

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CURRENT EFL PRACTICUM: INSIGHTS FROM UNIVERSITY MENTORS, SCHOOL MENTORS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE MAJORED STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF JEDDAH

Abstract: The overall purpose of this research was to assess the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English language majored students in the Saudi EFL context, mainly the University of Jeddah, Faculty of Education. To recruit the study participants, the researcher adopted a non-random sampling technique where the focus is to select information-rich cases for in depth study, which are likely to illuminate the questions under study and for the most effective use of limited resources. The data for this research study were collected using qualitative data method including, mainly, interviews which provided insights into the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English language pre-service teachers in the Saudi EFL context, mainly, the University of Jeddah, Faculty of Education. It was clear that essential contextual and pedagogical knowledge for English language teaching was improved during the practicum. They placed a higher importance on pedagogical knowledge and contextual knowledge as well as subject matter knowledge. It was indicated that English language teaching methodologies taught at university can be reinforced through the teaching practice during the practicum. The school mentors made their decisions based on the submitted lesson plans, and through discussion as well as observing pre-service teachers while teaching in the classroom. The school mentors provided support for the English language majored students to develop knowledge essential for becoming English language teachers. The university mentors, on the other hand, were more interested in seeing how the pre-service teachers adapted the knowledge they had acquired at university to school teaching, particularly the knowledge gained in the English Language Teaching methodology courses.

Keywords: current EFL practicum, university mentor, school mentor, English language majored students, the University of Jeddah.

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching practicum has been considered as one of the most crucial and influential stages in teacher education and it is also “the longest and most intensive exposure to the teaching profession” for teacher candidates (Cohen, Hoz and Kaplan, 2013, 345) is an integral part of any pre-service teacher training program. It is the time that trainee teachers move from university studies to actual school teaching practice under field supervision to acquire the professional knowledge and competences for teaching (Nguyen, 2015). It allows pre-service teachers to become exposed to the real world of teaching and to gain knowledge about the complexity of current classroom practices, which contribute to enhancing pre-service teachers’ motivations, attitudes, and engagement towards the teaching profession (Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernández 2017). Intrator (2006), described practicum and stated that it gives English language majored students the opportunity to become aware of the realistic nature of the teaching profession. Teacher education programs may do an effort here in order to create a supportive atmosphere involving supervisors, mentors, and teacher educators as a strategy that might contribute towards preparing beginning teachers for professional development and growth (Fajardo & Miranda, 2015). English language teaching takes added consideration due to the fact that most novice teachers face difficulties on their beginnings especially when practicum doesn’t meet its objectives (Viáfara 2011).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the development of effective teaching practice should occur at all stages of a teacher’s career, the first experience of real-life teaching always marks a milestone in every teaching career. As such, ensuring effective teaching of English language majored students so that they are well equipped with suitable knowledge, skills and dispositions is one of the aims of initial teacher education. To the researchers’ best knowledge, there has been limited systematic research into the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English language majored students in the Saudi context. This study, therefore, will contribute to assisting educational stakeholders in making informed

decisions about the establishment of a new policy regarding the English language teaching practicum, teacher preparation Programs and the English language teaching curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE PRACTICUM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

The practicum has emerged as an increasingly common feature of ESL/EFL teacher preparation program (Zhengdong 2013). It is an opportunity to help teacher candidates grow into their professional role as teachers and to become active participants in the profession. The teaching practicum provides novice teachers with actual teaching experience and intensive developmental feedback because during this time, they feel involved, challenged and even empowered. The outcomes of socialization during the practicum are influenced by the interactions that trainee teachers develop with their students, school mentors, university mentoring lecturers, peer trainees and school authorities. It is during these stages that trainee teachers may form personal teaching styles and philosophies that will guide them through the multiple, varied and complex pathways of teaching (Nguyen 2015). In the field of English language teacher education, the teaching practicum allows pre-service teachers the chance to “acquire the practical skills and knowledge needed to function as effective language teachers (Nguyen 2015).

Nguyen and Hudson (2010) conducted a research on 97 Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers, completing a four-year undergraduate course and having a six-week field experience in upper secondary schools in Hanoi to investigate their perceptions of potential difficulties related to learning about teaching EFL writing in their practicum by means of an open-ended questionnaire delivered at the beginning of their final practicum. An open-ended questionnaire collected data from 97 pre-service EFL teachers at the beginning of their final practicum. The data suggested that these pre-service EFL teachers were motivated to learn to teach English in general and teaching writing in particular but required mentors to model effective teaching practices and share their teaching experiences. They also needed their

mentors to be enthusiastic and supportive, and provide constructive feedback. These findings may assist teacher educators and school mentors for motivating and developing pre-service EFL teachers' practices.

