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English Preservice Teaching: Problems and Suggested Solutions

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Abstract

The present study investigated the problems faced by Egyptian EFL prospective teachers during their first encounter with preservice teaching. The sample for the study included 135 prospective EFL teachers trained in five preparatory (middle) schools in Kafr El-Sheikh city, Egypt. At the end of their first year training course, the prospective teachers were asked to write detailed opinion essays about the problems they faced. The data collected were classified and analyzed qualitatively. Findings concluded that there were a number of professional and administrative problems that entailed a comprehensive review of current policies and procedures adopted in preservice teaching.

Introduction

Preservice teaching is an important procedure in which a prospective teacher – or a student teacher – indulges into the details of the profession real world. Through preservice teaching, a faculty of education student tests the academic theories he / she studied. Besides, it is a golden opportunity to try out one's professional abilities and qualifications empirically. Moreover, teaching training is a chance for prospective teachers to learn new skills or improve the skills they already have. Social and cooperative skills are also developed due to the traditional technique followed in organizing the training. During their preservice teaching, prospective teachers are also supposed to get themselves acquainted with school philosophy, curriculum organization, instructional activities and evaluation techniques. Thus, they are expected to be given a rich experience of participation in the educational environment (Rao, 2006).

Richards & Farrell (2011) illustrate that two teaching experiences are usually provided to a student teacher during preservice teaching: microteaching and teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language. In that context, these experiences are encountered simultaneously. However, the Egyptian context in which the current study is held is quite different. Prospective teachers study a specialized course on microteaching during their second year at the Faculty of Education. Their preservice teaching starts afterwards in all through the third and fourth years. Thus, microteaching is considered to be the preliminary needed theoretical and performing background for preservice teaching. It is a rehearsal for the final real show.

According to the Egyptian faculties of education undergraduates' Bylaw, two supervisors are assigned to guide a group of student teachers during their practice teaching. A specialized external supervisor – who is likely to be a regular or a senior teacher – undertakes the tasks of checking prospective teachers' weekly attendance at school, revising their lesson plans, giving guidance, maintaining general observation and assessing their performance in the class. The same tasks are carried out by the other specialized internal supervisor – who is a TEFL staff member – in addition to handling administrative problems and providing academic counsels. The preservice teaching course total score is a sum of three evaluation areas assigned by the external and internal supervisors in addition to the school principal in which the student teacher's training takes place.

A number of studies were carried out to investigate the problems and attempting to improve the quality of preservice teaching. Among such studies was Perry et al.'s (2011) in which they sought understanding the variety of factors affecting teachers' motivation for and

commitment to teaching, especially early in their careers. The researchers examined the relationships between student teachers' experiences in their teacher education programs and their perceptions of teaching efficacy, engagement in and commitment to teaching, and stress associated with teaching. Afterwards, they established a project to enhance early career motivation and well-being.

In the same year, Snyder (2011) presented excerpts of video reflections taken from preservice teachers. He believed that video reflections allowed preservice teachers to examine their own teaching. Video reflections were effective in improving three areas of instruction: (1) reducing the amount of teacher talking and increasing the amount of student playing, (2) structuring of the lesson, and (3) attention to students' errors.

Investigating environmental literacy of pre-service teachers at one of the largest public universities in Turkey, Tuncer et al. (2009) evaluated the relationship of pre-service teachers' environmental knowledge, attitude, and concerns of their interests in environmental problems, involving outdoor activities, parents' interest and involvement in environmental activities. They used canonical analysis to explore relationships between pre-service teachers' environmental background and literacy. Their research concluded that environmental background of pre-service teachers was positively related to environmental literacy and attitudes along with other uses affected significantly by gender. They recommended that these results should be used to restructure the efforts of faculties of education.

Besides, Scheeler (2008) noted that there were a few empirical studies that inform teacher educators on ways to promote generalization of teaching skills with beginning teachers. For this reason, she made a study to find the missing link in teacher preparation that allows a generalization of effective teaching skills. She identified four factors as important to sustaining teaching skills in classrooms based on a review of research. The four factors included training to mastery so as to promote maintenance of behavior, using immediate feedback to promote acquisition of skills, programming for generalization and providing performance feedback in classroom settings. Afterwards, she described a model for promoting generalization of teaching skills using these factors. Implications for teacher preparation were discussed such as requiring generalization training in teacher preparation programs and training supervisors to sequentially implement model components.

