really useful. Before, of course, I had general knowledge about what young children were like, but thanks to this course, I had the chance to get detailed information on this subject. I learned how we should prepare lessons according to the characteristics of the children and how we can teach

**Journal of new advances in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)
Special Issue: Embracing Compassion-Based Approach: Needs to Redefine Education in
Emerging Dawn for Gen Z Students (2025)**

English without boring them. I already knew that teaching English was not just about taking a class and teaching words to children, but with the contributions of this course, I understood very well that we need to design and realize our lessons according to their needs and characteristics. (P28)

Yet, several (n=10) underlined the role of the process combining concrete experiences in simulated classroom atmosphere, getting feedback, and reflection-on-action attempts on their recognition of the arduous and multi-faceted nature of TEYL. They stated that before taking the course and conducting mock lessons, they thought that there were not particular instructional techniques tailored for TEYL.

Other than these two broad themes, there were a few who underlined their perceptual shift in that they thought they were supposed to teach grammar and vocabulary in a direct manner, and some reported that the process helped them realise the key role of gamifying language instruction and utilising drama activities to ensure student engagement and learning recall.

To explore the participants' TEYL conceptualisations in-depth, the participants were asked to create metaphors. They created a total of thirty-three metaphors, which fall in three broad categories, including ambivalent attitudes (n=19), neutral stance (n=13), and negative attitudes (n=1). More than half of the participants (58%) conceptualised TEYL in a nuanced way, in that while they emphasised how rewarding, enriching, and transformative it is to start at an early age, they underlined various inherent challenges such as the need for age-appropriate materials and activities, difficulty to attract attention and ensure lasting engagement as well as problems with classroom management. The remaining 40 % touched upon solely the structural process of instructing, without evaluating its nature, while only one participant touched upon only difficulties and learner resistance. The following two metaphors can best exemplify the predominantly ambivalent attitudes, highlighting its rewarding yet arduous nature:

TEYL is like painting because even if it looks very beautiful from the outside, it requires experience and experience in addition to knowledge such as geometry, perspective, colour theory, to create that work. (P10)

TEYL is like carrying an egg on a spoon because teaching English to young children is a very sensitive and valuable job and even our smallest mistake can cause problems. (P12)

The Impact of the Process on Teacher Professional Development

The Construction of a Professional Teacher Identity

In exploring professional teacher identity construction, three levels of self-confidence were observed, as is tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2.
Teacher identity development

Theme/Category	Indicator	Participant Code
Absolute Self-Confidence	-Self-recognition of development through pre-service training	-P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P5, P18, P19, P20, P24, P27, P28, P29, P32, P33
	-Real teaching experience	-P13, P19, P20
	-Positive feedback from others	-P2
Reserved/Cautious Self-Confidence	-Lack of real classroom experience	-P3, P4, P30, P31
	-Lack of voice quality	-P16
	-No personal interest in TEYL	-P17
	-Natural characteristics of children	-P21
	-Shy personality yielding to classroom management problems	-P22
	-Need for further competencies	-P26
	-Difficulty to prepare engaging activities and materials	-P34
Lack of Self-Confidence	-Lack of real classroom experience	-P7
	-Teacher impatience	-P23
	-Demanding nature of TEYL	-P23

While 65% of the participants (n=23) developed absolute self-confident TEYL teacher identity without any reservations, 29% (n=10) were found to develop a cautiously self-confident teacher identity. The remaining 6% (n=2) were found to lack a self-confident teacher identity. Those self-confident ones highlighted the importance of pre-service teacher training (n=22) and teaching experience (n=3). Those cautious ones touched upon the lack of a real teaching experience and some personal issues.

Journal of new advances in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)
Special Issue: Embracing Compassion-Based Approach: Needs to Redefine Education in
Emerging Dawn for Gen Z Students (2025)

In addition to the development of teacher self-identity, they were asked to elaborate on a high-impact teacher identity, as is tabulated below.

Table 3.

