



Foreign Language Teachers' Conceptions of Improvisation *

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Abstract

As teachers gather experience and knowledge, a shift towards a degree of flexibility in teaching and the development of the ability to improvise occur. With specific relation to knowledge base, teacher autonomy, and responsibility, the teachers experience severe challenges throughout their improvisational practices. Therefore, improvisation is suggested to be a part of teacher education. This article is based on a qualitative case study of teachers' conceptions of improvisation in teaching and specific characteristics of how improvisation in teaching is conceived. Empirical data were gathered from 10 in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' interviews. The transcripts were analyzed according to open-coding procedure. Results of the study revealed that foreign language teachers have a wide range of conceptions regarding this specific topic. Their conceptions are mostly positive; however, they also highlight some negative conceptions which can cause problems in teaching and teaching quality.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter of the 21st Century 1970s and 1980s, the qualities of a good teacher received attention in the field of educational research. For this specific purpose, teachers with experience were compared with the recently graduated ones, and the findings revealed that experienced teachers have their routines and whereas novice ones tended to act through standard sequences of tasks and activities. Another finding was about the skill of experienced teachers regarding how to improvise to respond to the needs in a specific classroom, which leads to spending less time to planning in comparison to new teachers (Berliner & Tikunoff, 1976; Borko & Livingston, 1989; Yinger, 1987). With this skill that blooms when teachers need to learn to work under uncertainty because this type of instruction involves some improvisation (Knight et al., 2015), teaching quality rather than teacher quality has gained more significance.

However, there is not still any agreement regarding the definition of improvisation as a teaching skill. A variety of descriptions ranging from the ability to reflect on action to performance of instruction has been noted. From this wide range of descriptions, it can be elicited that teachers' conceptions and improvisational skills have to be related to what to-do in class and teaching quality.

IMPROVISATION AS A CONCEPT AND A TEACHING SKILL

Improvisation as a word comes from the Latin root "improvisus", meaning "the unforeseen" (Montuori, 2003, p. 24) or "to provide the unexpected" (Dehlin, 2008, p. 25). It is applicable when daily routines or schedules do not work as they are planned, or when something unforeseen occurs in an intuitive and spontaneous manner. This concept is valid for many professions (e.g. drama, art, music, education) (Holdhus et al., 2016); however, in education, not much focus has been attributed to different features of it.

To improvise, in education, has frequently been accepted as an applied teaching skill that can be developed or learned throughout career. As commonly argued, the fact that improvisation is an integral part of daily life has to be considered as well (Dehlin, 2008).

On the other hand, there has still been no consensus regarding the definition of teaching skill. As Karlsen (2006) put forth, being skilled at improvisation, the teacher is expected to have the ability to make on-site decisions to solve any encountered problems. In other words, teachers' conceptions and improvisational practice have to be in line with the discussions regarding value-based instructions, curriculum content and teaching skills.

Being a recent topic in the field of education, the theory behind improvisation actually dates back to early traditions. The major reason underlying this situation is the separation between theory about teaching as a pedagogical skill and the teaching of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986; van Driel & Berry, 2010). To exemplify, there is a vast amount of literature on the teaching of improvisation as a skill, however, this literature does not necessarily provide improvisational teaching skills (Whitcomb, 2013, p. 44).

As a result of this theoretical foundation, teaching has been recognized to be improvisational (Dezutter, 2011). However, teachers have to be trained about the methods, techniques and strategies to identify, experience and apply improvisation for pedagogical purposes (Dezutter, 2011). In a sense, Pedagogical Improvisation (PI) involves simultaneous decision making and on-site action within a pedagogical setting. Pedagogical improvisation can activate during instruction while choosing a teaching method, giving examples or making use of body language.

As argued by Sawyer (2011, p.1) "Great teaching" mostly governed by rules, principles, standards and structure that have been developed with experience, including improvisational practices. Therefore, it wouldn't be incorrect to say that teachers with more experience are better at

improvising since they spend less time planning their lessons and are more likely to use improvisational techniques.

