AN ACTION RESEARCH ON DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS’ AWARENESS ABOUT RESPECT FOR DIVERSITIES THROUGH THEME-BASED ELT

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how to improve higher education students’ awareness about respect for diversities with English teaching based on the theme-based model of the content-based language teaching approach and how to overcome problems that may be encountered during the implementation. The study was designed as an action research, which is one of the qualitative research designs. The study group consisted of second-grade students who were educated at Vocational School of Tourism and Travel Management program of a university in the spring term of 2015-2016 academic year. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, researcher diary and student products. Positive results were gained regarding the awareness development on respect for diversities in the study. It was determined that students developed in their perceptions of the concept of respect for diversities and the elements that make up the differences and increased the number and variety of examples that contrast with the principle of respect for diversity. Moreover, it was observed that various expressions and behaviours of students that were incompatible with the principles of respect for diversities were also disappeared as a result of various activities designed in the process.

Introduction

Content-Based Language Teaching Approach (CBLT)

As in all areas of teaching, there are various approaches developed in foreign language teaching in the course of time. One of these approaches is the content-based language teaching approach. CBLT has become a systematically researched approach in the field of international foreign language teaching in recent years. This approach is based on the principle that people learn a language in real life instead of first learning and
then using it (Brinton et al., 1989). In CBLT it is claimed that meaning and content should be acquired at the same time, not consecutively in foreign language acquisition (Yalçın, 2013). It is also argued that foreign language is used as a tool for understanding the subject area as well as expressing the thoughts of students in different situations (Amutha, 2017).

CBLT is a teaching approach that focuses on learning language by learning about something; it improves students' high-level thinking skills and increases their motivation by providing cognitively challenging content materials and tasks. To sum up, CBLT aims to support students' integrated development of language competence and content knowledge and is supported by a number of theories from different academic disciplines (Butler, 2005). In this study, it is aimed to improve higher education students' awareness of respect for diversities as well as basic language skills. Only respecting for differences has been dealt with in this article.

**Respect for diversities**

Diversities are related to visible (language, religion, disability, ethnicity, colour, gender, marital status, age, etc.) and invisible differences (educational background, family background, values, upbringing style, etc.), accepting these differences, taking advantage of them and maximizing the potential they bring (British Council, 2009). Considering the position of diversities in human life, the importance of respect for them will be revealed in the continuation of social order. As a matter of fact, diversity-oriented events and crises taking place in both interpersonal relations on small-scale and in the world on a larger scale are indicatives of this. It is possible to overcome this situation in a social order where differences are allowed, respected and individuals can be themselves (Güven, 2012). One of the parties responsible for providing this order is the educational institutions.

When respecting for diversities is taken into account in terms of educational settings, teachers' appreciation, understanding and effective management of differences in their lessons mean that they accept that people are different in visible and invisible forms (British Council, 2009). In addition, the contents of the various curricula may also include issues related to diversities. In this respect, it is considered that foreign language programs are one of the areas where diversity issues can be addressed effectively (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002; Chinh, 2013, Jafar, 2016).
According to Jafar (2016), who focuses on integrating cultural differences into English courses, teaching English is a teaching of another language that carries a different culture and students are already exposed to a foreign culture. Jafar argued that the strategies used to address diversity related issues in English courses would not only improve students' critical thinking skills and team-work experiences, but would also contribute to the understanding of others and building traditions of democracy and tolerance.

**Problem**

Researches on integrating global issues into language courses are very limited in Turkish literature (Arıkan, 2009; Gürsoy, 2010; Gürsoy & Salı, 2014; Gürsoy & Sağlam, 2011; Sağlam & Gürsoy, 2010; Salı & Gürsoy, 2014). For example; Arıkan (2009), who associated English grammar lessons with environmental peace education, concluded that this approach was an effective strategy for teaching foreign languages. Gürsoy (2010) stated that the integration of environmental education with content / theme-based approaches to foreign language courses had multiple benefits such as learning foreign language in a meaningful and purposeful way and gaining environmental awareness. In the study of Sağlam & Gürsoy (2010), it was determined that English teacher candidates developed awareness of environmental problems. As can be seen, when the literature is examined, no research has been found which deals with the theme of respect for diversities with action research method and theme-based language teaching approach. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will contribute to filling the gap in the relevant literature.