Ideal TEYL teacher identity

Theme/Category	Indicator	Participant Code
Effective Instructional Practices	-Engaging activities (games, songs, drama)	-P4, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P16, P17, P19, P21, P22, P23, P25, P28, P30, P31
	-Creative and colourful materials	-P7, P10, P13, P16, P18, P27, P28, P30, P32
	-Kinaesthetic activities	-P5, P7, P13, P17, P28, P33
	-Initial attention	-P3, P5, P27, P32, P33
	-Revisions	-P7, P18, P19
	-Voice quality	-P19, P24, P33, P34
	-Here-and-now principle	-P5
	-Limiting the number of activities and target words	-P3, P12
	-Body language and gestures	-P4
	-Harmony with curricular objectives	-P17
Student-Centred Approach	-Attention to developmental features	-P10, P11, P14, P17, P18, P28, P29, P34
	-Attention to students' wishes and needs	-P2, P15, P22
	-Attention to learner differences	-P11, P30, P31
	-Knowing students well	-P7, P15, P19
	-Giving balanced incentives	-P22, P27
	-Motivating students	-P27
	-Engaging disinterested ones	-P2
Classroom Management	-Fine-tuned classroom language	-P3, P4, P7, P11, P12, P13, P18, P19, P26, P28
	-Fine-tuned classroom authority	-P7, P8, P9, P21, P25, P32
	-Classroom rules	-P7
	-Systematic and controlled L1 use	-P4, P11, P12, P21
Professional Development	-Openness to continuous PD	-P15, P16, P22
	-Reflection-in-action	-P16, P31
	-Technology competency	-P16, P22
	-Theoretical knowledge	-P29
	-Feedback from students	-P2
Personal Attributes	-Patience	-P3, P19, P21, P23, P26
	-Love & Care	-P2, P20, P26, P31
	-Empathy	-P23, P34
	-Courage	-P24, P27
	-Non-judgemental nature	-P22, P30
	-Fairness	-P15
	-Creativity	-P22

As is seen in Table 3, the nature of activities and materials, i.e., those in line with students' proficiency, developmental features, wishes and needs, and curricular objectives, was given utmost importance to ensure successful outcomes (n=24). Besides, a high-impact teacher identity was described to include a good classroom management, including behaviour management and fine-tuned L2 and L2 use (n=15). Other than these two, a high-impact teacher was described as one who could put students in the centre by taking their development features, learner differences, and wishes and needs into account (n=15). Various personal attributes were highlighted by several (n=15). Lastly, several touched upon the importance of a continuous professional development to ensure successful outcomes (n=7).

Concrete Experiences and New Understandings and Insights

The participants self-reported various challenges during their mock lessons in pairs in simulated classroom atmosphere, which fall into four categories, including lesson design and content challenges, classroom environment and management, teacher-related challenges, and positive experiences. The challenges of lesson design and content covered devising materials above student levels (P11, P12, P14), materials below student level (P13), difficulty to devise creative and colourful activities (P27, P28), lesson plans covering the objectives of the upcoming units (P17), lesson plans with too many objectives and target words (P3), problems with wrap-up (P28), and limited topics assigned for mock lessons (P1). Classroom environment and management problems included difficulty to give clear and simple instructions (P10, P11, P15, P16, P20, P21, P22, P27, P28, P31, P32, P33), simulated classroom atmosphere not reflecting the reality (P1, P6, P13, P17, P23, P29, P30), time management (P10, P19, P27), weak classroom discipline (P18, P22), overuse of L1 (P21), and inability to create the desired impact on the classroom (P8). Teacher-related challenges, on the other hand, included issues

such as teaching anxiety (P5, P21), low voice quality (P7), problems with pairs (P8, P24), tendency to get discouraged easily (P8, P19), low teaching energy (P27), difficulty to speak in a warm tone (P33), being the first to conduct mock lessons (P25), not taking TEYL I as a pre-requirement. Other than those, three (P2, P24, P26) stated that they had positive mock lesson experience, without referring to any challenges.

