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VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY: THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF EFL TEACHERS DURING PHD IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Dış Çevreden Sesler: İngilizce Öğretmenliği Doktora Programındaki EFL Öğretmenlerinin Akademik Deneyimleri

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Abstract

Professional development of teachers is vital in that keeping up with the rapidly changing educational world and thus enabling progress has become a must on the part of the teachers. So, many teachers of English devote valuable time and energy for academic degree and professional development. Although numerous studies have been conducted on the experiences of non-native PhD students studying at universities in the 'inner circle' countries, the present study sought to explore the academic experiences of non-native PhD students majoring in English language teaching (ELT) departments in a non-native context, Turkey, because such experiences are regarded by graduate students the world over as the most significant aspect which influences the quality of their research experience (Kachru, 1985). Moreover, very few, if any, studies enable non-native PhD students' own voices on the challenges they face to be heard in an expanding. Using a qualitative research design, data for the present study were collected though in-depth interviews and a metaphor elicitation task with ten PhD students studying at different universities in Turkey. Data were content-analyzed and emerging themes relevant to research questions were discussed. The findings revealed that among various other problems which the students faced, the most salient ones were those related to academic writing in Turkish as opposed to English, written feedback, supervision and administration. In addition, the metaphors which PhD students used centered generally on the theme of epic struggles and desperation in the hope of reaching the goal. The study also provides implications and suggestions for the guidance and supervision of non-native PhD students in the expanding circle.

Keywords: non-native, PhD, supervision, thesis writing

Öz

Öğretmenlerin mesleki gelişimi, hızla değişen eğitim dünyasına ayak uydurmak ve böylece gelişme sağlamak için hayati önem taşımaktadır. Dolayısıyla, birçok İngilizce öğretmeni, akademik derece ve profesyönel gelişim için değerli zaman ve enerjiyi ayırır. Her ne kadar 'iç çember' ülkelerdeki üniversitelerde

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okuyan ve ana dili İngilizce olmayan doktora öğrencilerinin deneyimleri konusunda çok sayıda çalışma yapılmış olsa da, bu çalışma, İngilizce dil öğretimi (ELT) bölümlerinde eğitim gören ve ana dili İngilizce olmayan doktora öğrencilerinin akademik deneyimlerini, yine ana dili İngilizce olmayan bir ülke olan Türkiye şartlarında, araştırmayı amaçlamıştır çünkü bu tür deneyimler, lisansüstü öğrenciler tarafından, araştırma deneyimlerinin kalitesini etkileyen en önemli yön olarak ele alınmaktadır (Kachru, 1985). Ayrıca, çok az (eğer varsa) çalışma ana dili İngilizce olmayan doktora öğrencilerinin genişleyen bir çevrede karşılaştıkları zorlukları kendi ifadeleriyle dile getirmelerine olanak sağlamıştır. Niteliksel bir araştırma tasarımı kullanarak, bu çalışmanın verileri, Türkiye'deki farklı üniversitelerde okuyan on doktora öğrencisi ile yapılan derinlemesine görüşmeler ve bir eğretileme çıkartımı tekniği kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Veriler içerik analizi uygulayarak incelendi ve araştırma soruları ile ilgili olan temalar ele alındı. Elde edilen bulgular, öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları çeşitli problemler arasında, en önemlilerinin, İngilizce'den ziyade Türkçe akademik yazma, yazılı geri bildirim, denetim ve yönetim konularında olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca, doktora öğrencilerinin kullandıkları eğretilemeler (metaforlar), genel olarak destansı mücadeleler ve hedefe varma konusundaki umutsuzluk temaları üzerinde odaklanmıştır. Çalışma ayrıca, genişleyen çemberdeki ana dili İngilizce olmayan doktora öğrencilerinin rehberliği ve gözetimi için ima ve öneriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ana dili İngilizce olmayan, doktora, denetim, tez yazımı

INTRODUCTION

The path leading to the successful completion of PhD study involves a variety of aspects with which a PhD student has to deal. Some of these aspects might strengthen while most others can impede progress, cause feelings of inadequacy and ultimately lead to student attrition (for a review on doctoral student attrition, see Bair and Haworth 2004). Some of these aspects have been closely investigated in numerous studies with the aim of revealing the challenges which those students face, which would, in turn, result in desirable changes. Uncovering the experiences doctoral students go through could also ease the already challenging process and provide PhD students with better services.