IMPROVISATION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Improvisation is claimed to encourage foreign language learners to be active in the learning process. Since it is practical to conduct the activities through improvisation, Wilson (2008) states that it requires very little time for both teachers and the learners. Moreover, the activities, which are implemented with improvisation in language classrooms, are not so demanding for the learners as “the language required to carry out these improvisation tasks is not difficult, and the students will not be frustrated by trying to say something that is beyond their ability” (Wilson, 2008, p. 31). Improvisation is used as “intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way” in foreign language classrooms (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997, p. 155). Thus, foreign language learners apply their own language skills and competence to be involved in a meaningful communication in a classroom. This is also evident in the definition provided by Berk and Trieber (2009, p.30). They define improvisation as “a conversational skill that, like other social and interactive skills, can be taught.”

Using improvisation as a teaching tool in a classroom is also suggested since it offers an opportunity to come up with a variety of answers during the classroom activities. Additionally, “the instructor does not evaluate any given response but instead facilitates the improvisation process among the students, with the goal of guiding them toward discovery of their own knowledge (Berk & Trieber, 2009, p. 30). “The atmosphere, in which improvisational teaching is dominant, is invaluable because of the fact that “all students get to express themselves creatively, to play together, to have their ideas honored, and to have their mistakes forgiven.” (Berk & Trieber, 2009, p. 30).

Moreover, improvisation is accepted as an instrument to enhance students’ problem-solving skills by developing their intellectual development (Sawyer, 2004). As Kostrhonová (2011) stated, using improvisation in language classroom activities, especially in speaking activities can help students be more creative and provide an alternative way for students to present their ideas by connecting the role which is given them to improvise with their own experience by improving the way of thinking and using their attitudes.

The current study was concerned with the improvisational conceptions of foreign language teachers in Turkey where improvisation received not much attention. In order to introduce the concept to national literature and add to international literature from a glocal perspective, present study is significant with a qualitative research design aiming at receiving in depth data regarding the Turkish teachers’, who are teaching English as a foreign language, conceptions of this naïve concept.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

Current study was designed as a collective case study in a qualitative manner. Collective case study design was most appropriate for our research because we gathered data from several practitioners who were not collocated to examine our phenomena (Stake 2000).

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were ten teachers of English working in a university’s language preparation program. They were selected by purposeful sampling or strategic sampling since they were assumed to provide useful insights about the topic (Johannessen, Tufte, & Kristoffersen, 2010, p. 160; Merriam, 2009, p. 77-78; Patton, 2002). All participants were female and teaching English as a Foreign Language for more than 5 years. They all held an MA degree in the field of English language teaching.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were gathered through nine open-ended questions. The questions were prepared, and assigned to participants after an intensive preparation process. At first, a pool of questions with approximately twenty questions was prepared, and these questions were sent to external scrutiny for content, and construct validity. After they provided feedback, some questions were eliminated, some others combined and some new ones were added. In order to check the reliability of the questions, the prepared list of questions was assigned to five EFL teachers. After an informal negotiation on the meaning and intelligibility of questions with the piloting participants, nine questions were decided to be used as data gathering instrument (see Appendix).

These questions were sent to participants through e-mail as a word document and they were asked to respond each question in detail. All participants sent back their responses the other day. Information received through written responses of the participants were analyzed with pattern coding strategy and content analysis. Trustworthiness of the data was checked through the implementation of the criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994).

DATA ANALYSIS

The aim of this study was to investigate the conceptions of Turkish EFL teachers regarding improvisation. With this purpose in mind, the answers given to nine open-ended questions were analyzed through content analysis and pattern coding strategies.