On the other hand, their new understandings and insights in their reports of mock lesson experiences were explored, which fall into two broad categories as classroom management and environment and lesson plan design and implementation. The first category included the need to use a fine-tuned classroom language and clear instruction (P4, P9, P10, P11, P20, P21, P22, P27, P31, P32), good classroom management (P9), careful time-management (P10), and teacher energy (P8, P27). The second category included connections and smooth transitions between activities (P28, P34), the need for a contingency plan (P9), the need to limit the number of objectives and target words/structures (P3, P4), materials and activities in line with student level (P11, P14), a wrap-up (P16), fine-tuned grammar instruction (P30), and materials not covering the objectives and target structures of the upcoming units (P4, P17).

Impact of Conducting Mock Lessons in Pairs, Getting Feedback, and Reflecting on PD

As is tabulated in Table 4, the process was reported to contribute to them in mainly three areas, yet a few were found to develop negative attitudes towards conducting mock lessons in pairs for communication problems and personal attributes (P16, P19, P29) and were concerned about simulated learning atmosphere not reflecting reality (P1).

Table 4.

Impact of the process on PD

Theme/Category	Indicator	Participant Code
Professional Learning	-Learning from others and testing them	-P2, P3, P4, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P21, P22, P26, P27, P28, P29, P30, P31, P32, P34
	-Evaluating self-performance	-P3, P5, P7, P9, P10, P12, P16, P19, P18, P22, P27, P33, P34
	-Compensating self-mistakes and lacks	-P4, P7, P22, P27
	-Adopting diverse roles as a teacher, a student, and an evaluator	-P20
Affective Development	-Lowering teaching anxiety	-P1, P33
	-Increasing self-confidence	-P5, P24
	-Empathising with students	-P15, P20
First-hand Experience	-Experiencing lesson planning and implementation	-P1, P8, P16, P17, P18, P22, P23, P25, P28, P31, P32

The process seemed to give them teaching ideas (n=23) and helped them evaluate their self-performance (n=13) based on the comments made to the mock lessons of their peers. This, in turn, helped them compensate their weaknesses (n=4). Additionally, eleven highlighted the importance of having first-hand experience, while six underlined its role to help them emotionally.

On the other hand, they were also asked whether reflecting upon their peers had an impact on their PD, and the answers showed that almost half (n=14; 44%) were negative for diverse reasons. They reported that they already had heard the lecturer's evaluations in the classroom immediately after the mock lessons (P13, P17, P19, P23, P25, P26); wrote as a formal requirement without internal motivation (P8, P14, P30); did not benefit as they could not see their peers' evaluations (P14, P17, P19); spent much time on them (P9, P16); lost their interest in time (P11, P12, P23); wanted to get teacher feedback on their evaluations (P9); and did not go beyond quantifying their peers' performance (P31). However, the positive ones (n=18) highlighted some benefits, including developing higher-order thinking skills (P2, P4, P5, P10, P15, P18, P29, P30, P32); learning from others' mistakes (P1, P3, P4, P7, P11, P20, P22, P27,

P32, P33); getting ideas for the future (P2, P18, P20, P28); compensating their weaknesses (P21, P33); attending lessons regularly (P10); and permanent learning (P18, P22, P33).

Anticipated Challenges and Ways to Address Them

The anticipated challenges were categorised into three broad themes, including external issues, student-related issues, and teacher-related issues. External issues included ineffective instructional materials (P2, P9, P10, P12, P19, P21, P22, P23, P24, P27, P28, P31); poor technological infrastructure of schools (P2, P3, P12, P17, P20, P27, P29, P31); crowded classrooms (P3, P4, P7, P13, P14, P17, P18, P19, P24, P32, P33); heavily exam-oriented system neglecting English (P11, P19, P21, P28, P31); parents' indifference and negative mindset (P2, P3, P9, P12, P17, P27, P28); lack of exposure outside classroom borders (P3, P4, P11, P13, P28); problems with the school administration (P4, P9, P19, P26, P29); constant system revisions (P1, P17, P28); overprotective and over communicative parents (P8, P15, P17, P29); limited class hours (P10, P11); overcrowded curriculum (P19); expensive stationary products (P17); inconsistencies between pre-service teacher training and classroom realities (P14); no separate TEYL classrooms (P21); clash between the national exam-oriented system and language curriculum (P22); and physically small classrooms (P4). On the other hand, student-related issues were low motivation (P3, P12, P27, P34); low proficiency (P5, P16, P25, P29, irregular student attendance for economic problems (P9, P23, P25); tendency to overuse L1 (P2, P4, P28); short attention span (P12, P17); overcrowded classrooms with foreigners (P5, P33); attention deficit and hyperactivity (P15, P18); and learner differences. Lastly, teacher-related issues should be understood as the use of old methods and techniques (P2, P31); inability to use technology (P2); and not using L2 (P2). The results show that anticipated challenges were dominantly those out of their control.