The studies which have been conducted thus far concern the difficulties which non-native graduate students face mostly in English-medium settings. To exemplify, there have been numerous studies on the issues of supervision as it stands out among the problems students face (Barron & Zeegers, 2006; Chiang, 2003; Harman, 2003; González-Ocampo & Castelló, 2018; Krauss & Ismail, 2010; Marsh, Rowe & Martin, 2002; Walsh, 2010; Wang & Li, 2011), and thesis writing and feedback (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Casanave, 2018, Larcombe *et al.*, 2007; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Strauss, 2012; Wang & Li, 2008). Other challenges such as motivation (Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao & Lynch, 2007) and financial support (Sherry *et al.*, 2010) have also been focused on in the literature.

So, although research on single factors influencing the PhD process in English-medium countries in general have been conducted, a study providing a whole picture of the experiences of ELT teachers majoring in ELT in particular has not been, to the best of our knowledge, carried out. However, as González-Ocampo and Castelló (2018) indicated, doctoral experiences vary across disciplines and should be analyzed to reveal them and thus provide support and guidance. Thus, with the aim of shedding light on this hitherto unexplored aspect, the present study was designed to investigate what challenges non-native PhD students studying in English Language Teaching (ELT) departments in different universities encounter, which aspect(s) of PhD they believe are more demanding and what they associate PhD study with. In addition, the study was carried out in a country in the expanding circle, Turkey, where English is used for instrumental purposes and "on an interpersonal level, it is used as a link language for international business and for tourism while also providing a code that symbolizes modernization and elitism to

the educated middle classes and those in the upper strata of the socioeconomic ladder" (Dogancay-Aktuna, 1998, p. 37).

LITERATURE REVIEW

II. I. Studies on the challenges encountered regarding writing

Writing is a complex and challenging process for both native and non-native speakers of any language in particular due to its nature. Because writing requires the use of socio-linguistic as well as linguistic properties, it constitutes a difficult challenge, especially for non-native speakers of a language. Therefore, most non-native speakers of English (NNSEs) experience writing apprehension when writing an academic paper in English. The specific reasons for that anxiety were revealed by Al-Shboul and Huwari (2015) in a study of NNSE PhD students in Malaysia. It was stated that this apprehension was caused by a "lack of knowledge in English structure, negative attitude toward writing, negative writing experience in the past and inadequate knowledge in academic writing" (pp. 538-543). Such students may have a harder time writing specific parts of an academic paper.

For example, the difficulties which L2 writers face when writing the discussion sections of their graduate theses were investigated by Bitchener and Basturkmen, (2006), who found that problems can arise due to the fact that students tend to overstate their claims by not using hedges in this section. The findings also revealed that the students did not realize the need to relate what they found in their studies to previous studies of similar issues in the discussion section.

In order to reduce NNSE PhD students' writing anxiety, to improve their writing and thus enable them to produce qualified publications, they are provided with written feedback. However, the nature of the written feedback which students receive is crucial in that it might lead to greater application or to the termination of the writing process. Because of its important influence on writing, written feedback has been researched to a significant extent. East, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2012), for instance, sought to determine what postgraduate research students receive by way of feedback from their supervisors and also what form of feedback they say that they find most effective. Using questionnaires and interviews with 53 local and international students in six New Zealand universities, they discovered that most of the feedback type which the students received was concentrated around overview comments on organization, vocabulary, appropriate register, grammar, spelling and punctuation. Also, 75% of the feedback was written feedback, followed by face-to-face meeting. Another finding was that L1 students found specific comments on organization and language helpful, and indirect comments intended to challenge them intellectually beneficial. L2 students, however, preferred direct feedback on language and a combination of direct and indirect feedback on language and organization, but they were afraid of misinterpreting the written feedback so they wanted to be more carefully directed. Those students wanted supervisors to provide both written and oral feedback, and to make constructive comments alongside critical comments in their written feedback.

As a solution to the difficulties in writing experienced by students, in addition to providing written and oral feedback, Larcombe *et al.* (2007) suggested community participation and peer collaboration. Similarly, Li and Vandermensbrugghe (2011) found that writing groups were very helpful "to start the writing process, maintain consistency in the practice of writing and sharing writing, and motivate them to develop academic writing capacities in English as a second language" (p. 203).

