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Teacher - student relationships across teaching careers of Turkish EFL teachers

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The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between teachers' professional experience and students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers. It also investigated the influence of these perceptions of students toward the course and the teacher. Fourteen high school teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) and 436 students participated in the study. Teachers had a professional experience of either two years or less or twenty years or more. Results showed that experienced teachers were perceived by students as significantly more co-operative than new teachers. There was no significant difference between influence behaviors of experienced and new teachers. Students' perceptions of relationships with teacher had a significant effect on their affect toward the course and the teacher. Effect of proximity was higher for both forms of affect.

Key words: Teachers' interpersonal behavior, affect toward course, affect toward teacher.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of teacher-student relationships and perceptions of both parties concerning these interactions are key factors affecting various aspects of learning environments. Teacher-student interactions in classroom are thought to mediate the relationship between instructional characteristics and students' academic achievement (Khine and Atputhsahamy, 2005).

Research has shown that there is a strong link between teachers' interpersonal behavior and students' attitudes toward and subjects in all areas (Den Brok et. al., 2004; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 1998; Wubbels et.al., 2006) and engagement in learning activities (Brekelmans et al., 2001; Wubbels and Levy, 1993). Such teacher related variables as job satisfaction (Veldman et al., 2013), burn-out, motivation, enthusiasm and enjoyment of the workplace are also influenced by teacher-student relationships. Researchers generally agree that relationships with students are among the most common sources of teachers' work stress (Wubbels and Levy, 1993; Wubbels and Brekelmans, 1998; Ben-Chaim and Zoller, 2001; Den Brok et al., 2004; Kyriakides, 2005). Consequently, cultivating healthy relationships between teachers and students within the classroom remains a major and crucial challenge for educators.

There are several student, class and teacher characteristics associated with students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers. Among these are student and teacher gender, students' socio-economic status, attitudes toward school and achievement, age, teacher experience and subject taught (Fisher et al., 2006).
Research on the association between teachers’ professional experience and students’ perceptions of student-teacher relationships is relatively scarce (Brekelmans et al., 2005; Veldman et al., 2013). As teachers gain more experience in their profession, various aspects of their identity and their classroom practices also change profoundly. It is certain that teacher-student relationships are also deeply influenced by changes in teachers’ professional identity and practices as a result of greater professional experience. How can interpersonal behavior patterns of new and experienced teachers be characterized? Do students’ perceptions of their relationships with teachers vary depending on teachers’ professional experience? Do students’ perceptions of their relationships with teachers influence their affect toward the course and the teacher?

This study aims to investigate the relationship between professional experience of Turkish high school teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) and students' perceptions of teacher-student relationship. It further investigates the relationship between students’ perceptions of teacher-student relationship and students’ affect toward the course and the teacher.

It is important to know more about students’ perceptions of beginning and experienced teachers’ interpersonal behavior patterns and effect of student-teacher interactions on students’ affect toward the course/teacher. This knowledge can give teachers, teacher educators and scholars valuable information and insight that can be utilized to help improve various aspects of learning environments. For instance, given the importance of relationships with students for teachers, a deeper understanding of teacher-student relationships throughout teachers’ careers can improve teachers’ job satisfaction and motivation and also classroom management by helping teachers deal with discipline problems in a constructive way. Knowledge about the changes that teachers go through in terms of their interpersonal behaviors can help teacher educators improve pre- and in-service teacher education, design professional development programs that are better suited to specific needs in particular phases of teachers’ careers. This can contribute to improvement of teaching and learning in classrooms.

### Model for teachers’ interpersonal behavior

A widely used model for studying student-teacher interpersonal relationships is the Model for Interpersonal Teacher Behavior (MITB). Developed by Wubbels et al. (1985), MITB is based on Timothy Leary’s (1957) research on the interpersonal diagnosis of personality. In the MITB, teacher-student interpersonal relationship is mapped in a two dimensional co-ordinate system.