Finally, the ways they offered to face those challenges categorized above could fall into three groups, as classroom management, stakeholder engagement, and resourcefulness and innovation. Classroom management covered limiting L1 use (P2, P4, P13, P28); leveraging short and varied activities (P12, P15, P18, P33); using innovative ways to ensure authority (P7, P14, P24, P32); utilizing collaborative learning (P18); dividing classrooms (P14); using rewards and incentives (P13); and devising contingency plan (P32). Stakeholder engagement included a good and fine-tuned communication with parents (P3, P8, P9, P12, P15, P27, P28, P30, P31); a good communication with the school administration (P4, P9, P17, P21, P26, P27, P29, P31); the attempt of taking students' wishes, expectations, and individual differences into consideration (P2, P25, P29, P30); good interaction with students (P25); interculturally sensitive lesson plans to include foreigners (P33); and peer collaboration (P26). The last category included teacher-devised materials to serve students (P2, P12, P19, P20); extra-curricular activities (P4, P10, P23); adapted existing materials (P10, P22, P24, P28); an English club (P4); a TEYL classroom (P16); and revision of pre-service teacher training curriculum informed by an analysis of language curriculum of successful countries (P16).

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The current study aimed at exploring the impact of a TEYL methodology course in line with ELT (Kolb, 2015) and RP (Schön, 1983) on the pre-service teachers' perceptions and professional development. It was found that while there was no significant perceptual evolution, there was almost complete agreement on the role of the experiential and reflective process on their awareness of young children's world, knowledge, and teaching skills. Still, they were found to have an ambivalent attitude towards TEYL, in that it was found rewarding yet challenging, thereby requiring utmost care. This supports the study of Yaman (2019), who found Turkish pre-service teachers in their final year to be aware of the enjoyable and key yet

challenging status of TEYL. The current research also supports the study of Bratoz (2015), who found that pre-service teachers found TEYL quite challenging. Additionally, they all welcome the experiential process which equipped them well with knowledge and skills and contributed to the development of a self-confident teacher identity. Their conceptualisation of a high-impact teacher with effective instructional practices and a good classroom management was found in line with their teacher identity development.

Additionally, stepping into the world of young learners for the first time through first-hand experiences allowed them to experience various predominantly external challenges and understand the importance of stakeholder engagement, teacher resourcefulness, good classroom management, simple and clear instructions, and a good time management. The findings that one predominant concern was classroom management corroborates with the study of Cakır and Gungor (2017). Similarly, the findings support those of Sabgini and Khoiriyah (2010), who found that after a process of video recording microteachings and self-reflecting upon them, the preservice teachers managed to identify their weakness, particularly in classroom management and teaching skills. Besides, the process satisfied them as they found it meaningful and built their self-confidence. That self-reported lack of self-confidence regarding classroom management points to the need for a focus on related strategies in teacher education (Copland et al., 2014). However, two studies differ in that their participants were more positive about self-reflection which they found to help them prepare materials. However, in the current research, although they all found the lecturer comments immediately after the mock lessons quite useful, half did not find reflective writing beneficial for their professional development. Yet the positive stance of the other half supports previous research by Gungor (2016), who found that reflective practice through viewing video-recorded microteaching sessions, receiving feedback, writing reflective diaries, and negotiating lesson plans could allow pre-service

teachers to evaluate their teaching beliefs and practices and identify possible areas with room for improvement.