The impact of supervisors in the PhD process

Completing a PhD programme can be considered as the final stage of becoming an academic. However, this process can also be regarded as the most challenging one because of the nature of the process itself. In that regard, the help and guidance of a professional, that is, a supervisor, are of great importance since these professionals determine whether the students can successfully make it through the process or abandon it (Castelló et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2006). In order to reveal and then resolve the problems related to supervision, a number of studies have been conducted.

Krauss and Ismail (2010) analyzed supervisory relationships from students' perspectives by conducting a combination of in-depth, one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions at one Malaysian university. They found that students were trying to manage their own PhD experience as well as their relationships with their supervisors. The management of their experience included "*acceptance* of the situation, and *responding proactively* to the situation so as to optimize the PhD research experience" [italics in the original] (p. 161). In a study carried out by Strauss (2012) with two Arabic speakers of English in the UK, he realized that the tense relationship between the supervisor and those students stemmed from the students' lack of linguistic ability and the differing expectations of the two parties. That is, in addition to the inability of the students regarding language use, the supervisor and the students had different understandings of the role which each should have. The supervisor defined supervision as "the process of guiding students to develop independent thinking, independent work, independent research", whereas the students expected more guidance and help and a closer relationship (p. 286).

Gunnarsson, Jonassonand Billhult (2013) conducted interviews with nine supervisors and seven PhD students at universities in England and Sweden and found that disagreements between the supervisors and the students changed over time and that tensions could arise when either party is not involved in important decisions, when supervisors are not up-to-date in a subject and when dubious advice was given which led to the loss of time on the part of the students. Also, due to having more than one supervisor, the students had to find a middle position and act as mediators, which they found challenging.

Adams (2003) tried to resolve the problems between international PhD students and their supervisors by conducting workshops based on his belief that "knowing that the other knows provides a supportive background for future communication" (p. 177). Similar to Strauss's (2012) findings, Adams (2003) stated that misunderstandings may derive from different expectations which are the result of various aspects such as past learning experiences, understandings about the rights and responsibilities of the parties involved, and beliefs about appropriate communicative behavior and politeness strategies. Moreover, it was found that lack of awareness of either party's own communicative behavior and its effects on others creates a great barrier between students and supervisors. If workshops are conducted to enhance understanding and consensus between the parties, the challenges will most probably be better dealt with.

In another study by González-Ocampo and Castelló (2018), doctoral students' significant supervision experiences were analyzed and then related to the strategies they use to cope with these experiences when they perceive them as challenging or negative. By asking a total of 1173 doctoral students majoring in various disciplines to answer a four-question survey, they revealed a clear "relationship between supervision and satisfaction with

doctoral studies" (p. 11). They also discovered that disciplinary culture has a high impact on how student perceive doctoral studies. Therefore, analyzing doctoral experience in various disciplines would enable recognition and help raise awareness to support such students in the journey.

To sum up, from the present literature regarding the challenges which graduate NNSEs face, it is evident that such studies need to be implemented especially in non-native contexts and across all disciplines. Moreover, it is necessary that not only one but every aspect of this demanding journey should be examined to reveal the whole picture. In this regard, this current study was conducted to reveal the doctoral experiences of EFL teachers majoring in ELT in a non-native context, Turkey. So, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What challenges do NNSE PhD students in ELT encounter during the PhD programme?

2. What degrees of difficulty do they assign to possible problems in their PhD study?

3. What metaphors do they use to define PhD study and what are the reasons behind their associations?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design methodology to answer the research questions since qualitative methodology provides "means for the researcher to capture or interrogate the "real world" – be that a situation, an organization or a set of relationships-in all its complexity in a way that quantitative approaches cannot do" (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p.108).

Data collection instruments

The data for the present study were gathered through in-depth interviews, which are "purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what that person has experienced, what he or she thinks and feels about it, and what significance or meaning it might have" (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, p. 170). Each interview lasted between 1 and 1½ hours and they were carried out in English. In case of difficulties due to language, participants used Turkish; however, what they meant was translated into English together with the participants. The questions were mostly generated by the researcher in line with the aim of the study. Yet, some of the questions which Son and Park (2014) had used in their study were also adapted and used in the present study. Despite using the questions devised in line with the study goals, the researcher was always open to any topic informants wished to raise.