Yuan and Lee (2014) conducted a study in China to investigate the process of belief change among three pre-service language teachers during the teaching practicum. Multiple methods of data collection were employed, including interviews, classroom observation (followed by stimulated recall interviews), as well as weekly journals the participants kept for the practicum (as a required assignment of the program). The findings reveal that student teachers' beliefs are not pre-determined or stable, but open to change and development.

Nguyen (2015) research aimed to (i) explore the perceptions of the university's academic staff, university mentors, school mentors and trainee teachers about the effectiveness of the current EFL practicum in selected Vietnamese universities, (ii) identify issues of concern about the practicum from the viewpoints of these stakeholders, and (iii) make recommendations for enhancing the practicum's effectiveness. The findings revealed that the trainee teachers did not begin the practicum with an unrealistic vision of the teaching profession. In the lead-up, most of them had envisioned many difficulties regarding classroom management, methodology selection, relationships with the practicum mentors and the assessment of their teaching performance. Data showed that the practicum was beneficial in preparing the trainee teachers for classroom practices in terms of improving their pedagogical content knowledge, contextual knowledge, instructional skills, communication skills and desirable teacher dispositions. However, a small majority of the trainee teachers had difficulties in controlling the classes, managing their teaching time and catering for students' varied learning needs. Most conducted teaching based on the classroom practice, the school mentor's expectations and the school English curriculum rather than implementing what was taught in the ELT courses at university.

The lack of empirical research in this area makes the present study timely and central to the increasing demands placed on English language teacher education, particularly when the growth in

the number of providers and the variety of English teacher training programs has raised questions about the quality of English language teachers' practical training. Also, this research into the effectiveness of the EFL teaching practicum can advance both theoretical and practical insights into enhancing English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia and other similar EFL contexts at the Arab World.

THE ROLE OF PRACTICUM MENTORS

Being an effective mentor is a learned skill as it takes time, practice and effort from the individual mentor. According to Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010), there are six qualities to effective mentoring: (i) organizational skills, (ii) interpersonal relationship, (iii) integration of theory and practice, (iv) rich content and pedagogical knowledge, (v) providing the right challenge and support, and (vi) being transformative leaders. A study by Maynard (2000) described the five desirable characteristics of a mentor: (i) giving clear expectations, (ii) giving advice before student teaching, (iii) providing constructive feedback, (iv) acknowledging the teaching styles of their own mentee, and (v) welcoming and accepting mentees.

A growing number of studies have documented the crucial role that mentor teachers play in the learning of pre-service teachers about becoming teachers and the development of their professional learning. For example, Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen and Bergen (2011) claim that the supervisory roles from mentor teachers have helped pre-service teachers improve the connection between personal and professional competencies of teaching, which is fundamental for pre-service teachers to develop their professional identity (Ambrosetti 2014).

Hudson and Nguyen's study (2008) involved a written survey administered to 91 Vietnamese pre-service teachers involved in an EFL degree. Results indicated that these pre-service EFL teachers had specific needs when considering mentors' personal attributes. These included a mentor who is enthusiastic (57%), helpful (27%), friendly (25%), and knowledgeable (20%) with communicative competence (18%). It was also claimed that desirable mentoring practices should involve constructive guidance, especially sharing

experiences (32%), checking lesson plans before teaching an EFL lesson (21%) and providing more opportunities for EFL teaching (12%). In addition, these pre-service teachers (n=91) required a mentor who could provide an understanding of the system requirements (e.g., curriculum 38%, school policies 32%, and assessment 18%), model EFL teaching (e.g., method and manner of delivery 52%, pronunciation 25%, and writing lesson plans 15%), articulate pedagogical knowledge (such as teaching strategies 37%, classroom management 34%, motivating students 17%, and dealing with unexpected situations 13%), and provide direct and detailed feedback about EFL teaching performance (56%) and English content knowledge (23%). Pre-service teachers have particular mentoring requirements that may assist their development as EFL teachers. These attributes and practices include developing personal inter-relationships and directing mentors to provide system requirements, specific pedagogical knowledge, modelling EFL teaching practices, and articulating feedback on such practices.