The current study also addresses commonalities between pre- and in-service English teachers. GURSOY et al. (2013) found that most teachers found the existing teaching hours insufficient for effective outcomes, which was voiced by the pre-service teacher in the present study. Additionally, similar to the pre-service teachers in the present study, in-service teachers supported taking young learner characteristics into consideration to have effective learning outcomes and ensure positive affective development. Additionally, the rewarding yet challenging nature of TEYL and the need for taking young learners' developmental features into consideration show that the pre-service managed to develop theoretically appropriate perceptions of TEYL, which supports GURSOY et al. (2013), who found that in reality. Furthermore, the foreseen challenges in the present study overlap with the challenges in the institutional, instructional, and socio-economic challenges in the field (Kızıldağ, 2009). Similarly, the pre-service teacher concerns about managing the classroom and engaging learners support those of in-service ones (see, for instance, Yıldız & Savasçı, 2024). Those findings both support and contradict the comparative findings of UZTOSUN (2016), who found that while both pre- and in-service teachers reported to be self-efficacious regarding giving simple instructions, their self-confidence to manage their classroom well was low.

The pre-service teachers in the current research were found to be aware of the developmental features of YLs and the importance of fluency. Therefore, they focused on the importance of speaking and listening and underlined the importance of using engaging instructional tools, text, and techniques such as drama, games, songs, and rhymes. The study contradicts with the study of OTHMAN and KIELY (2016), who explored pre-service tendency to use a structural-based approach to teach grammar and emphasise accuracy. It also contradicts

with the study of Singleton and Pfenninger (2019), who found that L1 is a good strategy to yield to subsequent foreign language learning.

Overall, the pracademic perspective of the researcher as well as her observations and informal talks with the participants could allow her to conclude that the experiential and reflective process successfully addressed the well-documented problem that pedagogy courses during initial teacher training lacks hands-on experience. This classroom implementation was observed to successfully empower pre-service teachers with practical TEYL skills and hands-on experience, as evidenced by the positive participant self-reported comments. Additionally, the pracademic was largely satisfied with her course of action combining mock teaching and feedback and engaging pre-service teachers in lesson planning cooperating, and practicing teaching. Yet, the negative comments and suggestions also show that the one-way reflective entry writing was not satisfactory for them, and it turned into a formal classroom requirement in time rather than a tool to enhance genuine professional development. Besides, despite positive teacher identity development and theoretical background, they were found to have continuous concerns about particularly managing the classroom and fine-tuning their use of English, which was unexpected and important insight. Therefore, that gap needs to be bridged with further actions by teacher educators via analysing real classroom scenarios, encouraging peer coaching, offering specific workshops focusing on classroom management and instruction-giving, and encouraging them to participate in related online forums and blogs, to list but a few. To conclude, this experiential and reflective process could be refined in the following years with more emphasis on classroom management techniques and instructional delivery through offering specific workshops, bringing authentic video excerpts taken from real classrooms, hosting in-service teachers to listen to their experiences and suggestions, analysing critical incidents, observing real classrooms, and doing small-group reflections moderated by the teacher educator. Lastly, the one-way nature of written reflections could be improved through

turning it into a dialogic one via responding back to them, allowing pre-service teachers to see how the others evaluated them, and using alternative modes such as face-to-face small group reflections.

Based on those findings, it could be concluded that pre-service teacher worries need to be addressed, for their positive stance determines success in the real field (Yaman, 2019). Promoting the expertise of TEYL teacher educators is of utmost importance due to their key position as the shaper of pre-service teacher support (Rich, 2019). Therefore, building a positive and self-confident teacher identity matters much in pre-service training. Contemplative practices addressing positive psychology such as mindfulness practice and guided meditation could be incorporated into initial teacher training. Such practices were documented to help pre-service teachers in times of crisis and in non-crisis situations through decreasing their stress, enhancing their resilience, increasing their inner peace, preparing them for learning, improving mental health, increasing innovation, comfort with challenges and new situations, and empathy as well as preventing teacher burnout (see, for instance, Birchinnall et al., 2019; Daza-Murcia, 2022; Hue & Lau, 2015). The participants also expressed their concerns about not experiencing a real TEYL classroom, and therefore, as is suggested by Gungor (2016), bringing in-service teacher videos with real classroom experience in Turkish or international settings could help them equip well for their future TEYL classrooms. The participants' pre-dominant concern, i.e., classroom management, needs to be understood as a two-dimension concept, namely instructional and behaviour management in which the former refers to attempts such as group organisation, seating arrangement, routine management, time management, instruction giving, task setting, feedback providing, and student monitoring, while the latter addresses unwanted situations and behaviours (Zein, 2019). It needs to be dealt from such a broader perspective during pre-service training.