The study also administered a metaphor elicitation task to elicit metaphors which the participants associated with studying for a PhD. Metaphor construction is as Cortazzi and Jin (1999) stated, "a bridge to the reality of the professional or technical world" (p. 149). So, in order to reveal the participants' feelings and thoughts and to enable a better understanding of the nature of PhD study for them, metaphor elicitation was used in the study. After eliciting the metaphors, participants were asked to share the reason/s behind their metaphor choice, which was intended to reveal what PhD really means to them.

Participants

The present study applied one type of non-probability sampling, purposive, to determine its participants. In applying this sampling, where "researchers handpick the cases to be

included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 115)., the aim was to select participants who could "best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (Creswell, 2009, p. 178).

Accordingly, ten (seven female and three male) Turkish PhD students were asked to participate in the study. They were all studying for degree in ELT in four different universities around Turkey. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, a number was assigned to each one according to the initial letters of their names (P-1, P-2 and so on). Four of the participants had already earned their course credits, passed the PhD comprehensive exam and commenced writing their PhD theses (P-1, P-5, P-6 and P-9). The rest of the participants had completed almost half of the courses and still had one term to go before taking the comprehensive exam (P-2, P-3, P-4, P-7, P-8 and P-10). Moreover, except for P-6, P-8 and P-9, who were full-time PhD students and worked as research assistants at universities, the rest were all working as instructors at universities.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze the data in this study. The aim here was to condense the extensive material into content categories by means of inductive content analysis. That is, firstly, the audio data were transcribed and saved as Microsoft word documents. After iterative reading of the transcriptions, the data were classified according to the aspects investigated in the study.

Following the initial coding, another researcher independently analyzed the data and formed his categories to ensure internal validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Then, the categories were assessed together to guarantee reliability. In general, there were a high level of agreement between the researchers; however, the few cases in which there was not agreement were discussed again and a consensus was reached. In the last phase, the categories were assigned to the related research question to which they give an answer.

RESULTS and DISCUSSIONS

Research question 1:

The first research question was designed to elicit the factors which constitute hindrances and challenges for NNSE PhD students in ELT departments in Turkey. The data for this section came from the themes which emerged from the in-depth interviews. In the following paragraphs, the categories formed on the basis of the themes are discussed in detail.

Academic writing in Turkish as opposed to English

One of the themes which emerged was related to academic writing in Turkish as opposed to English. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences when writing an academic paper in Turkish and English respectively. Seven of the ten participants expressed their frustration, fear, hate and stress when writing in Turkish due to the fact that they either had not had any experience in Turkish academic writing or did not know the terminology for their field, ELT. P-1 and P-9, for example, expressed their feelings as follows:

> I really feel stressed. I think it would not be wrong to say I am disgusted, I hate writing in Turkish. I do not know any academic terms in Turkish. I did

> all my studies in ELT so I did not study anything in Turkish and I did not write any academic paper in Turkish. (P-1)

> I feel really awkward and sometimes incompetent because I have always studied in English; not having actually written any papers in Turkish for very long. When I try to do that, I spend a lot of time trying to find the translations of all the field-related terminology and I get lost. (P-9)

Only three of the participants (P-4, P-5 and P-6) stated that they would feel comfortable writing in Turkish because it is their native language and they can manipulate sentences easily. For academic writing in English, the participants believed that they could express themselves better in English than in Turkish because they have been exposed to English for such a long time and thus feel more comfortable with English writing and its rhetoric. To be more precise, eight participants stated that they were a lot more comfortable with and competent at writing an academic paper in English than in Turkish. Even so, they still experienced various challenges regarding writing. For example, the choice of the correct word (academic language), the grammar, the format of the paper, collecting the data and the process of analysis, finding materials and finding a native speaker to edit papers were the most frequent problems expressed by the participants. However, the challenges which they emphasized had been even greater during the MA process, as P-3 clearly stated:

> So, it was very difficult at first, the right choice of vocabulary, the choice of grammatical structures, tense aspect, and you need to know how to address the reader and so on, but you just learn with the process itself. So maybe the learning process was very difficult because no-one really introduced you to the topic. No-one can really tell you how to do this. You just need to imitate the others. (P-3)

It is worth noting that P-3, like others, struggled to learn the academic language and the way to write an academic paper on his own as no-one really taught these aspects. On top of that, the participants believed that formal teaching in these aspects was not the teacher's responsibility, but that they should learn them on their own, which interestingly hints at the term 'learned helplessness'.