In this context, a foreign language course program has been prepared based on the theme-based model of CBLT in order to provide higher education students with basic language skills and awareness of diversities. The general purpose of this study is to investigate how to improve higher education students’ basic language skills (not presented in this study) and awareness of ‘respect for diversities’ with English teaching based on the theme-based model of the content-based language teaching approach and how to overcome problems that may be encountered during the implementation. For this purpose, the basic question of the research has been expressed as follows:

*How does English teaching based on a theme-based model contribute to the improvement of higher education students’ awareness of respect for diversities?*
Method

This study was designed as an action research which is one of the qualitative research models. The participants of the study were; 24 higher education students who were at second grade level in Tourism and Travel Management Program of a university’s Vocational School and had English proficiency at CEFR-B1 level, the researcher who designed and implemented English teaching in line with the theme-based approach and the validity committee which was established for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating the implementations in the research process and consisted of two experts.

The research data were collected through needs and interest questionnaires, personal information form, semi-structured interview form, researcher diary, observation and student products. In the analysis of the data, a three-stage analysis method was followed before, during and after the implementation process and content analysis and descriptive analysis methods were used. In order to ensure the reliability of the data analysis results, reliability formula (reliability = consensus / consensus + disagreement X 100) proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994, p.64) was applied between the coding of the researchers. Accordingly, the agreement rate between the coders was found to be 0.92 in the data analysis process. In addition, by taking into consideration of the points mentioned in the literature (Johnson, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the context of validity and reliability; in-depth-focused data were collected through long-term research, data were collected from four different data collection tools: semi-structured interview, observation, researcher diary and student products, interviews were recorded with voice recorder, while observations were recorded with a video camera to prevent data loss, meetings were held with the validity committee in the context of expert review, detailed information was given about the role of the researcher, the participants and the implementation process, direct quotations were included from semi-structured interviews and researcher diary without adding comments to the reader, examples of student products were presented in some parts, the stages of data collection tools, data collection and analysis were examined in terms of consistency by the researchers and the experts in the validity committee and participant confirmation was obtained.

Findings
Eight lesson plans prepared within the scope of three different themes were implemented at 22 course hours in a period of 11 weeks for the English course taught with theme-based approach within the framework of global issues. Within the scope of this study, only the theme of ‘respect for diversities’ was presented. Three different lesson plans were developed and implemented for four weeks in the action process of developing awareness of the theme of respect for diversities. These lesson plans, each of which reflected the experiences of the previous practice, were designed in the framework of the sub themes of Individual similarities and differences, Cultural similarities and differences, and Prejudices and stereotypes, respectively. The problems encountered during the implementation of each plan were analysed and the subsequent plans were reviewed considering these problems.

In this cycle, observation notes, researcher diary and student products were examined on the theme of respect for diversities and two types of problems were identified, namely, expressing ideas that were incompatible with the principle of respect for diversities and expressing prejudiced and stereotyped thoughts. The problem of expressing ideas that were incompatible with the principle of respect for diversity includes conditional respect for diversities and negative attitude. According to the observation records, the expression of “I respect for diversities of someone else as much as I am respected” was detected from the student who had the mentality of conditional respect for diversities. In other words, it was observed that the student's respecting for diversities would be shaped according to the person’s mentality of respecting for diversities he/she addressed. The following expression of the student who had a negative attitude problem attracted attention; “I am respectful to the people, events and situations that do not contradict my values, but I cannot respect the people, events and situations that are against my values”.

The researcher developed and implemented an action plan for the next lesson plan in order to eliminate the problem of expressing ideas that were incompatible with the principle of respect for diversities. In the activities prepared within the framework of this action plan, it was tried to ensure that students realized that all individuals had different physical, characteristic and cultural differences compared to others, however, everyone had similar characteristics that originate from being human and deserved respect in all circumstances. In addition, in the next lesson plan, activities focusing on the positive aspects of diversities and enabling students to brainstorm about how a
world where everyone was the same would be were included. This issue was dealt with through various activities designed in this context until respect for diversity was attained in principle extent. No conditional expressions and negative attitudes were encountered in the activities during the process and in the last interviews. It was also found out that more principled expressions were used by the students. Besides the development of awareness, which was the aim of the study, attitude development was also observed. However, in the third lesson plan, which was conducted within the framework of *Prejudices and stereotypes* sub-theme, it was faced with the problem of expressing prejudiced and stereotyped thoughts. This problem was manifested by the majority of pupils in an activity by matching certain gender and personality traits with people from different occupations, ages and status. In this activity, judgeship was matched with being a male, teaching with being a female, a homeless person was linked with causing trouble, a business person with having an important job and a fun life with being a pop star. All of these were considered as a problem as they were typical examples of prejudiced and stereotyped thoughts and contradicted the purpose of the implementation. In order to solve this problem, students were asked to work in groups to compare their answers with the answers of their group friends and explain the reasons for their answers. As these steps were the part of the follow-up questions of the activity, there was no need to prepare a second action plan for this problem, and the students were encouraged to rethink their ideas and to find their prejudiced and stereotyped thoughts.