RESEARCHERS' ROLES AND ETHICS

First author has made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data. The second author has been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

In order to ensure the ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

FINDINGS

CONCEPTIONS ABOUT PEDAGOGICAL IMPROVISATION

Responses about what pedagogical improvisation (PI) is, revealed a variety of concepts. Flexibility in the classroom, ability to adapt whatever is known, instant production and performance depending on the situation, ability of gathering existing pieces together in teaching, being able to collect and assemble existing things in a new combination, new ways to do something, changing the routine and finding and adapting new methods in the classroom, and on-spot-process to encourage students. Following quotations demonstrating the participating EFL teachers' responses may help better understanding their conceptions.

"Pedagogical improvisation is all about being free from strict plan and curriculum. This leads to being flexible in the classroom. And if a teacher feels flexible, this helps him try new ways, new methods to change the routine."

"Adapting what is known, and putting all the pieces together for better teaching can be called as PI."

CONCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING SKILLS CHARACTERIZED AS IMPROVISATIONAL

The participating EFL teachers' conceptions about improvisational teaching skills showed that teacher's being a dramatizer, ability to make spontaneous decisions (N=2), ability to solve problems (N=4), giving concrete instruction, providing spontaneous responses, creativity (N=3), time management, class management, self-confidence (N=2), critical thinking, ability to cope with

unexpected situations (N=2) and being practical are the skills a teacher who is improvisational should have. The quotations directly taken from the written responses explains these conceptions better.

“If you are skillful in terms of improvisation, this means that you are able to make spontaneous decisions to solve problems that might occur while teaching.”

“For a teacher to be called as skilled enough to use improvisation as an instrument, that teacher should be good at time and classroom management, should be self-confident as well.”

CONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL / LIMITATIONS OF IMPROVISATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Another question aimed at eliciting participants' conceptions regarding the potential and limitations of implementing improvisational knowledge while teaching. Potentials that were commonly noted are; gives chance to create a new world, creates a classroom beyond its walls, leads to broad imagination and creativity, adapting the lesson according to student needs instead of following standard lesson plans. On the contrary, overuse of improvisation demonstrates a low level of professionalism, can lead to being unplanned and missing the routine, leads to responsive teaching are the agreed limitations. The potentials and the limitations of improvisational knowledge are explained amenably in the below vignettes.

“It provides a classroom which encourages broad imagination and creativity.”

“The teacher is autonomous to meet the needs of the students being independent of the strict curriculum.”

“If improvisation is overused while teaching, it can lead the teacher to miss the routine, get used to being unplanned.”

CONCEPTIONS ABOUT IMPROVISATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

In addition to the participants' conceptions of improvisation in teaching, how they perceive improvisation in language teaching was also investigated. The conceptions elicited are as follows; creates a pathway and guides students for real life language use (N=2), may boost students' speaking skills (N=2), leads to spontaneous language performance, gives opportunity to use language in a context, promotes communication, leads students overcome their low self-esteem and fear of making mistake.

All of these concepts are stated in the following quotations taken from informants' responses.

“By being away from unreal language use, improvisation leads to authentic language use which in turn helps them overcome their low self-esteem and fear of making mistake.”

“Using improvisation in language classroom boost students' speaking skills because of the integration of communicative language teaching, and using language in context.”

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES OF IMPROVISATION IN TEACHING

Another area that was explored was about the informants' conceptions of improvisational teaching's strengths and weaknesses. Strengths were listed as; causes accumulation of experience for improvisation (N=2), leads to an authentic teaching environment, enables teacher to use her potential, increases creativity and confidence (N=2), beneficial for the learners, helps students overcome speaking anxiety. On the other hand, improvisational teaching was believed to require some skills and knowledge which also appeared in participants' responses as negative conceptions; teacher has to be skillful, requires high content and pedagogical content knowledge, depends on teachers' improvisational skill.

“I cannot think of any weakness actually since it is the way of authentic teaching which increases the creativity of both learners and the teacher. This also helps learners overcome their speaking anxiety.”

“I am not sure whether it can be accepted as a weakness or not, however, the teacher should be skillful enough and have the necessary pedagogical content knowledge to be able to apply improvisation.”

CONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON IMPROVISATION IN TEACHING

How professional development, an integral part of teaching career, affects improvisational teaching was also investigated. All participants agreed on three common impacts; namely, PD adds to improvisational techniques and strategies (N=4), PD increases self-efficacy and confidence in teaching thus improvisational skills (N=6), PD increases teacher autonomy which leads to better improvisation in teaching (N=4).

Every concept regarding the impact of PD can be seen in the following vignettes.

“A teacher involved in professional development learns improvisational techniques and strategies that can improve their self-efficacy and self-confidence while implementing improvisation in their teaching.”

“As a result of the strategies gained through professional development, teachers’ autonomy increases and they can become better implementers of improvisational teaching skills.”

CONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHERS’ IMPROVISATION SKILLS

Finally, the participants were asked to note the factors that may have the potential to affect teachers’ improvisational skills. The list including the results of this question is kind of longer compared to the previous areas. Time, lack of knowledge, position of the teacher in the classroom, motivation of both parties, the adequacy/inadequacy of physical conditions, stress level of the teacher, PD of the teacher, desire of the teacher to try new things, size and level of the class, extracurricular responsibilities of the teacher, years and quality of experience, strict curriculum, creativity and problem solving skill of the teacher, pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management skill, autonomy, and self-confidence of the teacher are the stated factors that potentially effective on teachers’ improvisation skills.

“There are many in fact, however, teachers’ skill regarding, time management, applying communicative tasks, his being willing to take part in PD, and not having extra-curricular responsibilities can have positive impact.”

“If the teacher lacks pedagogical content knowledge, does not know how to solve problems, lacks self-confidence and autonomy, then it can be difficult to talk about improvisation.”

As it is clear in the results of the study, participating foreign language teachers have a wide range of conceptions about many areas regarding improvisation in teaching.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Current study investigated the conceptions of foreign language teachers with specific relation to improvisational teaching. With this aim, conceptions were grouped under some specific subtitles such as, improvisational teaching skills, factors affecting improvisational teaching, improvisation in language teaching, effect of PD on improvisation as a teaching skill, strengths and weaknesses of improvisational teaching.

Results of the qualitative study provided in-depth insights into foreign language teachers conceptions regarding this specific topic. They stated that improvisational teaching is all about flexibility in the classroom, ability to adapt whatever is known, instant production and performance depending on the situation, ability of gathering existing pieces together in teaching, being able to collect and assemble existing things in a new combination, new ways to do something, changing the routine and finding and adapting new methods in the classroom, and on-spot-process to encourage students. This result shows that language teachers are aware of the required capabilities and ways to apply improvisation in the classroom. These concepts are also listed in Crossan and Sorrenti (1997, p. 155).

Secondly, their responses to necessary teaching skills to make use of improvisation in the class involve skills such as being a dramatizer, ability to make spontaneous decisions, ability to solve

problems, giving concrete instruction, providing spontaneous responses, creativity, time management, class management, self-confidence, critical thinking, ability to cope with unexpected situations and being practical. These conceptions are all skills that a high quality and experienced teachers should have. By being parallel to what is stated in previous studies (Berliner & Tikunoff, 1976; Borko & Livingston, 1989; Yinger, 1987) it can be inferred that in order to implement improvisation in a language classroom, the teacher should be skillful both in terms of pedagogy and content. Moreover, teachers' problem-solving skills also reflect in students' problem-solving capabilities since they take their teachers as role models and learn how to find ways to overcome problems in a creative way. This is also evident in the study of Sawyer, 2004.

Another striking finding is about the potentials and limitations of the improvisational teaching. Even though, it was conceived as a positive, and effective teaching strategy by the teachers, they also underlined a very important point that can be a danger for teachers and their teaching qualities. It is overusing improvisation. Since it may cause getting used to teaching without getting ready, unplanned and spontaneous, teachers may get out of the track and continue teaching as they improvise.