One of the two participants (P-2 and P-6) who indicated that they did not feel comfortable and secure when writing in English stated that:

> … there are thousands of rules that I have to follow so my ideas have to pass through a filter, and that is not who I am. When I write something, I hate everything that I write. I am sorry, that is not me, that is the paper which they ask me to write according to APA or whatever style. So, it kills my creativity because everything is the same. Every article starts in the same way. The tables, all the comments are the same, used a billion times. One of the most boring writing styles ever is academic writing. There is no variety in it. There is no creativity in it. You cannot use idioms. There are certain things that you are not allowed to use; why? I mean, as long as I do the research and the academic thing – let me do it my way, but yeah, that is the challenge for writing. (P-2)

In addition to the challenges indicated by the rest of the participants, P-2 showed in this statement that he was clearly having trouble coping with the rules of writing in English. He suggested that the rhetoric in English is different from that of Turkish and that had

created problems for him. Regarding this issue, Kaplan (1966) pointed out that logic is not universal but rather evolves out of the culture of a particular society. Therefore, writing is culture-based and each language has its own unique set of writing conventions. Kaplan (1967) also stated that "...rhetoric, the method of organizing syntactic units into larger patterns, is as much a culturally coded phenomenon as the syntactic units themselves are" (p. 15). According to the cultural model put forward by Kaplan, being a language of Indo-European origin, English has a linear thought pattern whereas Turkish is an oriental language marked by indirectness. So, adapting to a totally different way of writing or rhetoric was found to be challenging by the participant and by a few others who commented that they found the format and structure of an academic paper difficult to arrange.

Written Feedback

Except for two participants (P-1 and P-6) who were at the writing stage of their theses, the remaining eight participants emphasized the fact that they had not received any written feedback on their papers during the PhD process, and some of them had also not received any even during the MA process. P-10 maintained that, like the rest, she always felt "the lack of this feedback" and in terms of academic writing, she "did not receive any feedback during [her] MA and others" (P-10). One participant offered an explanation for the reason why teachers do not provide written feedback on their papers as follows:

> I think they [teachers] are quite good at it, but maybe about the language we are using, they can be more careful – but they are also non-native speakers. Maybe they won't see the deficiencies all the time. If there could be a cross-check with a native speaker, it would be more beneficial for us because if there is not a big mistake about language use, they may not realize it. (P-8)

Similar to the findings of East, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2012), these students all called for more written feedback and guidance not just on meaning but also on grammar and vocabulary choice because these were the areas in which they indicated that they had most difficulty.

Supervision as a Facilitator or Nightmare

The issue of supervision is crucial during graduate studies because, as Braine (2002) stated, "a sound relationship between the advisor and advisee is essential to the latter's success, and that, in the case of NNS graduate students, hands-on help by the supervisor from the conception of a research project to the writing of the thesis is the most effective" (p. 65).

Since only four of the ten participants in the present study had already started writing their thesis, which means that they had already chosen the advisor with whom they wanted to work, the real data on the issue of supervision of PhD study came from those participants. Nevertheless, the remaining participants offered their opinions about the issue on the basis of their experiences during their MA study. The comments made by the four participants working with a supervisor showed that although two of them were content, the other two had mixed feelings about the help which they had received. They stated some positive but more negative aspects related to the issue. P-6, for example, stated that her "supervisor is very knowledgeable but intolerant of mistakes". She therefore did not feel very comfortable when discussing her thesis with her supervisor. The two participants who seemed quite satisfied with their supervisors made comments such as:

> I think it is great in the sense that it is what I would expect from a supervisor. She does not direct me, but provides me with options, which is obviously what is expected from PhD-level supervision. I would not have preferred a supervisor with strict views and [who insisted] that I had to write according to what she thinks. (P-9)

It seems that for a mutually satisfactory relationship, the expectations of the students from a supervisor should not clash with those of the supervisor, as was emphasized by Strauss (2012). In other words, not only the expectations regarding the role of each party but also the expectations about research interests should be compatible for a healthy relationship, which was addressed in the following extract:

> The professor already has some interests. He has a PhD and … you have your own interest because ELT is a giant ocean. Not everybody likes the same things. I like certain things and people keep saying this has been studied a billion times and is not new but old. … I know these topics have been studied a billion times but I can look from a different perspective, so the first reaction rather than saying 'OK, find a different perspective. Maybe we might find different things'. Even that little 'maybe' does not exist there. … I am forced to have certain interests. (P-2)