Dimensions are called Proximity (Cooperation-Opposition, CO) and Influence (Dominance-Submission, DS). Proximity (CO) represents the degree of cooperation or closeness between teachers and students. The Influence (DS) dimension indicates who is directing or controlling the communication and how often (Wubbels and Brekelmans, 2005).

Each quadrant of the co-ordinate system represents two segments of teacher interpersonal behavior, hence a total of eight sectors of teacher interpersonal behavior. For example the two sectors in the first quadrant (Dominance and Cooperation) are called Leadership (DC, representing a high level of Dominance and a lower-moderate level of Co-operation) and Helping/Friendly (a high level of Cooperation and a lower level of Dominance; thus CD). Sectors in the second quadrant (Cooperation-Submission) are called Understanding (a high level of Cooperation and a lower-moderate level of submission, CS), Student Responsibility/Freedom (a high level of submission and a lower level of co-operation, SC). In the third quadrant (Submission-Opposition) are sectors of Uncertain (higher submission, lower opposition; SO) and Dissatisfied (high level of opposition, lower level of submission; OS); and finally in the fourth quadrant (Opposition-Dominance) are Admonishing (high level of opposition, lower level of dominance; OD) and Strict (high level of dominance, lower level of opposition; DO) (Wubbels and Brekelmans, 2005). Sectors are presented graphically in Figure 1. The closer sectors are to the Dominance/Submission dimension (strict, leading, uncertain and student responsibility/freedom) the more they contribute to this dimension, and similarly helpful/friendly, understanding, dissatisfied and admonishing contribute most to the Cooperation/Opposition dimension.

Sample teachers’ interpersonal behaviors representing each sector are listed in Table 1

Based on the MITB, Wubbels et al. (1985) developed the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI) to map students’ and teachers’ (self) perceptions of teacher interpersonal behavior. Using data from both Dutch and American classes, eight different types of teacher profiles were defined: Directive, Authoritative, Tolerant, Uncertain/Tolerant, Uncertain/Aggressive, Drudging and Repressive.

Directive, Authoritative and Tolerant-Authoritative types are characterized by fairly dominant (control oriented, high in influence) teacher behavior but differ in the amount of Proximity (affiliation orientation). Directive teachers are less co-operative. Tolerant teachers are about as co-operative as Authoritative teachers, but differ from Authoritative teachers in their degree of dominance. The least co-operative sectors are Repressive and Uncertain-Aggressive, repressive teachers being the most dominant of all eight types (Wei et al., 2009).

Directive, Authoritative, Tolerant and Tolerant-Authoritative types have been found to be the most common teacher profiles (Maulana et al., 2011). Wubbels et al. (2006) report that both teachers and students...
Figure 1. The Model for Teacher Interpersonal Behavior (MITB) (Source: Wubbels and Levy, 1993).

Table 1. Sample teachers’ behaviors for the sectors of the MITB (based on descriptions provided by Wubbels et al., 1985).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Sector (Scale)</th>
<th>Sample behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Organizing, giving directions, setting tasks, determining procedures, being aware of what’s happening, providing structure, explaining, making intentions clear, holding class attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Helpful/Friendly</td>
<td>Assisting, showing interest and concern, being able to take a joke, inspiring confidence and trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Listening with interest, displaying empathy, patience, trust, openness and tolerance, looking for ways to settle differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Student Freedom</td>
<td>Promoting independent work, being lenient, allowing students to go at their own pace, waiting for the class to settle down, approving of student activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Acting hesitant and timid, apologizing, adopting “wait and see” attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS</td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Disapproving, criticizing, looking unhappy or moody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OD</td>
<td>Admonishing</td>
<td>Getting angry, being sarcastic, irritated and forbidding, admonishing, punishing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO</td>
<td>Strict</td>
<td>Keeping a tight rein, checking, judging, demanding silence, setting rules, giving hard tests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

usually prefer tolerant-authoritative, authoritative, and directive profiles as these combine high teacher control and teacher-student affiliation.