Paulus's study (2017) aimed to investigate the mentor teachers' voices and beliefs to help the professional learning of pre-service English teachers (PSETs) in their school-based practicums. This is a qualitative study which involves seven mentor teachers who teach English in senior high schools in Indonesia. Data was gathered through questionnaires and unstructured interviews carried out in the participants' school setting and analysed using NVIVO 9 (qualitative data analysis software). The findings reveal the mentor teachers' beliefs in guiding PSETs during the school-based practicum. The mentor teachers viewed that PSETs need to learn and experience more fundamental aspects of teaching, namely interpersonal skills and emotional engagement in teaching, including their leadership.

RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

The overall purpose of this research was to assess the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English language majored students in the Saudi EFL context, mainly, The University of Jeddah, Faculty of Education. Through the identification of these factors, this research intended to help teacher preparation programs policymakers and administrators gain a better understanding of the

teaching practicum, of the impact of this experience on the development of EFL English language majored students, and of the challenges it has posed for them, with a view to improving English language teacher education in Saudi Arabia.

The main question guiding the research is: How well does the teaching practicum prepare the EFL pre-service teachers for the actual classroom by building up their knowledge, skills and dispositions as they are working towards the teaching profession?

This question is further divided into three sub-questions:

- What perceptions do the university mentors, school mentors and EFL pre-service teachers have of the teaching practicum in relation to its role in pre-service teachers' learning to teach?
- What are the issues of concern about the teaching practicum effectiveness as perceived by the university mentors, school mentors and EFL pre-service teachers?
- What could be done to enhance the effectiveness of the current teaching practicum of EFL?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this study may be of importance and interest to numerous groups: English pre-service teachers, English language educators, administrators who work with English language teachers and those responsible for the ongoing development and assessment of English language teachers. English language pre-service teachers and English language educators will have a better base for reflection to prepare for their tasks during the school placements while policy-makers and educational administrators will be informed of the issues concerning the design and evaluation of the teaching practicum. This study is also significant to teacher educators who design and develop guidelines for English language teacher education programs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

To recruit the study participants, the researcher adopted a non-random sampling technique where

the focus is to select information-rich cases for in depth study, which are likely to illuminate the questions under study and for the most effective use of limited resources. This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). The researcher was helped with the participant selection process by providing the contact details of the practicum coordinators and a list of English language majored students who were enrolled in the Higher Diploma of Education Program for teacher preparation, at the Faculty of Education, University of Jeddah in the year 2018, as well as the names of host schools. The researcher was then able to contact four school mentors, two university mentors and 16 English language majored students enrolled in the Higher Diploma of Education Program for teacher preparation via email, telephone and face-to-face for possible interest and participation in this study. They all responded by email, expressing their willingness to join in the research.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The data for this research study were collected using qualitative data method including, mainly, interviews which provided insights into the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English language pre-service teachers in the Saudi EFL context, mainly, the University of Jeddah, Faculty of Education.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

The interview themes were formulated based on a review of literature in English language teacher education. After establishing initial contact with participants, the researcher began to interview them. The length of interviews varied between 55 and 75 minutes. The 16 English language majored students enrolled in the Higher Diploma of Education Program for teacher preparation at the University of Jeddah chosen were each interviewed twice, one before the practicum and one near the end of the practicum, while the school mentors and the university mentors were interviewed once. Participants were given a copy of the interview schedule so that they could feel more at ease. The contents of the notes were

verbally reviewed with the interviewee for clarity and accuracy.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF INTERVIEWS

Two methods were employed to ensure the validity of the interviews, namely, interview questions and researcher bias. The researcher designed the interview questions, and structured them after conducting the literature review on the topic and consulting with experts in the field. The interview questions included all important dimensions identified in the literature and in experts' advice so as to avoid a lack of representative questions or underrepresentation of certain aspects. The researchers did her best to minimize personal bias as much as possible. That was through what was called member checking. In this process, the researcher sought the views of members on the accuracy of data gathered, descriptions and even interpretations. After each interview, respondents were requested to authenticate the accuracy of the information obtained through the interview process. As for reliability, the interview schedules were piloted with 6 English language majored students enrolled in the Higher Diploma of Education Program for teacher preparation at the University of Jeddah, one university mentor, and one school mentor who were comparable to the population of this research study. The aim was to make sure that each respondent understood the questions in the same way and the answers could be coded without uncertainty. Together with the pilot study and face-to-face interviews the researcher could improve interview reliability.