We can clearly observe the desperation and frustration of this participant, and this was a common concern among almost all the participants. Another issue regarding supervision was that if the students can maintain a healthy communication with the supervisor and empathize with the other party, the process flows more smoothly, which was stressed by most of the participants. The following extract clarifies this point:

> I think the most important thing is to maintain communication. Even when the work is uncompleted, letting the supervisor know and asking for more time is important. Good communication is essential in maintaining this relationship. (P-5)

The other challenges which participants stated were related to the lack of time allocated to them due to the heavy schedules and responsibilities of the supervisors, their personalities and also the distance problem when the supervisor is in another city.

Administration

Considering the fact that only three of the participants were full-time PhD students (research assistants), the issue of support or the lack of support from the institutions in which the rest of the participants worked was found to be a crucial concern and was frequently voiced by them.

Only two of these seven participants appreciated the support provided by their institutions. Four of them noted that their institutions had constituted more of a barrier than a facilitator since the beginning of the PhD process, as is clear in the following extract:

> This is a very, very killing point in Turkey. Just because I am doing my PhD, I get nothing and I have to travel [in order to research] all these things. So, there is no law or any kind of institution that legally supports what I am doing. Not financially, not mentally, not at all. So, on top of doing a PhD, you have got all these financial problems and outside resources problems, which makes the PhD very, very hard in Turkey. (P-2)

Interestingly, students complained about not having any financial benefits from completing the PhD. However, doctoral students who work in a public institution do actually get higher salaries in Turkey and having a PhD degree may serve 'as a catalyst for career development

and accelerated promotion' as well as a milestone to "keep their job as secure as is ever possible' (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 724-727). Since those doctoral students working in public institutions generally need to travel to other cities to attend the PhD courses, there emerged another problem about getting permission. In other words, one participant, interestingly, stated that his colleagues caused problems for him because they continuously questioned why the administration had let him go on to take his PhD course.

Research question 2:

The second question which this study sought to answer was related to the degree of difficulty which the PhD students assigned to the possible issues which they might encounter during their PhD study. To answer this question, participants were asked to rank items from 1 to 12 in order of increasing difficulty. Table 1 summarizes the findings:

Table 1: Summary of the degree of difficulties which students face
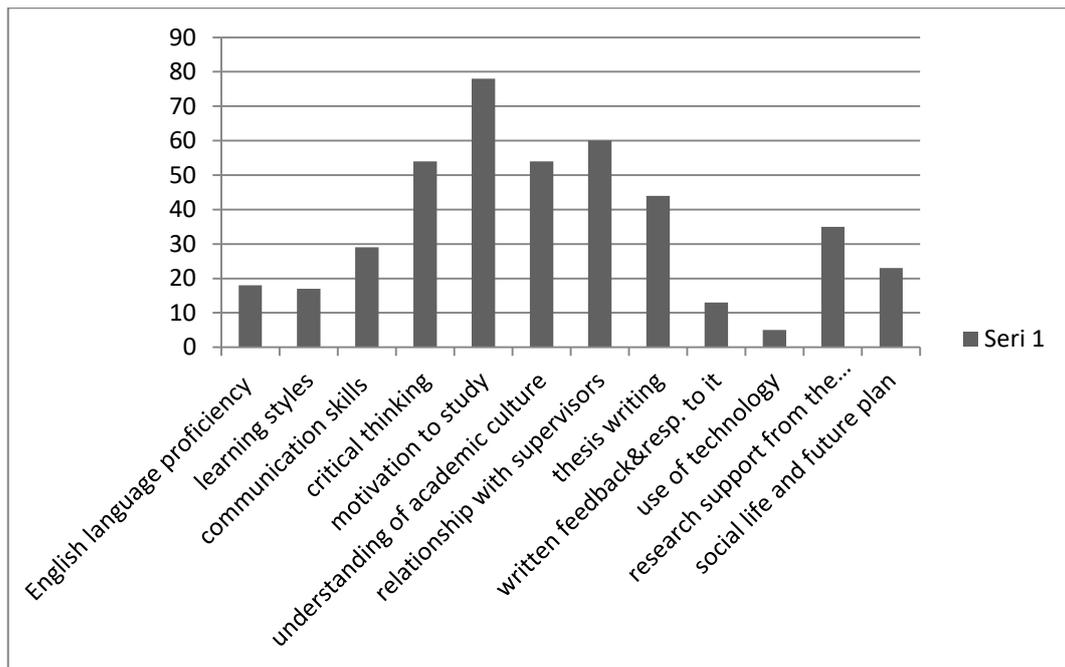
As is obvious from Table 1, most of the participants found *motivation to study* to be the most challenging aspect of the PhD process. However, the issue of motivation was mentioned only by a few of the participants during the in-depth interviews. The second biggest challenge was the *relationship with supervisors,* which was considered to be a very crucial aspect of a PhD programme. This was followed by *critical thinking* and *understanding of the academic culture*, which had almost the same degree of difficulty, as

