

STRESS AMONG TURKISH PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMEN ADAYLARININ STRES DÜZEYLERİ

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that student teachers experience high levels of stress, depression, hopelessness and anxiety due to various factors such as role clarification, conformity, time, financial worries, and assignments. However, not enough understanding is available regarding the main stressors and levels of stress in the lives of student teachers within the Turkish context. The present study addresses the following questions: Does study stress among pre-service English language teachers vary between study years and are there gender differences? Participants in this study are 138 pre-service English language teachers from a large public university in İzmir, Turkey. Study stress was measured using the Higher Education Stress Inventory, developed by Dahlin, Joneborg and Runeson (2005). A Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was performed on the stress inventory. Results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS Version 17). Findings indicate that participants are under great stress regardless of the study year. Another important finding is that year 1 students are seriously stressed out, especially when compared with year 2 students. The present study found no significant difference between the mean stress scores of male and female students. There were no significant gender differences on any item, except the variable "Gender and Ethnic Background". Implications are discussed for teacher education in Turkey.

Keywords: Stress, stressors, student teachers, gender, study year

Özet

Alan yazın incelendiğinde hem yurt dışındaki hem de Türkiye'deki çalışmalar, öğretmen adaylarının rol belirsizliği, uyum sorunu, zaman sıkıntısı, maddi problemler ve ödevler gibi pek çok faktör nedeniyle yüksek düzeyde stress, depresyon, umutsuzluk ve kaygı yaşadığı görülmektedir. Ancak Türkiye'de öğretmen adaylarının yaşadığı stres faktörleri ve stres düzeyleri hakkında yeterli çalışma bulunmamaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının stress düzeylerinin sınıf düzeylerine ve cinsiyete göre farklılık gösterip göstermediğini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Çalışmaya İzmir'de bulunan bir devlet üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 138 İngilizce öğretmen adayı katılmıştır. Öğretmen adaylarına, Dahlin, Joneborg ve Runeson (2005) tarafından geliştirilen Yüksek Öğrenim Stres Envanteri uygulanmıştır. Uygulanan principal component analizinde, varimax seçeneği kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler sosyal bilimler için geliştirilmiş olan SPSS 17 istatistik paket programı ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, araştırmaya katılan tüm öğretmen adaylarının yüksek oranda strese maruz kaldıklarını ortaya çıkmıştır. 1.sınıf öğrencilerinin, özellikle 2.sınıf öğrencileri ile karşılaştırıldığında, çok daha stresli oldukları görülmüştür. Stres skorları arasında cinsiyete göre anlamlı bir farklılık görülmemiştir. Ayrıca, 'Cinsiyet ve etnik yapı' dışındaki hiç bir faktörde, cinsiyetler arası önemli bir farklılık tespit edilmemiştir. Bulgular Türkiye'de öğretmen yetiştirme alanıyla ilişkilendirilerek tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Stres faktörleri, öğretmen adayları, cinsiyet, sınıf düzeyi

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INTRODUCTION

Student teachers experience a unique set of circumstances since being a student teacher is a different process from that which other university students experience. Stressors linked with student teaching such as disruptive pupils, expectations, role clarification, conformity, time, evaluation, assignments, peer discussions and feedback can make student teaching an overwhelming experience. Student teachers experiencing high levels of stress caused by feeling unsupported during the practicum, feel demotivated, and may even decide not to teach at all (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Chaplain, 2008; Goldstein, 2005; Merc, 2010).

However, school experience is not the only cause of distress in student teachers. Sumsion (1998), for example, reported the stories of two early childhood student teachers who decided to discontinue their studies in an Australian university, despite their positive practicum reports. The study explored the emotional intensity of these student teachers' responses to the experiences they encountered. Similarly, Miller and Fraser (2000), in their study of 392 student teachers at a teacher education institution in Scotland, pointed to stressors like unclear assignments, too much to do, worrying over their future, a lack of time for study, interpersonal difficulties and loneliness. Early findings of a longitudinal project in England by Malderez et al. (2007) on the experiences of student teachers have also confirmed that becoming a student teacher is a highly emotional experience and that initial professional preparation needs to help student teachers master this "inevitably emotionally-charged business of becoming a teacher" (p.242).