Studies carried out in Turkey have shown that Turkish teachers too are perceived by students to display more cooperative than opposition behaviors. Rakici (2004) study with 722 eighth grade science students in 5 schools and Simseker’s (2005) study with 1317 eighth grade mathematics students in 17 schools and 22 teachers have shown that students perceive their science and mathematics teachers cooperative and strict.

Studies generally show that teachers’ professional experience, among various other demographic variables, has a significant effect on students’ perceptions of teacher-student relationships (Fisher et al., 2006).

Teachers’ interpersonal behavior and career

Literature on the association between teachers’ experience and student-teacher interpersonal relationship has found mixed results. Generally speaking, teachers’ influence seems to be higher and displays an upward trend in early years of teachers’ career whereas proximity seems to remain rather steady.

For instance, Brekelmans et al. (2002) argue that there is a significant linear upward trend in teacher dominance especially in the first eight years of teachers’ careers. Throughout this period teachers move from more
“uncertain” behavior that gives student more freedom toward more leadership and strict behaviors. Students usually perceive beginning teachers as Uncertain/Tolerant and Tolerant. This perception urges teachers to do something about it. Beginning teachers mainly attribute (consciously or unconsciously) problems in interacting with students to the Influence area and they develop dominance patterns in their daily practices. Yet, there is no linear trend in co-operative behavior. Teachers in general do not become more friendly and understanding as they become more experienced (Brekelmans et al., 2002).

Brekelmans et al. (1992) too found higher levels of teachers’ influence in the first ten years.

In another study, Brekelmans et al. (2005) found that students’ and teachers’ perceptions of teachers’ influence developed in the first 6 (mainly the first 3) years of teaching. Most teachers learned to cope with problems in providing structure and maintaining order in classrooms in the first years of their careers. Within the first two years of teaching, Authoritative and Tolerant/Authoritative profiles were more often. Teachers’ self-perceptions and students’ perceptions of proximity in the teacher–student relationship hardly changed in the first 20 years of the career. There was a decline in proximity towards the end of teaching career. Thus, towards the end of the teaching career there was an increase in the number of Repressive teachers while this profile was totally absent at the beginning (Brekelmans et al., 2005).

In their cross-sectional study with 573 Dutch teachers and 25,000 students, Brekelmans et al. (1992) showed that influence was high during the first ten years. Co-operative behavior, however, remained rather consistent throughout the entire teaching career.

Some other studies found contrasting results concerning the relationship between teachers’ career and influence. Although students’ perceptions of teachers’ proximity did not vary depending on teacher’s experience - just like in studies mentioned above - there was a positive relationship between teacher’s experience and students’ perceptions of teachers’ influence (Brekelmans et al., 2002; Somers et al., 1997; Wubbels and Brekelmans, 1998; Wubbels and Levy, 1993). Similarly, in a study with 3085 students and 67 teachers, Levy et al. (1992) found that students and teachers perceived teachers with less (fewer years of) experience as less dominant than more experienced teachers. In the light of the discussion so far, this study aims to answer the following research question:

**RQ1:** Do students’ perceptions of teacher interpersonal behavior (Influence vs. Proximity) vary depending on teachers’ professional experience?

**Teachers’ interpersonal behavior and students’ affective outcomes**

Studies investigating the link between perceptions of teacher–student relationship and students’ affective outcomes found positive associations between both influence and proximity and such affective outcome measures as attitudes toward class, motivation and affect with the course/teacher. In terms of sectors, strong positive associations were found between such interpersonal sectors as leadership and helpful/friendly, and affective outcomes, whereas there were negative relationships with such sectors as admonishing, dissatisfied, and, in most cases, strictness (Maulana et al., 2011).

The study carried out in Grades 8-10 Maths classes in Australia by Fisher and Rickards (1998) showed that in classes where students perceived greater Leadership and Helping/Friendly teachers’ behaviors, there was a more favorable attitude toward the class. The opposite was true when the teacher was perceived as Strict or Dissatisfied.