Overall, findings indicate that the active and reflective process contributed to the self-reported professional development of participants. Yet, the fact that the study is limited to a single case and mainly relies on self-reported data does not allow grand generalisations beyond the specific context of the study.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, W., & Rixon, S. (2008). Materials for teaching English to young learners. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *English language learning materials* (pp. 38–58). Continuum International Publishing.
- Birchinall, L., Spendlove, D., & Buck, R. (2019). In the moment: Does mindfulness hold the key to improving the resilience and wellbeing of pre-service teachers? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 86, Art. No. 102919. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102919>
- Bratož S. (2015). Pre-service teachers' attitudes towards learning and teaching English to young learners. *Journal of Elementary Education*, 8(1/2), 181-198. <https://journals.um.si/index.php/education/article/view/423>
- Butler, Y. G. (2015). English language education among young learners in East Asia: A review of current research (2004–2014). *Language Teaching*, 48, 303–342. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000105>
- Cakır, A., & Gungor, M. N. (2017). Pre-service teachers' evaluation of practices in teaching English to young learners according to 21st century teacher qualifications. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(1), 244-259.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2014). Challenges in teaching English to young learners: Global perspectives and local realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(4), 738-762. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.148>
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge.
- Damar, E., GURSOY, E., & KORKMAZ, S. C. (2013). Teaching English to young learners: Through the eyes of EFL teacher trainers. *ELT Research Journal*, 2(3), 95-110.
- Daza-Murcia, L. M. (2022). Meditation practice: A welcome activity in a pre-service teacher education program during pandemic. *Revista de Psicología y Educación/Journal of Psychology and Education*, 17(1), 54-68. <https://doi.org/10.23923/rpye2022.01.216>
- Dörnyei, Z. & Dewaele, J.-M. (2023). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing*. (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Ellis, G. (2014). “Young learners”: Clarifying our terms. *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct062>
- Flick, U. (2014). Mapping the field. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 3-18). Sage.
- Johnstone, R. (2019). Language policy and English for young learners in early education. In S. Garton & F. Copland (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners* (pp.13-29). Routledge.
- Gungor, M. N. (2016). Turkish pre-service teachers' reflective practices in teaching English to young learners. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(2), 137-151. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2016v41n2.9>

Journal of new advances in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)
Special Issue: Embracing Compassion-Based Approach: Needs to Redefine Education in
Emerging Dawn for Gen Z Students (2025)