In her examination of psychological distress among prospective teachers, Gardner (2010) draws attention to the lack of studies on the measurement of psychological distress among student teachers and states that anxiety and/or depression may be a problem for many student teachers. Nonetheless, there is little or no attention paid to the sources of student teacher stress and the ways of dealing with it. Student teachers are often expected to cope with their own emotional burdens either by ignoring or suppressing them.

The research literature on the problems of university students and particularly student teachers has indicated that the situation is not different in Turkey (e.g. Gizir, 2005; Ozguven, 1992). Student teachers have a number of significant problems in relation to their academic and social lives such as courses, practicum, health, accommodation, lack of financial resources and relationships with friends. Can (2010), in his study on organizational stressors for the student teachers in 42 different state universities in Turkey, identified various stressors like low status of the teaching profession, expectations of family, crowded classrooms, lack of materials and long working hours.

Although it is accepted that life satisfaction and an intense feeling of joy can contribute to the personal development of student teachers and their happiness as teachers (Oguz-Duran, 2010), student teachers in Turkey are reported to experience a lack of motivation and strong feelings of insecurity, dissatisfaction and hopelessness (e.g. Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Bostancı et al., 2005; Kızılaslan, 2011; Sahin 2009).

However, little understanding is available regarding the main stress factors in the lives of student teachers within the Turkish context. Therefore, the present study addresses the following questions: Does study stress among prospective English language teachers vary between study years and are there gender differences? Considering the crucial role teachers play in the development of their students, and of the society on the whole, this study is an important step which contributes to student teachers' becoming happier, more effective teachers in the future.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this quantitative study are student teachers enrolled at the English language teaching department. At this department, 608 students were listed as at 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years. Two stage stratified random sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of equal numbers of females and males in the study sample from each study year. A total of 138 students (36 year from 1st year, 32 from 2nd year, 36 from 3rd year and 34 from 4th year) were approached at the end of the 2013-2014 academic year. Surveys were completed during the class hours in the final week of the spring term.

Instrument

Study stress was measured using the Higher Education Stress Inventory (HESI), developed by Dahlin, Joneborg and Runeson (2005), consisting of 33 items to be rated on a four-point Likert scale, 1-4, (totally disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, totally agree). The survey originally developed in Sweden was first piloted to a smaller group of students (N=36) at the department in order to check its suitability for the Turkish context. Following the pilot, three items were eliminated and it was converted into a five- point Likert scale survey with the middle option (no response) added. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the adapted survey was found to be 0.773. Additivity was confirmed using ANOVA with Tukey's test for non-additivity.

Data Analysis

A Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was performed on the stress inventory, using the Kaiser normalization with Eigenvalues >1. 10 factors were identified, explaining 64.48% of total variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (0.707) and Barlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.0005$) were calculated to assess the suitability of carrying out a factor analysis on the data (Field, 2005). The factors were labeled as "Lack of peer support", "Gender and ethnic background", "Worry about the future profession", "Lack of time for own interests", "Financial concerns", "Unclear assignments", "Timing of assignments", "Poor quality of the education system", "Competitive atmosphere" and "Lack of teacher support". Table 1 shows Cronbach's alphas for the factors identified. Factors with low alphas were included as they are considered to cover relevant aspect of stress.