shown in Table 1. The participants were aware of the fact that critical thinking here was used in the sense of being analytical when reading a paper and finding the advantages and disadvantages of any academic work on their own, without perpetual guidance from their supervisors or teachers. The challenge *understanding of the academic culture* relates to the requirements of academia in general.

Thesis writing was also among the most feared and most encountered challenge. The difficulty comprised both finding a researchable topic and the writing process itself. This issue was one of the most dominant concerns which emerged in the in-depth interviews as well. *Research support from the university* concerns organizational issues such as giving participants one or two days off work to undertake their PhD study, being supportive in every phase of the process and providing incentives for those who want to have continuous professional growth. However, the findings show that this was found very challenging because most of the time no support was provided to the participants.

Communication skills, which include the ability to use language in social contexts, in other words, communicative competence, was also a challenge for the participants even though they were all majoring in ELT. Then came *social life and future plan* which caused a problem for the students as they indicated the lack of time that they had for a social life. This was because the majority of the participants were full-time instructors in universities.

Research question 3:

The final research question was designed to elicit the metaphors which the participants associated with PhD study by using a metaphor elicitation task. They were also required to reflect on their metaphor choices.

What is a PhD?

The participants were asked to define PhD study using one metaphor and to explain why they associated a PhD with it. In the metaphor elicitation task, they were simply asked to fill the gaps in the prompt 'A PhD is ...because...' and provide an explanation or clarification for the metaphor. The intention was that this, in turn, would help to uncover the participants' feelings and experiences regarding PhD study because, as McShane (2005) stated, metaphor is used as "an imaginative strategy that can transport with it other nuances and shadows that might not otherwise [be] articulated in the description of the lived phenomenon" (p. 6).

The metaphors which the participants used were 'constipation', 'trying to climb up a rocky mountain', a 'labyrinth' (mentioned twice), 'a journey with ups and downs', a 'thorny road', 'something you cannot live with or without', 'a light bulb', 'driving a car in a totally different country' and a 'caterpillar". Interestingly, as can be clearly observed, the term 'PhD' evoked somewhat similar thoughts and feelings with a few exceptions. That is, looking at the nature of the majority of metaphors, namely 'trying to climb up a rocky mountain', 'labyrinth' (twice), 'a journey with ups and downs', 'a thorny road', 'driving a car in a totally different country' and 'a caterpillar', it can be clearly seen that the PhD process was regarded as something very challenging, intriguing and different, but with a reward at the very end. The only completely positive metaphor which emerged was 'a light bulb', by which the participant considered PhD study to be enlightening and an opportunity to discover and learn more. Although 'something you cannot live with or without' seemed rather neutral, the metaphor 'constipation' was used to express a highly

negative attitude towards PhD study in general and academic writing in particular, as the following comment shows:

> Because the first thing that comes to my mind is writing a PhD thesis, my metaphor for writing any kind of paper is 'constipation'. Literally, this is how I feel when I have to write something down. The reason for that similarity between the writing process and constipation is that you have things in there but you cannot get them out. ... But when you ask me to put it down on a piece of paper in a certain format, that is where I cannot get it the way I want to get it. (P-2)

Some other explanations for the metaphor choices are provided below:

> ...driving a car in a totally different country. You might have a driving licence to drive a car in general, and feel safe driving it, but then again, if you are not familiar with the roads and the driving culture of the particular country, you might not do it as easily. (P-9)

> ... a caterpillar, which is incessantly spinning a cocoon. It cannot stop to rest, to eat, even to protect itself from anything dangerous. It just has to keep on doing the work without thinking and until the end. (P-5)

> ... a labyrinth. It requires a lot of hard work and patience to find the exit. (P-4)

As stated previously, the metaphors and the explanations given by the participants reveal the challenges and, in a sense, the desperation of the participants trying hard to reach the end, which for them is the completion of the PhD.