Conceptions of participants regarding the strengths of implementing improvisation revealed that it is beneficial especially in language classrooms. Due to the fact that improvisational language teaching provides authentic language use and a more natural atmosphere, students can overcome their speaking anxiety, and become better at language use. Speaking skill which is accepted as the most difficult skill to develop mostly because of the affective filter the students have can be easier for the learners who are in a learning process where improvisational language teaching is implemented. This finding is parallel to what has been stated in Kostrhonová (2011).

Another finding showed the significance of professional development on better improvisational teaching. Despite not being surprising, PD is not a very commonly applied strategy in in-service teacher education. However, participants' awareness regarding this issue should be considered as important.

As a final result, participants listed a lot of factors that might impact improvisational teaching. Among the listed factors, there appeared some factors that might have positive and negative impact. Lack of knowledge, authoritative position of the teacher in the classroom, lack of motivation of both parties, the inadequacy of physical conditions, high stress level of the teacher, big size and low level of the class, extracurricular responsibilities of the teacher, and strict curriculum can have negative impact. On the other hand, involving in PD, desire of the teacher to try new things, years and quality of experience, creativity and problem-solving skill of the teacher, pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management skill, autonomy, and self-confidence can be listed as factors that can have positive impact.

To conclude, present study added to the literature of improvisational language/teaching with all these qualitative and in-depth findings. It would not be wrong to claim that foreign language teachers have a wide range of conceptions regarding this specific topic. Their conceptions are mostly positive; however, they also highlight some negative conceptions which can cause problems in teaching and teaching quality.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the current study are valuable in the sense that they provide various implications and suggestions for many fields in education. First of all, even though improvisation is not accepted as a teaching method and believed to develop with teaching skills and experience, the value of it as a teacher quality and ways to improve it as a teaching skill have to be explained in teacher education faculties as a course component by the teacher trainers. This can be done either with demonstration, or during practicum with observation.

Second important implication is for the professional development units of the state and private education institutions. In line with the significance of professional development in teachers career

journey, these units should take the responsibility to provide language/teachers with necessary training that may lead them learn strategies to implement improvisation in their teaching.

Another group that should consider the impact of teachers' improvisational skills in their language/teaching is educational policy makers. By putting loads of burden on the shoulders of Language/teachers such as heavy curriculum, crowded classrooms, extracurricular activities, unrealistic daily and weekly teaching hours, it would be utopic to expect teachers implement improvisation as a teaching skill. Actually, these stated burdens can also cause teachers overuse improvisation which leads to being unplanned at all.

Finally, improvisation should be accepted as a significant teaching strategy especially in language classrooms to lower students' anxiety in language production, and increase their self-confidence while performing in the foreign language.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As it is the case in every research, current study also has some limitations. To begin with, it only aimed at investigating foreign language teachers' conceptions of improvisations. However, teachers of other majors could also provide distinctive conceptions depending on their content areas. Another limitation is about the research design. Data were gathered with only one data source. Strengthening the data with some class observations could triangulate the data and add to its strength and significance by checking to what extent the participants apply their conceptions in their teaching.

Therefore, further research is required to overcome all these limitations in a variety of contexts with the participation of teachers from different majors and with the application of other data collection instruments.

ATUHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

First author has made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data. The second author has been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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APPENDIX (Interview Questions)

Dear Participant,

We kindly ask you to respond to the following open-ended questions as detailed as possible. Your personal information will not be used and your responses will be used only for the purpose of a research study, which aims to investigate the language teachers' conceptions of improvisation.

Thank you for your participation.

Dr. Görsev Sönmez & Prof. Dr. Onur Köksal

Open-ended Questions

1. What is improvisation in pedagogical practice?
2. What teaching skills can be characterized as improvisational?
3. What is the potential and/or limitations of improvisational knowledge and skills in teaching?
4. How do you define improvisation in language teaching?
5. What are the improvisational teaching skills?
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of improvisational knowledge in teaching?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of improvisational skills in teaching?
8. How does professional development contribute to improvisation in teaching?
9. What are the factors affecting teachers' improvisation skills in a positive and negative way?