- Gungor, M. N., & Eksursoyi, G. (2019). A review of research on teaching English to young learners in EFL contexts (2008-2018). In G. Y. Ekşi, L. Guerra, D. Werbinska, & Y. Bayyurt (Eds.), *Research trends in English language teacher education and English language teaching* (pp. 481-504). University of Évora
- Gupta, A. (2024). *Qualitative methods and data analysis using ATLAS.ti: A comprehensive researchers' manual*. Springer.
- Gursoy, E., Korkmaz, S. C., & Damar, A. E. (2013). Foreign language teaching within 4+ 4+ 4 education system in Turkey: Language teachers' voice. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 53(1), 59-74.
- Hue, M. T., & Lau, N. S. (2015). Promoting well-being and preventing burnout in teacher education: A pilot study of a mindfulness-based programme for pre-service teachers in Hong Kong. *Teacher Development*, 19(3), 381-401.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2015.1049748>
- Incecay, G. (2012). Turkey's foreign language policy at primary level: Challenges in practice. *ELT Research Journal*, 1(1), 53-62.
- Julien, H. (2008). Content analysis. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 120-122). Sage.
- Kırkgoz, Y. (2019). Fostering young learners' listening and speaking skills. In S. Garton & F. Copland (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners* (pp. 171-187). Routledge.
- Kırkgoz, Y. (2008). A case study of teachers' implementation of curriculum innovation in English language teaching in Turkish primary education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(7), 1859-1875. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.02.007>
- Kızıldag, A. (2009). Teaching English in Turkey: Dialogues with teachers about the challenges in public primary schools. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 1(3), 188-201.
- Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Moon, J. (2000). *Children learning English*. Macmillan Heinemann.
- Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- Othman, J., & Kiely, R. (2016) Preservice teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching English to young learners. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 6 (1), 50-59.
- Privitera, G., J., & Ahlgrim-Delzell, L. (2019). *Research methods for education*. Sage.
- Raya, M. J., Vázquez, B. M., & Vieira, F. (2024). Bridging the gap between theory and practice in initial teacher education for autonomy. In M. J. Raya, B. M. Vázquez & F. Vieira (Eds.), *Pedagogies for autonomy in language teacher education: Perspectives on professional learning, identity, and agency* (pp. 1-11). Routledge.
- Reynolds, B. L., Liu, S., Milosavljevic, M., Ding, C., & McDonald, J. (2021). Exploring pre-service pre-primary EFL teacher beliefs about teaching English to very young learners: A Macau case study. *Sage Open*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211052932>
- Rich, S. (2019). Early language learning teacher education. In S. Garton & F. Copland (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners* (pp.44-59). Routledge.
- Rich, S. (2014). Taking stock: Where are we now with TEYL? In S. Rich (Ed.), *International perspectives on teaching English to young learners* (pp. 1-19). Palgrave Macmillan.

**Journal of new advances in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)
Special Issue: Embracing Compassion-Based Approach: Needs to Redefine Education in
Emerging Dawn for Gen Z Students (2025)**

- Sabgini, K. N. W., & Khoiriyah, K. (2020). The pre-service teachers' reflection in English for young learners teaching practice. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 8(2), 311-322.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Shin, J. K., & Crandall, J. (2013). *Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice*. National Geographic Learning.
- Singleton, D., & Pfenninger, S. E. (2019). The age debate: A critical overview. In S. Garton & F. Copland (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners* (pp.30-43). Routledge.
- Uztosun, M. S. (2016). Pre-service and in-service English teachers' efficacy beliefs about teaching English at primary schools. *Elementary Education Online*, 15(4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17051/ieo.2016.80068>
- Yaman, I. (2019). Exploring pre-service English language teachers' perceptions about "teaching English to young learners" through metaphors. *IJOEEC (International Journal of Eurasian Education and Culture)*, 4(7), 141-157.
- Yıldız, G. R., & Savasçı, M. (2024). Navigating Turkish EFL teachers' perceived challenges with very young learners. *Language Teaching and Educational Research (LATER)*, 7(1), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.35207/later.1356067>
- Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Council of Higher Education] (2018a). İngilizce öğretmenliği lisans programı [Undergraduate program of English language teaching]. https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Kurumsal/egitim_ogretim_dairesi/Yeni-Ogretmen-Yetistirme-Lisans-Programlari/Ingilizce_Ogretmenligi_Lisans_Programi.pdf
- Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Council of Higher Education] (2018b). Öğretmen yetiştirme lisans programları [Teacher education undergraduate programs]. https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Kurumsal/egitim_ogretim_dairesi/Yeni-Ogretmen-Yetistirme-Lisans-Programlari/AA_Sunus_%20Onsoz_Uygulama_Yonergesi.pdf
- Zein, M. S. (2017). Professional development needs of primary EFL teachers: Perspectives of teachers and teacher educators. *Professional Development in Education*, 43(2), 293-313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2016.1156013>
- Zein, S. (2019). Classroom management for teaching English to young learners. In S. Garton & F. Copland (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners* (pp. 154-168). Routledge.