Table 1. Cronbach's alphas for the factors

	Factors									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
isolation	,750									
cold atmosphere	,598								,433	
family career	,501								-,379	
gender		,794								
ethnic		,788								
demand	,372	,465								
long working			,776							
stressful			,721							
studies control				,724						
future profession				,550						
weakness				,529						
responsibility				,506			,493			
professional			,332	,421						
accommodation					,673					
financial					,602			,405		
dejected										
economy			,514		,541					
influence study						-,666				
unclear goals						,623				,410
function unclear						,597				
literature							,865			
pace							,631			
passive								,838		
training conflict								-,408		
competitive									,806	
fail clarify										,829
Cronbach α	0.548	0.614	0.621	0.565	0.545	0.428	0.530	0.373	0.409	0.399
Variance										
Explained %	13.95	8.05	7.66	6.03	5.95	4.99	4.89	4.55	4.36	4.05

Results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 17). Differences between genders were analyzed using the Independent t-test for normal variables and the Mann-Whitney U test for non-normal variables. Differences between study years were analyzed using the ANOVA, Scheffe for normal variables and the Kruskal Wallis test for non-normal variables.

RESULTS

Results of the current study showed that students' stress scores range between 53 and 106. The mean stress score for students in general was reported to be 78.219 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and histogram of stress scores

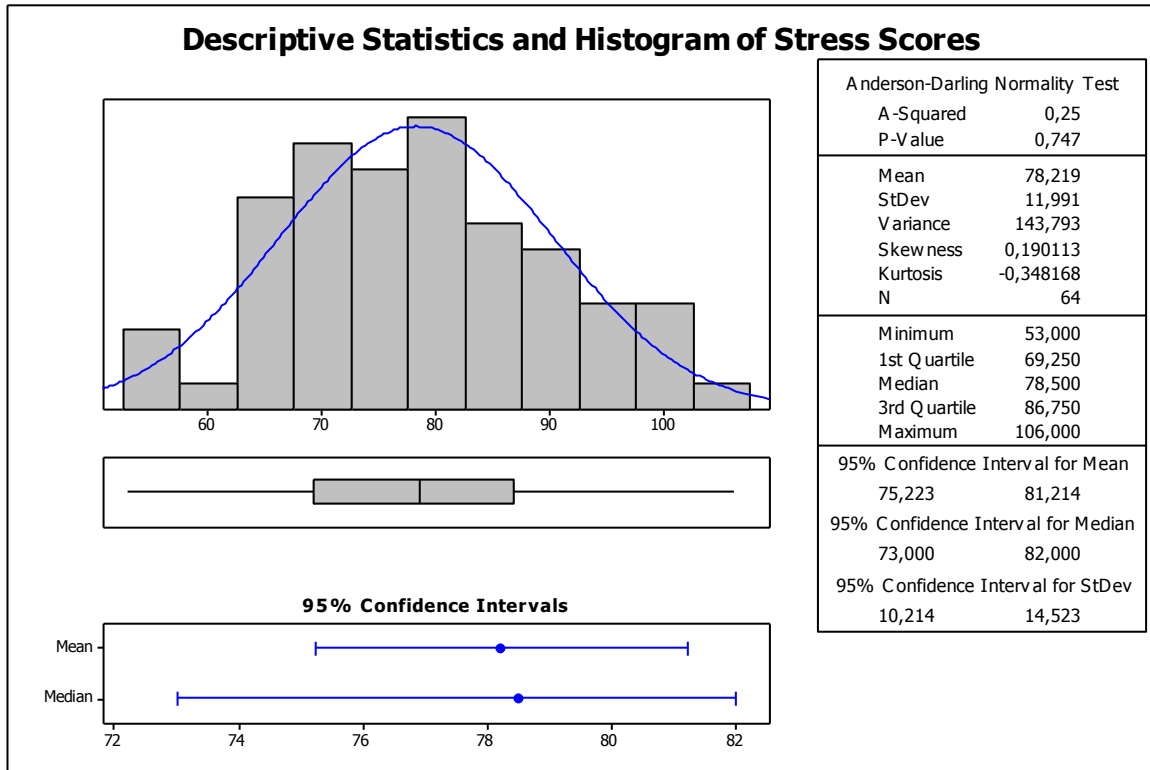


Figure 1 displays stress scores by gender and study year. Results indicate that year 1 female students have a higher mean stress score (81.61) than their peers in year 4 (80.13). Females with the lowest stress score (73.81) are in year 2. Results also show that stress scores of year 4 females have the lowest standard deviation (8.02), and stress scores of year 3 females have the highest standard deviation (11.79). The mean stress score of year 1 male students was found to be the highest (83.72). They are followed by year 3 males (77.47), year 2 males (75.81) and year 4 males (74.93).