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) described the process of data analysis and interpretation in four steps. The first step is to become fully immersed in the data such as interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials collected. The second step is to systematically organize the material into salient themes and patterns. The third step is to attach meaning to the themes in order to tell a coherent story. The fourth step is the composition of the material in order for others to read what was learned (p. 270). These steps were followed.

RESEARCH ETHICS

This study was approved by the University of Jeddah, Faculty of Education. Therefore, required

measures of protecting human participants were in place. Participants received letters informing them of the study and requesting consent. The letter stated that data and information collected will be kept confidential and anonymous. The district, schools, and teacher names operate under pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

English language majored students, school mentors, and University mentors' views on teacher knowledge during the Practicum

On responding to the question: How does the practicum support effectiveness? Although a few English language majored students' respondents (3 out of 16) see little benefits for practicum, the majority of the respondents (n = 13) indicated great benefit from practicum. Examples from the English language majored students' responses as follow:

The practicum supported my teacher knowledge. It helped improving English accent and pronunciation and English functions in spoken and written texts.

To me, Yah, the practicum enriched my teacher knowledge. I use spoken English during the lesson. It enriched my vocabulary and developed my English grammar.

Ah, I think the practicum helped me a lot. It helped my knowledge about different activities to develop students' English skills. I can manage my class well.

To me, after the teaching practicum, I have gained more knowledge of Classroom Management strategies for a language class. As well as the relationship between content selection and students' needs.

From their answers, it was clear that essential contextual and pedagogical knowledge for English language teaching was improved during the practicum. English language majored students placed a higher importance on pedagogical knowledge and contextual knowledge as well as subject matter knowledge. It was indicated that English language teaching methodologies taught at

university can be reinforced through the teaching practice during the practicum. As one respondent said *teachers who know more teach better.*

The school mentors, on the other hand, emphasized the development of pedagogical and contextual knowledge as a primary condition for effective teaching. As the school mentors claimed *Many English language pre-service teachers came to school with a sound knowledge of the English language but, they have very limited pedagogical understanding of how to apply it in their teaching.*

Concerning assessment of English language majored students' knowledge, the school mentors made their decisions based on the submitted lesson plans, and through discussion as well as observing English language majored students while teaching in the classroom. The school mentors provided support for the English language majored students to develop knowledge essential for becoming English language teachers.

The university mentors, on the other hand, were more interested in seeing how the English language majored students adapted the knowledge they had acquired at university to school teaching, particularly the knowledge gained in the English Language Teaching methodology courses. As one claimed: *I feel successful when I see my students adapt the knowledge, they acquired at university to school teaching, particularly the knowledge gained in the English Language Teaching methodology courses.*

Sometimes, people accuse the university staff of not doing their work well. So, the university mentors want everything to go well.

I do not want anybody to say that I do not do my job well. I do not wish to hear any complaint about knowledge deficiency among our pre-service teachers.

In analysing the mentor's sayings, it is clear that practical teaching knowledge comes through teaching experience and interactions of the English language majored students in the school contexts. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) put it " during the teaching practicum they have the opportunities to observe, discuss and reflect on the "ongoing actions of expert teachers as they choose among alternative strategies, organize classroom routines,

and make immediate decisions as well as set problems, frame situations and consider/reconsider their reasoning” (p. 262).

English language majored students indicated that the teaching practicum was effective in helping them acquire the instructional skills essential for language teaching. As respondents put it.

No doubt, the teaching practicum was effective in helping them acquire the instructional skills essential for language teaching.

Yes, it helped me integrate technology into English Language teaching.

Sure, I could use teaching aids and other resources to facilitate teaching.

As for me, I could select appropriate teaching techniques, and model the English language.

Concerning classroom management, there was consent between respondent (school mentors, university mentors, and English language majored students that novice teachers (English language majored students) lack classroom management skills. One student emphasized it:

I found it particularly hard to deal with mixed level classes.

As university mentors put it:

The solution lies in the teacher's use of different teaching strategies during the lesson period, otherwise, she will be at a mess and the classroom will be problematic.

The school mentors, in agreement with the university mentors, suggested that *they might have become familiar with these situations and had learnt to develop effective instructional techniques to deal with the problems.*

As for the cooperation between university and host school, the University mentors confirmed high level cooperation.

The university allocated two hard working university teachers for this purpose.

Well, the cooperation is highly appreciated.

Concerning support have you received from the Faculty of Education (Practicum office) and the host school before you start your practicum, English language majored students placed a higher importance on the support they receive from both

the Faculty of Education (Practicum office) and the host school.