Being interested in evaluating the validity and reliability of a Digital Professional Portfolio (DPP) system used along with other preservice teaching assessments to assess the instructional competencies of preservice teachers; DiPerna & Derham (2007) analyzed data using a variety of methods including Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient,

Cronbach's alpha, and Cohen's kappa coefficient. Results supported the use of the DPP. Theoretically acceptable relationships were found between DPP and other teacher assessments. Weaknesses of the DPP were also identified. They included low percentage of exact agreement between scorers. Finally, directions for future research were discussed.

Purpose of the Study

The current study aims at identifying and classifying the different types of problems and obstacles faced by preservice teachers during their first encounter with field training, or in other words, preservice teaching. Suggested solutions to these problems are theoretically proposed by the researcher recommending empirical application in further studies.

Need for the Study

Diagnosing and analyzing real problems encountered during prospective teachers' preservice teaching can be beneficial for:

- ***Educational Policy Makers*** – The current study highlights the different sorts of shortcomings that impede the preservice teaching in a representative context. The obtained results can be taken into account when planning and executing preservice teaching.
- ***Faculty of Education Staff*** – Preservice teaching is theoretically introduced and practically supervised by faculty staff. Being aware of the nature of the problems faced by prospective teachers, the staff can improve the processes of instructing and guiding their student teachers during their preservice training.
- ***Prospective Teachers*** – Preservice teaching trainees can benefit from the conclusion of the study at hand as well. They can be more aware of the different kinds of problems they may come across. The suggested solutions to these problems may also be found helpful.

Sample for the Study

The sample for the current piece of research included 135 subjects enrolled in the third year, English Department, Faculty of Education in Kafr El-Sheikh. They are about 20 years old and have been studying English for almost eleven years. Being specialized in teaching English, the subjects have been studying advanced academic courses along their university years – like poetry, novel, phonetics, grammar, ... etc – and educational courses – that include psychology, TEFL, mental hygiene and the like. As for preservice teaching, the sample – at the time of carrying out this experiment – has just finished its first-year teaching training at five preparatory schools: four schools for girls and a school for boys. They were to complete another level of teaching practice in the following year at secondary schools. The researcher

chose third year prospective teachers intentionally so that they can benefit from the findings of the study in their next year preservice teaching course.

Methodology

A blended descriptive-analytical method was utilized in the current study. Opinion essays were used to elicit prospective teachers' problems from their real preservice training. That represented detailed description of the problems. Afterwards, both qualitative and quantitative statistical techniques were used to analyze the content of these opinion essays. The researcher's meticulous analysis aimed at finding possible outlets and solutions to the preservice teaching problems. Related studies were also linked to the current results.

Tools of the Study

An open-ended opinion essay represented the main tool to collect the study data. Preservice teachers were asked to write detailed opinion essays on some of the problems they encountered during their first-year field training. Neither time nor format restrictions were imposed on the participants.

Results and Discussion

Simple statistical analysis of the data collected from prospective teachers' opinion essays indicated the existence of twenty three preservice teaching problems faced at preparatory schools. The following presentation of these problems is based on the percentage of participants stating them.

The commonest problem experienced at all training schools and stated by almost 55.56% of prospective teachers was the insufficiency of the time devoted to the English lesson. There was a complaint about the inability to cover the allotted content each week. Moreover, prospective teachers expressed their tendency to give additional details and exercises on the content, but the limited time frustrated them. According to rules, a lesson is forty five minutes long. English lessons vary in their content. A complete English lesson contains a short list of new vocabulary, a grammatical rule and a simple drill on a language subskill. To overcome this problem, an outline of the lesson pace is suggested. If a preservice teacher devotes, for instance ten minutes for vocabulary, fifteen minutes for grammar and ten minutes for subskills; he still has ten minutes left for greetings, additional details, unexpected situations and assignments. Adhering to such an outline entails good rehearsal before real practice and awareness of time during teaching. Prospective teachers are encouraged to use a stop watch not allowing themselves to exceed the time limit devoted to each step in the lesson.