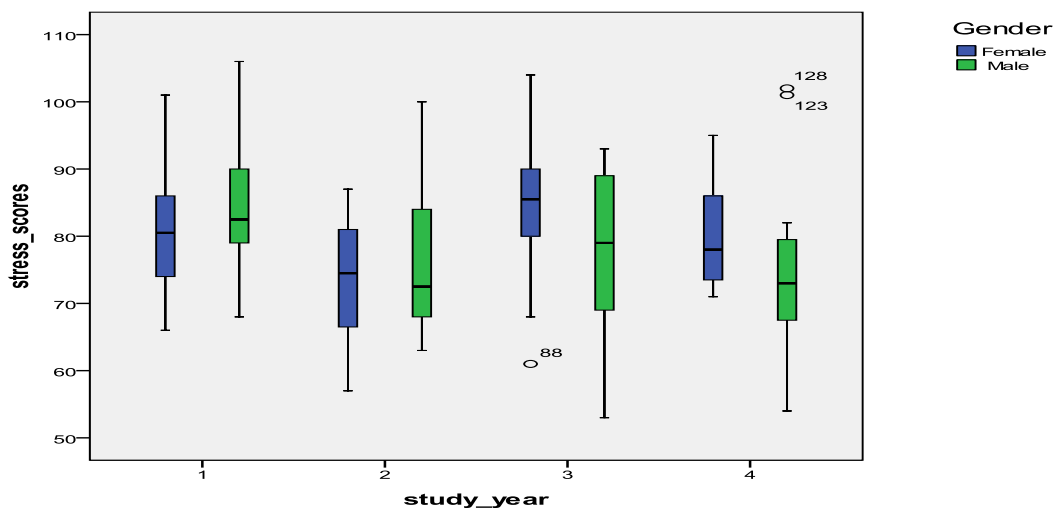


Figure 1. Stress scores by gender and study year (Numbers 88, 123,128 identifying potential outliers)

A cut-point of 71 was identified using the ROC curve, indicating that students with a stress score of over 71 are under great stress and students with a stress score of below 71 are less influenced by stress. This means that 93 students in the sample are under great stress and 45 students are not seriously stressed out.

There were no significant gender differences on any item, except the variable “Gender and ethnic background”. As Table 3 indicates, male students gave higher ratings to “Gender and ethnic background” than females. According to the results of the Mann Whitney U test ($p\text{-value}=0.049 < \alpha=0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups (see Table 4).

Table 3. Comparison of non-normal variables by gender

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Gender/ethnic background	Female	69	62.81	4334,00
	Male	69	76.19	5257,00
	Total	138		
Lack of time for own Interests	Female	69	72.93	5032,50
	Male	68	65.01	4420,50
	Total	137		
Unclear assignment	Female	69	62.80	4333,00
	Male	67	74.37	
	Total	136		
Timing of assignments	Female	69	70.49	4863,50
	Male	69	68.51	4727,50
	Total	138		
Lack of teacher support	Female	68	68.74	4674,00
	Male	68	68.26	4642,00
	Total	136		

Table 4. Test results for non-normal variables

Mann-Whitney U	1919,000	2074,500	1918,000	2312,500	2296,000
Wilcoxon W	4334,000	4420,500	4333,000	4727,500	4642,000
Z	-1,965	-1,173	-1,743	-,292	-,071
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,049	,241	,081	,770	,944

There were no significant study year differences on any item. However, comparison of stress scores by study year indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean stress scores of students in year 1 and year 2 ($p\text{-value}=0.038 < \alpha=0.05$). It is possible to note that the mean stress score of year 1 students is higher than the mean stress score of year 2 students (see Table 5 and Figure 2).