Henderson and Fisher (2008) found that the more Leadership, Helping/Friendly and Understanding behavior and the more Students’ Freedom students perceived, the more positive were their attitudes towards the course and the more satisified the students were with the course. Conversely, students who perceived higher levels of Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Admonishing and Strict behaviors were more likely to show less positive attitudes toward the course and feel less satisfied with the course.

In a study with Physics teachers, Brekelmans (1989) reported that Authoritative and Directive teachers had the highest students’ attitude scores. Students of Drudging, Uncertain/Aggressive and Repressive teachers had the worst attitudes toward Physics (cited in Wubbels and Brekelmans, 2005).

In terms of influence vs. proximity, some studies reported somewhat stronger effects for proximity (Telli et al., 2007) although influence too had a positive effect on such variables as pleasure, relevance, effort and subject-related attitudes.

Amelsvoort (1999) demonstrated that the association between interpersonal teacher behavior and students’ subject specific motivation is both direct as well as indirect via students’ motivation and regulation processes (cited in Den Brok et al., 2004). He found two significant causal paths leading from proximity to students’ pleasure: one path linked the two variables directly, the other path linked proximity to students’ regulation of emotions, which in turn affected effort, with effort affecting pleasure (Wubbels and Brekelmans, 2005).

In a study carried out in Indonesia by Maulana et al. (2011) influence and proximity were found to be important determinants of student motivation. Both dimensions were related to a more autonomous motivation, while influence was also associated with a more controlled motivation. Interestingly in his study, the relationship between teachers’ interpersonal behavior and student motivation was more strongly connected to influence than to proximity.
Table 2. Reliability coefficients for the QTI and subscales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>No. of Items</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC- Leadership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD- Helpful / Friendly</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS- Understanding</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC- Student Responsibility / Freedom</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO- Uncertain</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS- Dissatisfied</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OD- Admonishing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO- Strict</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QTI</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>.735</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Factor loadings of exploratory factor analysis on the scales of QTI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC – Leadership</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD – Helpful/Friendly</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS – Understanding</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC – Student Freedom</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO – Uncertain</td>
<td>-.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS – Dissatisfied</td>
<td>-.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OD – Admonishing</td>
<td>-.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO – Strict</td>
<td>-.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Den Brok et al. (2005) found that teachers’ interpersonal behavior explained more than 12 percent of the total variance in students’ attitudes towards science.

In the light of data presented so far this study aims to answer the following research question:

**RQ2: How much variance in students’ affect toward the course and toward the teacher can be explained by teachers’ interpersonal behavior?**

**MATERIALS and METHODS**

**Sample**

This study was carried out in May 2013 at four high schools in downtown Ankara, Turkey. 14 EFL teachers and 436 students taught by these teachers participated in the study. Convenience was the key factor in selection of the sample. Teachers were purposefully selected for the study. Only EFL teachers with a professional experience of 2 years or less and 20 years or more who taught the same grade (2nd year of high school) of students participated in the study. Of 14 participants, 8 teachers had a teaching experience of 2 years or less and 6 teachers had a teaching experience of 20 years or more. 9 teachers were males and 5 were females. Each teacher administered the questionnaire in one class. Students were briefly informed about the aim of the study by their teachers. They were also reminded that their evaluations concerning how they felt about the teacher/course (good vs. bad; valuable vs. not valuable) were not meant to judge the teacher/course with such adjectives or insult him/her but were used as expressions representing one side of a continuum. A student’s evaluation about a teacher might fall in a random point in the continuum and this does not necessarily mean this student thinks his/her teacher is worthless or bad.

**Instruments**

**The Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI):** The QTI which was originally developed in the Netherlands (Wubbels and Levy, 1991) has been widely used to assess teacher-student relationships. The QTI proved to be a reliable and valid measure of teacher-student relationships (Wubbels and Brekelmans, 2005) as studies with Dutch, American, Australian and multi ethnic samples (Den Brok et al., 2009) have shown.