In second place, the students' impolite or naughty behaviour came. This problem was highlighted by 37.78% of the participants in four schools. Such a behaviour varied among side talking, inappropriate replies to the teacher and complete chaos. Preservice teachers raised a stink about students' impolite behaviour stating that it was the reason – in most cases – for losing control of the class completely. Green (2009) pointed out that students who were rude and disrespectful to their teachers often had parents with bad parenting skills. It was supposed that those students lacked the right model who represented a code of conduct. Thus, it was believed that a teacher shouldered the responsibility of affecting his / her students modifying behaviour.

Another problem faced by preservice teachers at all involved schools was students' lack of motivation. A percentage of 31.11% of the sample felt unease with such results of this problem as students' little participation in the class and their frivolousness. Qinghong (2009), in a similar study, attributed students' lack of motivation to the fact that college English teaching does not fully reflect or effectively meet students' learning needs. Hence, a reasonable solution may lie in modifying courses and teaching methods. However, the researcher believes that this problem may have some deeper causes like students' conviction that their study is nonsense in the presence of unemployment. The dominating belief that there will be no chance to get a governmental job even if one excels in his / her study leads logically to students' lack of motivation. In this concern, Erdogan et al. (2010) suggested that students' motivation could be increased through the use of various instructional methods and techniques; i.e., project based learning design.

Students' carelessness especially in doing their home assignments was a complaint of 24.44% of the preservice teachers at three schools. The researcher thinks that this problem may have a number of causes. Through observation, students usually underestimate preservice teachers realizing that they do not have much authority in their evaluation. Besides, the absence of an adequate punishment tool contributes to the increase of students' carelessness. Since there is no deterrent, home assignment is largely neglected. Thus, possible solutions to this problem may include devoting a part of students' evaluation to their interaction with the preservice teacher. This should be declared to students from the very beginning. Moreover, a suitable deterrent ought to be found to punish those who are not serious enough in doing their home assignments.

Almost 22.22% of the preservice teachers at four schools suffered students' poor skills. They wrote that some students can hardly read or write English! The negative phenomenon of exam cheating had led to the fact that some students succeeded and were enrolled in higher

grades without being really entitled to that. Such poor skills impede the normal, expected pace of students' progress. Instead of explaining the new lesson, preservice teachers found themselves obliged to get off the track wasting lessons in giving the very basics of reading and writing. In most cases, this is not even allowed by supervisors and school administration. Overcoming this obstacle entails two procedures in the researcher's opinion. The first procedure is to eliminate the problem root by finding serious, strict techniques to prevent cheating in exams. Underwood (2006) suggested some solutions to reduce exam cheating. She proposed stimulating an environment where cheating is not acceptable though the use of honour codes to which both staff and students have allegiance. In her opinion, such environments help students resist peer pressure to cheat. Besides, the design of tests and examinations, and the organizational structures for delivering those assessments, should be designed to reduce potential collusion within or beyond the examination hall. The second procedure is meant for dealing with the present poor product. Educational policy makers should think of extra simultaneous programs to develop these students reading and writing skills.

Moreover, 17.78% of preservice teachers in four schools were harassed by being hesitated. Their self-confidence decreased, so they did not usually remember the lesson details. A teacher perplexity in the classroom is a perfect material for students' sarcasm. It may lead to chaos as well. This problem was thoroughly investigated by Bodzin et al. (2010). They contributed preservice teachers' lack of confidence to their initial conceptualization of a teacher as someone who knows the answers and tells them to students. Therefore, preservice teachers are often fearful about a future situation where a student asks a question that they do not know its answer. Bodzin et al. (2010) also referred to teachers' weak mastery of the academic content as a possible cause of this problem. They discussed many approaches to overcome prospective teachers' lack of confidence focusing on correcting their conceptions of the teaching situation and bettering their understanding of the content to be taught.

There was also another complaint by 17.78% of the sample that the school red tape did not allow preservice teachers to adhere to time in beginning and finishing lessons. Trainees at three schools expressed their dissatisfaction with regular teachers' disrespect of the lesson time. They also referred to the lengthy – and sometimes unspecified – time devoted to the break. Such an administrative problem has something to do with adapting the school policies as well as reinforcing personal trends towards respecting discipline.

An equal percentage of the sample mentioned the unavailability of adequate teaching aids – especially computers – as a serious impediment. Some preservice teachers referred to the

fact that the unavailability did not necessarily mean the aids did not exist. It was the excessive bureaucracy that hindered them in using the already-existing language or computer labs at some schools. Trần (2007) faced the same problem when he was concerned with teaching speaking communicatively to high school students. He suggested that teachers should learn to overcome the lack of teaching aids by taking advantage of real classroom situations, designing games, using songs, being flexible in organizing group works in class and relying on the different strategies of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach.