CONCLUSION and IMPLICATIONS

The present study set out to reveal the challenges which NNSE PhD students face. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten NNSE PhD students in ELT departments at different universities around Turkey, an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The study also used a metaphor elicitation task in which participants were asked to construct a metaphor to define what PhD study meant to them.

The findings revealed a variety of difficulties which PhD students face. Among the most salient ones, as was reported in answers to the first research question, were problems related to academic writing in Turkish as opposed to English, written feedback, supervision and administration. These findings were further supported when the participants were asked to arrange items according to the perceived degree of difficulty, which was the second research question. Although the major challenge was found to be *motivation*, which was not mentioned very much in the in-depth interviews, the rest of the findings supported those from the first research question. After *motivation* came *relationship with supervisors, understanding of the academic culture, thesis writing, research support from the university, communication skills*, and *social life and future plan* successively.

The results of the metaphor analysis, which was the third research question addressed in the present study, indicated that most of the participants, with only one exception, found the process of studying for a PhD very challenging, full of difficulties and producing desperation. However, what was common among the metaphors was the idea of success, the completion of the PhD, after all the hard work, pain and suffering.

As it is evident in the findings of this study, some aspects of PhD study should be reconsidered to facilitate what is already a demanding process. One such point concerns being allowed to write in Turkish and English alike. The participants claimed not to have been trained to write academically in Turkish, and they lacked exposure to Turkish in their education process. This issue could be dealt with by teaching academic language in Turkish as well as the format to be followed in writing. Moreover, participants in an ELT PhD programme could be required to write at least one academic paper in Turkish so as to eradicate the problems which they encounter even when they write the abstracts of their theses. As for English, participants reported the difficulty in finding the appropriate words to use in academic writing to be the most challenging part. "It is most important that the second-language writer understands the need to 'write early and write often'" but candidates could nevertheless be given a list of the most frequent words in academic writing and could be asked to analyze their use by using the corpora as a project, for example (Zerubavel, 1999). They already had a complex about being easily labelled as non-native even from their writing let alone their speaking, and this should be prevented in order to help them to feel confident. They should also be given guidance in English rhetoric as this was also stated to be a challenge because Turkish and English have different rhetorical patterns (Kaplan, 1966; 1967). To solve the difficulties of writing which are experienced by students, in addition to providing feedback on the writing process, community participation and peer collaboration could be implemented so that students can get help, guidance and encouragement from others (Larcombe *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, "to start the writing process, maintain consistency in the practice of writing and sharing writing, and motivate them to develop academic writing capacities in English as a second language", writing groups could be formed (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011, p. 203).

The findings concerning written feedback in the in-depth interviews revealed the lack of its provision during the PhD and also the MA processes. Although numerous projects and assignments are given during these stages, the participants stated that they were provided with either no or very little written feedback. Considering the central role of feedback to the development of students' learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), the participants asked for the provision of more written feedback not only on language but also on the content of a paper. However, written feedback was not among the most challenging issues in the ordering task, which might be due to the fact that there were comparatively more challenging items in the ordering.

Regarding the issue of supervision, the participants complained about the lack of involvement in important decisions such as deciding on the topic of a thesis, which echoed the findings of Gunnarsson *et al.*, (2013). The interest and expertise areas of the supervisors should be close to those of the students, otherwise, tension and regret are inevitable. To remedy that, students could be guided very carefully by their teachers to determine their interest areas and then guided to choose the best fitting supervisor in terms of research interests. Additionally, even when an area has been highly researched, students should be given the opportunity to find a relatively less investigated aspect of it and to carry out their research in the area in which they really have interest. Moreover, to limit misunderstandings, as Adams (2003) suggested, workshops could be arranged so that supervisors and supervisees can share their mutual expectations and concerns. Knowing each other and establishing "greater clarity about this educational relationship may also help to avoid a breakdown in relationships or students withdrawing from the programme" (Parker-Jenkins, 2018, p. 66).

Finally, the results of the metaphor elicitation task revealed the importance of PhD study for the candidates. Although they seemed ready to shoulder the burden, they were almost all afraid and desperate. In this respect, they really need understanding work and study environments. In other words, the institutions in which they work should be understanding and flexible with those who opt for further professional development.

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