This study used the Turkish version of the QTI. The Turkish version of the QTI developed by Telli (2006) has 62 items. Students rate their teachers’ interpersonal behavior on a 5 point Likert scale with 0 meaning Never and 4 meaning Always. Some sample items from the questionnaire are: “This teacher is a good leader,” and “This teacher is strict.” Each completed questionnaire yields a set of eight scale scores.

In Telli’s study, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the eight scales for the 62-item Turkish version of the QTI was between (.74 and .97). Exploratory factor analyses indicated that two factors that explained 76.5% of variance structured the eight scales.

For this study, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the eight scales and for the QTI as a whole (Table 2) varied between .671 and .893. Exploratory factor analyses indicated that eight scales loaded on two factors with an Eigenvalue larger than 1. Two factors explained 78 percent of the total variance and could be labelled Influence and Proximity dimensions. Factor loadings of exploratory factor analysis on the eight scales of QTI are provided in Table 3.

**Affect Toward the Teacher/Course Scales:** In order to quantify students’ affect toward the course and the instructor, 8 items developed by McCroskey (1994) were adapted and used for this study. 4 items tapped students’ affect toward the course and 4 items tapped students’ affect toward the instructor. The scale is a 7 point semantic differential scale. The students were asked to mark their evaluation on a scale between two bipolar adjectives describing the instructor/course like: “Good-Bad”, or “Valuable-Worthless”.

Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was (.783) for the Affect Toward the Teacher (ATT) Scale and (.814) for the Affect Toward the Course (ATC) Scale.
### Table 4. Results of t-test and descriptive statistics for professional experience and student-teacher interpersonal relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Experience</th>
<th>95% CI for Mean Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Teachers</td>
<td>Experienced Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INFLUENCE</strong></td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROXIMITY</strong></td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.01.

### Table 5. Regression analysis on the effect of student-teacher relationship on students' affect toward the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>4.363</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INFLUENCE</strong></td>
<td>-.127</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>-.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROXIMITY</strong></td>
<td>-.082</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>-.238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F=20.013, p<.01; R= .291, R²= .085.

### Analyses

Students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships were analyzed according to dimension scores: Influence (Dominance-Submission, DS) score and a Proximity(CO) score. For this analysis, eight scale scores (Leadership - DC, Helpful/Friendly - CD, Understanding - CS, Student Freedom - SC, Uncertain - SO, Dissatisfied - OS, Admonishing - OD, and Strict - DO) were converted linearly to two dimension scores. In computing dimension scores, the formula suggested by Wubbels and Brekelmans (2005) was used. The closer sectors are to the Dominance/Submission dimension (strict, leading, uncertain and student responsibility/freedom) the more they contribute to this dimension, and similarly helpful/friendly, understanding, dissatisfied and admonishing contribute most to the Cooperation/Opposition dimension. The higher these scores are, the more influence or proximity was perceived in the behavior of a teacher. To obtain mean QTI scores for classes, scores of students from the same class were combined to a class mean.

Independent samples t-test was used to compare means of two groups and one-way ANOVA was used for multiple group comparisons. In case of a significant variance between groups Tukey test for multiple comparisons was used to find the source of variance. In order to test variance homogeneity hypothesis Levene test was utilized. To quantify the correlation between variables Pearson correlation coefficient was computed and to understand how the typical value of the dependent variable changed when any one of the independent variables was varied, regression analysis was performed. Results were interpreted at (.01) or (.05) confidence intervals. All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 16 software.

### RESULTS

The first research question of this study involved a comparison of students' perceptions of beginning and experienced teachers' interpersonal behaviors. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare students' perceptions of beginning teachers’ (with 2 years or less of teaching experience) and experienced teachers’ (with 20 years or more of teaching experience) interpersonal behavior. Results of the t-test are provided in Table 4.