On another track, 15.56% of the study sample griped about restrictions on innovation. In other words, preservice teachers are to follow certain teaching methods and classroom activities. They are not allowed to experiment or apply what they have theoretically studied at the faculty. Their own view points and enthusiasm are completely neglected. Like many preservice teaching problems, this issue needs a long-term remedy. A radical change in educational policies should take place. Furthermore, changing policies ought to be simultaneous with replacing educational leadership's cultural dogma about educational practices with more enlightening beliefs.

A common problem faced at three schools by 13.33% of preservice teachers was the inability to identify and use the appropriate punishment for troublemakers or careless students. Preservice teachers said that this problem negatively affected their professional performance inside the classroom. Besides, it led in most cases to their complete loss of temper. In this concern, Barrientos (2010) discussed a number of behaviour management models aiming at reinforcing desired student behaviours and eliminating disruptive ones. Such models were gradual and diverse ranging from what she called "token economies" to "contingency contracting" strategies. Even corporal punishment was believed to be important in certain cases.

A phenomenon at four schools irritated 11.11% of the participated preservice teachers. The specialized external supervisor compelled them to explain two lessons at a time! When they did that, students naturally were incapable of assimilation. The aim of this practice was to decrease the stress suffered by class regular teachers. Like many other problems, this needs a serious change in the supervisors' visions and conscience. If educational policy makers managed to make this hopeful change, behavior and practices would accordingly change putting an end to such a problem.

A similar percentage of 11.11% complained about students' looking down upon prospective teachers knowing they were not regular ones. The reasons for this problem may relate to students, supervisors, regular teachers, school administration or preservice teachers

themselves. Students suffer an explicit deterioration in ethics. This negative phenomenon is very general and casts a shadow over the teacher-student relationship. The researcher thinks a national educational policy should develop programs to implant ethics in the young. Supervisors and regular teachers contributed to the problem by their either casual or even deliberate contempt for preservice teachers. Many supervisors and regular teachers may tell their students that preservice teachers have no authority and that they mere mere students. Solutions in this case begin with supervisors' and regular teachers' behavior modification and end with such operational procedures as giving preservice teachers the authority to score students in specified parts of the monthly formative evaluation. However, preservice teachers might also be responsible for this lack of respect. Being academically weak or excessively humorous, a teacher loses a good deal of his status. Good preparation of each lesson and holding balance between humor and seriousness in class are suggested recommendations to overcome the problem.

There was a minor problem for 6.67% of the preservice teachers in two schools. Preservice teachers' had poor writing and organization skills on the blackboard. Although it seemed a trivial issue, this problem was a continuous source of students' complaint. It hindered students' perception and shook prospective teachers' self-confidence. Since such traditional teaching aids are supposed to continue at Egyptian schools, it is suggested to focus on handwriting development in the courses of the faculties of education.

An equal percentage of 6.67% of the participants mentioned the private lesson culture as an impediment for preservice teachers. Students used to rely basically on private lessons. For them, private lessons were the main source of learning while attending school was a routine task. There were many negative phenomena and facets of behavior related to that culture. The most frequently mentioned complaint in that concern was the ethical crisis lain in students' scorn in dealing with preservice teachers. Some students used to test their prservice teachers by tricky questions to prove their unprofessionalism. Such a behavior was reinforced by private lesson teachers as a means of a 'muscle show'! The result was more perplexity and lack of enthusiasm to preservice teachers. Coexisting with private lessons is a difficult task for regular school teachers and preservice teachers alike. It is an "informal" form of education that nearly replaces the formal education at school. Roshdy (2013) widely discussed the problem in his essay at the *Daily News Egypt*. He questioned a number of teachers about the possible alternatives to private lessons. Remedial 'catch up' classes presented by the Ministry of Education were found frustrated for teachers. It was proposed that the idea would be

developed, financially supported by the Ministry and socially promoted and encouraged by mass media.

Related to the private lesson culture was the problem of students' frequent absence and neglect of bringing course books. Such practices annoyed 6.67% of the preservice teachers and impeded them from carrying out their tasks. Like most problems discussed in that concern, it seemed that the solution requires radical social and cultural behavior modification.