Well, the school mentor is an experienced teacher and guides me to the right method of teaching. I benefited a lot.

I am not suffering from lack of support.

Things are going well.

When asked about teaching competency improvement when students were at the Practicum, the school mentor confirmed improvement.

Well, their attitudes towards the teaching profession improved. They liked it.

Sure, I do my best with them. There are positive responses and positive attitudes.

As for lesson preparation, classroom teaching, classroom management and school engagement, students stated that they prepared their lesson well: *we prepare it in accordance to what we have learnt, no doubt.*

We can manage our classroom well. We are well prepared, engaged and participate to our school.

Though their school mentor emphasized something else.

THE PRACTICUM'S EFFECTIVENESS

The majority of the participants (English language majored students) (n=15) agreed that the practicum was *an essential part of the English language teacher training program* and that they had adequate opportunities to *become engaged in the teaching activities as well as being successful in establishing good relationships in the school, and to be familiar to the system there.*

As one respondent put it *Well, I think the practicum is an essential part of the English language teacher preparation program.*

Another one indicated that *Through the practicum I feel satisfied with my teaching performance. I have had adequate opportunities to engage in teaching activities.*

These positive feelings toward the teaching practicum emphasized the educational values of this experience in the development of beginning

teachers as indicated by Farrell (2001) in EFL teacher training.

When EFL pre-service teachers were asked to evaluate the teaching practicum's effectiveness in terms of its arrangements, the majority indicated that arrangements need much care. As one respondent indicated:

Well, the duration and timing of the practicum are not appropriate. I think we can do this on one additional semester to be added to the teacher preparation program at the university.

Before the practicum, I was worried about teaching as a whole. But when I got engaged, I found that everything was well prepared.

As for ways of improving Practicum, the majority of participants confirmed their satisfaction with arrangements.

I am proud of the whole practicum arrangements.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this research study underline the notion that teacher preparation programs need to provide a balanced set of programs which will guarantee the professionalism of their students who will become EFL teachers. It can be emphasized that English language teaching methodologies taught at university can be reinforced through the teaching practice during the practicum.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

However, this research study still had some limitations. For instance, the number of the research population is limited. Future research needs to widen the scope to include more participants. Second, this research study relied on qualitative method in collecting data. Future research needs to use different methods, specially mixed methods. Third, this research study included only female students. Future research needs to be applied to both sexes.

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APPENDIX 1: THE UNIVERSITY MENTORS – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Does your department coordinate the planning, organizing and implementing of the teaching practicum? How?
2. To what extent is there cooperation between university and host school during the period of practicum?
3. How do you evaluate the role of the department in the planning, organizing and implementing of the teaching practicum?
4. How often does the university mentor visit schools during the teaching practicum?
5. How do you feel about the university's support of the department in terms of organizing the teaching practicum?
6. How does your department assess the teaching effectiveness of the pre-service teachers?
7. What are your suggestions for improving the assessment practice?
8. How satisfied are you with the whole practicum arrangements?
9. What are the common complaints about the teaching practicum that you hear from: EFL pre-service teachers, university mentors, school mentors and others?
10. Do you have any suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English Language pre-service teachers?

APPENDIX 2: SCHOOL MENTORS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your evaluation of EFL pre-service teachers' overall preparation for the practicum?
2. How do you assess EFL pre-service teachers' teaching skills?
3. How do you assess EFL pre-service teachers' communication skills?
4. How do you evaluate pre service teachers' teaching competency?
5. How do you support EFL pre-service teacher's acquisition and development of their knowledge essential for becoming an English language teacher?
6. Do you think their teaching competency improves as the teaching practicum goes on?
7. What are the assessment tools you use to evaluate the EFL pre-service teachers?

8. What are the main concerns regarding the assessment and evaluation of English language pre-service teachers?
9. What problems are inherent in the teaching practicum?
10. Do you have any suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English language pre-service teachers?

APPENDIX 3: EFL PRE SERVICE TEACHER'S INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you describe your preparation for the teaching practicum?
2. How do you describe your feelings before the practicum starts?
3. How are you prepared in lesson preparation, classroom teaching, classroom management and school engagement?
4. Are you ready for the role of an English language teacher before entering this teaching practicum?
5. How much support have you received from the Faculty of Education (Practicum office) at the University and the host school before you start your practicum?
6. Are you confident for the teaching practicum?
7. What is the effect of teaching practicum on your English language proficiency?