Table 5. Comparison of stress scores by study year

Study year	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Dev.	Variance
1 Stress scores	36	40	66	106	82,67	10,054	101,086
2 Stress scores	32	43	57	100	74,81	9,852	97,060
3 Stress scores	29	51	53	104	81,10	12,954	167,810
4 Stress scores	30	48	54	102	77,53	10,994	120,878

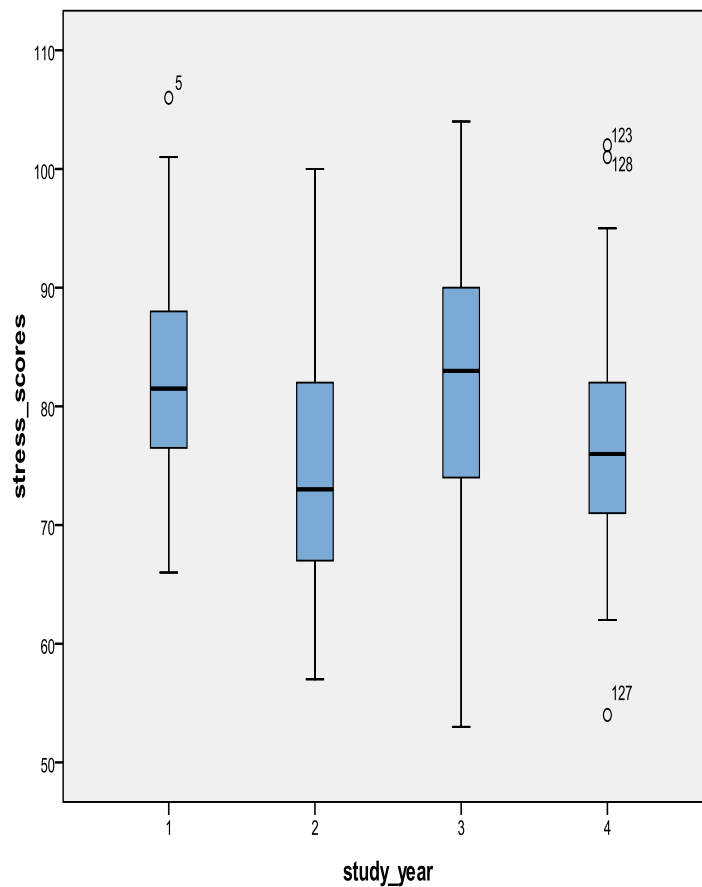


Figure 2. Comparison of stress scores by study year

Binary logistic regression with stepwise backward elimination of insignificant variables was used to examine the influence of variables on students' stress levels. As Table 6 shows, the variables 'lack of peer support' (factor 1), 'gender and ethnic background' (factor 2), 'worry about the future profession' (factor 3), 'lack of time for own interests' (factor 4), 'financial concerns' (factor 5) and 'unclear assignments' (factor 6) were identified as significant variables in students' stress scores.

Table 6. The influence of variables on students' stress scores

	Beta	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Odds Ratio Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B) Lower	Upper
Step 1 ^a Factor1	,428	,142	9,083	1	,003	1,535	1,162	2,027
Factor2	,361	,156	5,344	1	,021	1,435	1,057	1,950
Factor3	,412	,191	4,638	1	,031	1,509	1,038	2,196
Factor4	,602	,166	13,121	1	,000	1,825	1,318	2,527
Factor5	,552	,161	11,790	1	,001	1,737	1,267	2,381
Factor6	,611	,212	8,325	1	,004	1,842	1,216	2,790
Constant	-32,757	7,122	21,157	1	,000	,000		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: factor1, factor2, factor3, factor4, factor5, factor6.