According to the Faculty bylaw, preservice teachers may be divided into small groups – each contains seven to nine students – and distributed to schools. Within each school, the prospective teachers work in pair so that lessons are explained alternately each week. In this concern, 4.44% of the preservice teachers griped about the lack of harmony between co-teachers. Preservice teachers often plan their lessons separately, do not exchange view points and do not complement each other. This problem invokes the necessity to revolutionize traditional, dogmatic training programs and teaching methods.

The Teacher's Guide provided by the Ministry of Education was of little benefit for 4.44% of the participated preservice teachers. Although some supervisors insisted on sticking to the methods and steps stated in that guide, preservice teachers found it rather brief, routine and uncreative. This complaint sheds light on the poor preparation of the Teacher's Guide. A reconsideration of the guide content as well as its organization by educational experts is due.

Supervisors and senior teachers were frequently absent. This caused almost 4.44% of preservice teachers to feel insecure inside the classroom. Necessary instructions a preservice teacher needs were not available. To overcome this problem, it is recommended that a strict discipline that regulates the supervisors' duties should be established.

Students' insistence on talking in the mother tongue disturbed 4.44% of the preservice teachers. Oral answers were given in Arabic and objections raised whenever preservice teachers themselves tried to talk in English. Such a phenomenon negatively affects oral-mode skills – i. e. listening and speaking. Among the main reasons behind such a phenomenon is the written exam culture. Students are only evaluated on the basis of the final written exam. The emphasis, thus, is solely on the writing skill. Comprehensive evaluation that involves the four language skills should be adopted. Students should also get accustomed to listening to and talking in English as much as possible from the earliest stages of their language learning. Moreover, teachers must be qualified and tested on oral skills before they practice teaching.

A minor number of preservice teachers – almost 2.22% – highlighted the problem of dividing classes into regular-achiever classes and high-achiever ones. Students, who pass an IQ exam after finishing the preparatory stage, are enrolled in special classes confined to them

only. This administrative procedure confuses preservice teachers who usually prepared the same lesson plans for all classes. Moreover, there was a complaint that regular-achiever classes obviously lacked competition and had no regular distribution of achievement among students. Ammermueller & Pischke (2009) asserted the peer effects relying on the variation across classes within schools. It was recommended that the formation of classes should be heterogeneous. In this case, a better chance is given to students to compete and develop their abilities.

Time insufficiency for checking home assignment was the complaint of 2.22% of preservice teachers. The forty-five-minute lesson did not usually cover the last lesson plan step to give new home assignment, check and provide feedback on previous assignments. Consequently, the purpose and the value of assignments went off. The problem is either administrative or organizational. There ought to be a review of the lesson optimum time limit so that it is commensurate with the content tasks of the plan. On the other hand, teachers should exert more effort to organize and adapt the amount of time they have to suffice the different required tasks.

Admitting their personal defects, 2.22% of the preservice teachers confessed the negative effect of their low voice on conveying information to students. The majority contributed this to shyness and feeling afraid of confronting the class. Sometimes, the supervisor's attendance watching and evaluating their performance increased the symptom. Bahanshal (2013) handled the problem in the context of the impact of teaching large classes on English teaching. She pointed out that teachers' low voice in front of large classes resulted in students' boredom and classroom noise. She recommended reducing the number of students in each class. Moreover, other suggestions such as utilizing the *Students-Centered* rather than *Teacher-Students Approach* and working with small groups rather than the whole class were also highlighted.

Detecting a structural problem of lesson content, 2.22% of the sample stated that lesson content lacks harmony. In their opinion, there is no logical link among the new vocabulary, the grammatical rule and the sub-skills a lesson includes. They suggested that these components should be logically selected and organized to support each other. Preservice teachers were not comfortable teaching isolated pieces of information. A sort of integration is needed.

Conclusion

This study manipulates some problems encountered by prospective teachers during their preservice teaching field training. To be objective and well-organized, one is to conclude that

preservice teachers undergo many varied problems. Almost each element involved in the training process needs a sort of reevaluation, performance improvement and positive development. Administrative and professional issues should be revised and re-planned. It is strongly recommended that a comprehensive review of preservice teaching ought to be made by educational experts so that new policies and regulating rules are set out.

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