There is not a significant difference (t= -1.56, p= 0.12) between influence scores of beginning teachers (M=2.73, SD=1.11) and experienced teachers (M=2.88, SD=0.82). However, the difference between proximity scores of beginning teachers (M=4.38, SD=3.39) and experienced teachers (M=5.99, SD=1.99) is significant (t= -6.02, p = 0.00). Proximity scores of experienced teachers are significantly higher than those of beginning teachers. These results suggest that teachers’ professional experience has a significant effect on students’ perceptions of teachers’ proximity. According to students’ perceptions, experienced teachers are significantly more co-operative than beginning teachers. Effect of teachers’ experience on teachers’ influence behavior is not significant.

For the second research question of this study, simple linear regression analysis was performed to analyze the effect of student-teacher interpersonal relationship on students’ affect toward the course and the teacher. Results of the simple linear regression for the effect of student-teacher relationship on students’ affect toward the course is provided in Table 5 and for the effect of student-teacher relationship on students’ affect toward the teacher in Table 6.

Results of the regression analysis showed that students’ perceptions of their relationships with teacher accounted for 8.5% of the variance in students’ affect toward the course [R²=.085, F=20.013, p<.01].
Table 6. Regression analysis on the effect of student-teacher relationship on students’ affect toward the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>4.116</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>44.792</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFLUENCE</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROXIMITY</td>
<td>-.214</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>-.728</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F= 242.348, p<.01; R=.727, R²=.528.

factors (Influence) (β = -.125, p < .01) and (Proximity) (β = -.238, p < .01) had significant effects on students’ affect toward the course.

Results of the regression analysis showed that students’ perceptions of relationships with the teacher accounted for 52.8% of the variance in students’ affect toward the teacher [R²=.528, F=242.348, p<.01]. Perceived Proximity of the teacher had a significant effect on students’ affect toward him/her (β = -.728, p < .01), while the effect of Influence (β = .008, p > .05) was not significant.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to investigate the relationship between EFL teachers’ professional experience and students' perceptions of teacher-student relationship in a Turkish high school setting. It further examined the influence of these perceptions on students’ affect toward the course and toward the teacher. 14 EFL teachers who had a professional experience of 2 years or less or 20 years or more and 436 students at 2nd grade (year) of high school taught by these teachers participated in the study. 8 teachers had a teaching experience of 2 years or less and 6 teachers had a teaching experience of 20 years or more.

Results show that although students perceive experienced teachers exercising a slightly higher level of influence (control) this difference is not significant. New teachers too are perceived to be exerting similar levels of control. However, proximity scores of experienced teachers are significantly higher than those of beginning teachers. As teachers gain more experience they are perceived by their students to be more co-operative. In other words experienced teachers are better at relating to their students than new teachers. They can achieve significantly greater proximity with their students without compromising interpersonal control over their students. New teachers are perceived to maintain a similar level of interpersonal control in classroom but this result comes at the expense of these young teachers growing somewhat detached from students.

Literature generally suggests that teachers’ co-operation be consistent throughout the entire teaching career (Brekelmans et al., 1992; Brekelmans et al., 2002; Somers et al., 1997; Wubbels and Brekelmans, 1998; Wubbels and Levy, 1993). Brekelmans et al. (2005) found that teachers’ self-perceptions and students’ perceptions of proximity hardly changed in the first 20 years of their career. There was a decline in proximity towards the end of teaching career.

Our finding that experienced teachers are perceived to be significantly closer and more co-operative contrasts with previous evidence. We believe to some extent, this finding can be explained by cultural differences. Turkey is a country that is high on Hofstede’s dimensions of collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 1980) and that is above average in conservatism, hierarchy, egalitarian commitment and harmony (Schwartz, 1994). Social status and age are important factors determining the level of respect a person is accorded by the society. In Turkish cultural setting, leaders, and also other people in positions of authority including teachers, are expected to display such paternalistic attributes as parental consideration, highly personalized strong leadership and limited delegation (Ronen, 1986). We believe that relatively higher levels of teachers’ influence, although not significant, and significantly higher levels of proximity displayed by more experienced teachers can be associated with those role expectations.