During the action research process, interviews were made with the students before and after the implementation of the action plans prepared for the theme of respect for diversities, data were analysed by content analysis and the students’ perceptions of diversity were grouped under two categories as *primary component diversities*, which cannot be changed later, and *secondary component diversities* which are subsequently acquired. In the preliminary interviews, it was determined that students gave three different, totally four examples in terms of primary component diversities and 11 different, totally 20 examples in terms of secondary component diversities. In the last interviews, it was detected that they gave a total of 21 in six different examples with respect to primary component diversities and 46 in 17 different examples in terms of secondary component diversities. Therefore, it can be said that in the last interview findings obtained after the implementation of the action plans, students’ perceptions of
the elements that make up the diversities improved and they increased the examples they gave for the primary and secondary components that make up the differences in terms of variety and number. The accessed encodings from the statements in the last interviews that were not expressed by the students in the preliminary interviews were identified as; *physical property, talent and family* for primary component diversities and *clothing style, geographical location, ideology, cultural background, emotional state, motivation and learning style, interest and strength (strongness / weakness)* for secondary component diversities.

In addition to the components which make up the diversities, the verbs students used in their definitions on the concept of respect for diversities were also examined and the obtained data were subjected to descriptive analysis. When the findings about the improvement of the verbs used by the students in their definitions of respect for diversities are evaluated in general, it can be said that there was a significant improvement in the qualitative sense besides the quantitative increase of the verbs used. While the definitions of respect for diversities were short and superficial in the preliminary interviews, it was observed that the explanations were broader in the last interviews. In the preliminary interviews, the students used six different verbs a total of 10 times, and after the implementation, they used 20 different expressions a total of 58 times. It was also observed that in these expressions, students did not only relate respecting diversities to others or to different ones, but also considered respecting themselves and accepting themselves as they were. In addition, the expressions such as *to see differences as wealth, to develop empathy, to accept different ways of life, to learn from diversities, not to consider differences as a superiority or inferiority indicator, to think that we are the same despite our differences* are considered to be important in terms of demonstrating the awareness raise of the theme.

Similar to the awareness raise of respect for diversities, an improvement was also identified in the case of examples that contradict the principle of respect for diversities. In the interviews, the students were asked to give instances that contradict with the principle of respect for diversities considering the events in our country and in the world and collected data were subjected to content analysis. When the findings were examined, it was seen that in the preliminary interviews, the students gave two different, totally six examples for *intervention to the primary component* and two different, totally seven examples for *intervention to the secondary component* with
respect to instances that contradict the principle of respect for diversities. However, it was identified that they gave four different, totally 15 examples for intervention to the primary component and five different, totally 12 examples for intervention to the secondary component regarding instances contradicting the principle of respect for diversities in the last interviews. As a result, it was determined that the students developed in their perceptions of the instances that contradict the principle of respect for diversities in the last interview findings after the implementation of the action plans and increased the number and variety of examples that contrast with the principle of respect for diversity.

Discussion

Many researchers advocate content-based teaching in foreign language teaching methodology, particularly in connection with teaching global issues (Cates; 1997, 2000; Crandal, 1993; Gürsoy, 2010; Met, 1991; Prodromou, 1992; Serrano, 2008; Swenson & Cline, 1993). CBLT is an approach that does not only support the students' language development, but also improves the knowledge of the content. Gürsoy & Salı (2014) argued that the use of global issues as content would contribute to the students' language improvement and their awareness, skills and positive attitudes towards these issues. In this study, awareness increase regarding the theme of respect for diversities addressed in the course was determined. Similar findings can be observed in other studies that use global issues as themes (Arıkan, 2009; Corzo & Lopera, 2016; Gürsoy, 2010; Omidvar & Sukumar, 2013; Yoshihara, 2011).

In the initial phase of the action research process when the awareness development had not been realized; problems of expressing ideas that were incompatible with the principle of respect for diversities and expressing prejudiced and stereotyped thoughts were identified. Through the various activities designed to solve these problems, the issues were taken into consideration until the students were able to use more principled expressions and became aware of their prejudices regardless of their own situation and values. This is not surprising, as these problems are thought to be related to the lack of awareness of the theme mentioned. As a matter of fact, the results of the needs survey conducted in order to determine the themes to be addressed in the courses before the implementation started revealed that there was a lack of awareness for this theme in the study group. However, these problems are important in terms of providing the starting point for the activities designed under the
action research process and have been solved in parallel with the increase in awareness.

REFERENCES