DISCUSSION

Considering the mean stress scores for all study levels, it is possible to claim that participants, regardless of the study year, seem to be under great stress. It was found that students in the sample had a mean stress score of 78.219, which should be considered rather alarming. It was found that 93 students in the sample are under great stress. This finding is in agreement with Bayram and Bilgel's (2008) findings which showed that there is a high prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress among university students in Bursa, Turkey. This finding also corroborates the ideas of Bostanci et al. (2005), who highlighted the high frequency of depressive symptoms among university students in Denizli, Turkey.

Another important finding was that year 1 students were found to be under great stress, especially when compared with year 2 students. In agreement with results from the study conducted by Dahlin, Jonesborg and Runeson (2005) in Sweden, year 1 students in Turkey seem to suffer more from stress. This result is also consistent with that of Bayram and Bilgel (2008), who found that 1st year students had higher scores for depression, anxiety and stress than those in higher levels. However, the finding that freshmen have the highest stress scores is not supported by Sahin (2009), who did not find any correlation between hopelessness level of students at an education faculty in Turkey and their study year. On the other hand, Bostanci et al. (2005) suggested a positive correlation between depression and study year among university students in Turkey, explaining that the workload of students increased with the study year.

The significant levels of stress experienced by year 1 students in the current study might be a feature of the process of undergoing the transition from home to the university setting. It is possible that many of the students have moved from home for the first time, and that they are now expected to maintain a high level of academic achievement and adjust to a new social environment (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). In addition, these freshmen have probably been struggling with the problems of moving from childhood to adulthood, which is a critical stage of human development marked by uncertainty and stress (Ozguven, 1992).

In contrast to earlier findings of Can (2010), Chaplain (2008) and Dahlin, Jonesborg and Runeson (2005), who found that females experience more stress and depression

than males, the present study found no significant differences between the mean stress scores of male and female students. This finding is in agreement with Bayram and Bilgel (2008) and Bostanci et al. (2005), who did not observe any significant gender differences in depressive symptoms and depressions scores of university students in Turkey.

An important finding to emerge from this study is that males gave higher ratings to 'Gender and ethnic background' than females. There were no significant gender differences on any item, except this variable. Considering the significant socio-cultural differences between various regions of the country, it is possible that 1st year males studying in a different city to that of their birth experience different stressors, and sometimes more pronounced stress in the absence of their usual support framework, such as family, relatives and friends. This finding indicates that male students are not satisfied with the present socio-cultural climate, which might adversely affect their studies.

The variables that significantly influence students' stress scores were found to be 'lack of peer support', 'gender and ethnic background', 'worry about the future profession', 'lack of time for own interests', 'financial concerns' and 'unclear assignments'. This finding supports the previous finding that students, especially 1st year students, feel rather lonely at the beginning of their education period. It can be seen that those stressors related to personal and interpersonal worries are rated more highly than those that relate to studying. The top 2 stressors 'lack of peer support' and 'gender and ethnic background' relate to personal and interpersonal issues, either directly or indirectly. Although this finding is not supported by Miller and Fraser (2000), who found that stressors related to academic life and studying were rated more highly by student teachers in Scotland, it is consistent with Gizir's (2005) findings. In his study conducted at a big state university in Turkey, Gizir also found that university students had problems related to friendship relations. The students in Gizir's study complained about artificial friendships which are not based on mutual trust and affection. Similarly, the students in the current study cannot get the emotional, social and practical assistance they need from their peers and suffer from a feeling of loneliness and isolation.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the current study suggest that student teachers in Turkey might be under more pressure than was previously thought. It is known that excessive stress impacts on educational attainment and quality of life. Experiencing high levels of stress may also undermine well-being and lead to major depression. Understanding causes of stress and helpful coping strategies has the potential to contribute to teacher education. It is, therefore, urgent that those involved in teacher education in Turkey ask whether or not high levels of stress experienced by student teachers encourage the development of healthy, loving and efficient teachers.

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