On the other hand, literature on the the association between teachers’ experience and influence shows mixed results. For instance; Levy et al. (1992) found higher levels of dominance for more experienced teachers. In some other studies too there was a positive relationship between teacher’s experience and students’ perceptions of teachers’ influence (Brekelmans et al., 1992; Brekelmans et al., 2002; Somers et al., 1997; Wubbels and Brekelmans, 1998; Wubbels and Levy, 1993). Yet, other studies found little change over years after a period of a linear upward trend in the first few years although definition of “first few years” changed slightly (the first eight years according to Brekelmans et al., 2002; ten years according to Brekelmans et al., 1992; and first 3-6 years according to Brekelmans et al., 2005).

Our finding that there is no significant difference between influence (control oriented) behavior of new and experienced teachers is generally in contrast with the literature. We believe this result can be explained by cultural expectations concerning teachers’ roles.
Culturally, Turkish teachers are expected to be role models. New and more experienced teachers alike are traditionally expected to exhibit and thus pass on culturally accepted and appropriate behaviors and attitudes to students. They are required to enforce on students a certain and more strictly defined set of behavioral norms, a stricter disciplinary code compared to Dutch schools – a society with a considerably smaller power distance. Therefore teachers are expected to be dominant, to direct students’ activities and maintain a high level of control on their behaviors in classroom.

Our second finding suggests that students’ perceptions of teachers’ influence and proximity have a significant effect on students’ affect toward the course and toward the teacher. Effect of proximity is higher for both forms of affect and effect of influence (teacher control) on students’ affect toward the teacher is not significant. This result generally supports previous evidence. Previous studies found positive associations between both influence and proximity and such students’ affective outcomes as attitudes toward class, motivation and affect with the course/teacher (Den Brok et al., 2004; Wubbels and Brekelmans, 2005). Generally, including a study in Turkey (Telli et al., 2007), effects of proximity were somewhat stronger than effects of influence.

Den Brok et al. (2005) found that teachers’ interpersonal behavior explained more than 12 percent of the total variance in students’ attitudes towards science. In our study teachers’ interpersonal behavior explained 8.5% of the total variance in students’ affect toward the course.

This study shows that students expect teachers to display more closeness and cooperation than influence and control. It is important for teachers to relate to students, while also maintaining interpersonal control (by showing leadership and strictness, limiting uncertain behaviour) in the classroom communication process. Teachers who can achieve close relationships, cooperation and care in one hand and influence and direction (to a somewhat lesser extent) in the other seem to have a positive influence on students’ affect toward the course and themselves.

Students seem to prefer tolerant-authoritative, authoritative, and directive profiles as these combine affiliation and control. Considering somewhat different findings in different cultural settings we can assume that culture may be playing a key role in shaping students’ expectations about teacher roles.

Students’ perceptions of both dimensions are determined to a great extent, by teachers’ nonverbal and verbal behavior in the classroom (Wubbels et al., 2006). Influence, for example, is associated with taking a central position in the classroom, standing rather than sitting down, eye contact, clear tone of voice, short verbal instructions and serious facial expression. Teachers’ proximity involves such teacher behaviors as trusting students, encouraging students to voice their disagreements, willingness to explain if students do not understand things and showing patience. We believe such behaviors should be promoted in teacher education and professional development programs and integrated into teacher performance evaluation.

This study was carried out in a high school setting in Turkey with EFL teachers and 2nd year students being the only participants. Thus generalizability of our findings is somewhat limited. Further research at various school levels and settings is needed to substantiate our findings. Also more research is needed to shed light on the influence of cultural differences on teachers’ interpersonal behavior.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES


