EFL Student Teacher Perceptions of the

Teaching Practice Program at SQU

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Abstract

The role of the teacher in all formal educational settings is a vital one. Therefore, it is important to adequately prepare the teacher for the challenging task of teaching. Adequate preparation entails a solid teacher training program and pre-service activities that will equip trainees with the prerequisite skills for facing and responding to the challenges of the new job. In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), the importance of teacher education and training cannot be overstated. The trainee not only has to learn practical classroom skills, s/he also has to be an effective language learner. One way to examine and reflect on teacher education programs is to determine how trainees perceive a given program and its components. This article reports on a study conducted at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman, which investigated how teacher trainees perceived the teaching practice component of their training program at SQU's College of Education. The results indicated that, although the trainees valued the teaching practice component, they had reservations about such matters as the disrespectful behavior of pupils, the lack of cooperation of some school teachers and of school administrations. The trainees valued supervisor input and feedback though, some felt that there was minimum opportunity to discuss such feedback. However, almost all the trainees felt adequately prepared to enter the workforce after two semesters of teaching practice.

Keywords: teacher education, teaching practice, feedback, field observations, student-teachers

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In a country that has recognized the importance of English since the inception of formal mass education in 1970, preparing qualified English language teachers has become a matter of great consequence, as "pre-service English teacher education determines the quality of future in-service English teachers." (Tercanlioglu, 2008). Thus, the preparation of these teachers has been assigned to selected national institutions, chief among them is Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman's most prestigious higher education institution. At the university's College of Education, the teacher education programs includes components suggested by prominent theorists, practitioners and researchers and are therefore common to teaching programs around the world. The program has three main components: English language teaching methodology, microteaching, and teaching practice. The first component represents what Wallace (1991) has termed received knowledge and the last two involves experiential knowledge. All these components have been part of the program since its inception in 1986 when SQU received its first batch of students.

No published research has investigated teacher trainees' perceptions regarding any of the three components and since there is a dearth of research on such perceptions worldwide (Farrell, 2008), and in Oman in particular, the author of this paper thought it beneficial to conduct the present study.

Background

Gloria Velez-Rendon (2002) asserts that "the field of theory and research on language teacher education is still in its infancy" (p. 457). She clarifies this assertion by claiming that the field has not paid enough attention to the process of preparing language teachers and to how they gain the conceptual and practical knowledge they will later need. This section provides an overview of what theory has to say then presents some research on teacher education.

In teacher education a debate exists about what should form the knowledge base of pre-service programs. This does not focus on what language teachers should know, but rather on what should be regarded as core knowledge in teacher education (Howe, 2008; Troudi, 2005). Some commentators (e.g. Johnson, 2000) claim that current teacher education programs focus on the socio-cultural experiences of learning at the expense of the methodological and technical dimensions of teaching. For example, Troudi reports that some scholars suggest that equipping prospective language teachers with knowledge about second language acquisition may be of limited use. According to Freeman and Johnson, emerging teachers develop their skills by involvement in "a dynamic socio-cultural process framed by the institutional forms and contexts where their teaching is done." (Troudi, 2005, p.4). Such a process, coupled with reflection, should form the knowledge base in language teacher education.

However, while acknowledging the importance of reflective teaching, other theorists and practitioners say it is dangerous to overlook the importance of language and linguistic knowledge in language teacher education programs. Language teachers should

be understand what language knowledge involves because after all they will be teaching a language. In addition, many researchers acknowledge educational psychology's positive role in enhancing teachers' ability to effectively manage their classes and make pedagogical decisions. (Cleaves & Walker, 2010; Troudi, 2005).

This debate is not new. Wallace (1991 and 1998) talks about two types of knowledge that teacher training programs should offer: received knowledge and experiential knowledge. Received knowledge includes theoretical knowledge handed down from experts and experiential knowledge comes through trainees' direct contact with the real context of teaching.

For pre-service programs to be effective, Wallace (1991) supports reflection but does not minimize the importance of received knowledge. In *Training foreign language teachers: a reflective approach*, he argues that three models exist for teacher training programs: the craft model, the applied science model, and the reflective model. In the craft model, the profession's wisdom is passed down from experts to trainees for reception and imitation. In the applied science model, trainees study theoretical courses and apply learnt knowledge in the classroom. The reflective model gives trainees an opportunity to discuss ideas and observe real practice with a view to reflection and error correction.

Reflection is also part of the experiential knowledge deemed important by Wallace. Experiential knowledge includes staged teaching practice, which, according to Wallace (1991), includes the following:

1. observation and analysis of recorded lessons

2. draft lesson plans for group discussion

3. peer microteaching (not recorded)

4. individual microteaching

5. individual recorded microteaching

6. supervised teaching of real students for reflection and discussion

7. unsupervised teaching of real students.

For many (e.g. Farrell, 2008; Chiang, 2008; Wallace, 1991), teaching practice is always of the essence since it provides intense training and socialization "into all aspects of the teaching profession inside and outside the real classroom" (Farrell, 2008). Trainees receive guidance and assistance from their professors, supervisors and cooperating school teachers before solo ventures into the real classroom. Teaching practice includes microteaching and actual supervised and unsupervised teaching in a real context (Wallace, 1991 and 1998). Research indicates that trainees value the teaching practice component the most in their teacher education programs (Chiang, 2008) since it gives them an opportunity to practice their skills in a real life context.

The teaching practice component at SQU's College of Education includes all the elements Wallace (1991) mentions, except for peer microteaching. However, professors, cooperating schools and teachers might differ in their adherence to them. The present study sheds light on what actual practice is like in terms of these aspects.

Turning now to research on foreign language teacher education, it is painfully lacking in some parts of the world. This perhaps reflects a more serious problem around the overall status of foreign language education (Velez-Rendon, 2002). Farrell (2008), seeing a research deficit in English language teaching concerning trainees' specific teaching practice experiences, made his own contribution with a study on the perceptions

of 60 trainees in Singapore. His findings show that cooperating schools and teachers view trainees as a burden and thus are not always supportive. Yet, as he indicates, trainees need and want cooperation and guidance to help them become successful teachers.

The literature, however, indicates that in some areas of the world, research on teacher education is growing (e.g. Gleaves & Walker, 2010; Howe, 2008; Bates, 2005, 2007, 2008; Lai & Grossman, 2008; Shi & Englert, 2008). Indeed, Michael (2003) reports an "explosion in research" on this topic (p. 3). He claims that organizations such as the European Educational Research Association and the Association for Teacher Education in Europe have provided a platform for this. However, he also asserts that most European published research highlight case studies of innovation and good practice. Currently, a new area of research has emerged, "teachers' *thinking* or *crafts' knowledge*" (ibid, p. 3), which focuses on what teachers, especially experienced ones, do and why.

Michael (2003) studied foreign language teacher education in 32 different countries where differing contexts produced a great variety of needs and ways to meet them. He discovered "examples of innovation and good practice" (p.19) and identified common features in programs across the surveyed countries. These included method, organization of training and its components (e.g. mentors, teaching practice and assessment), and views on language learning and assessment. Among the many recommendations arising were the establishment of a common European framework of reference for language teachers and training and an accreditation system to allow program comparability.

A study in Turkey by Leyla Tercanlioglu (2008) investigated the perceptions of pre-service EFL teachers on their educational experience. The researcher asserted that finding out what the trainees thought would open the eyes and minds of English teacher educators to the realities of the field in both the local and global contexts. Her study used a qualitative methodology drawing its data from interviews with 5 focus groups, each containing 5 participants. Certain themes emerged from the verbatim transcription of the interview data, including department services, general facilities, department impressions and student experiences in the department. As for the first theme, almost all participants reported dissatisfaction with the preparation they were receiving for their future career. Their instructors assumed an evaluative rather than a teaching role and there was little room for flexibility in the design of their studies. Also the class sizes were large. Furthermore, they complained about the non-intellectual nature of their coursework and a lack of help or intervention from the faculty. They were also dissatisfied with the general facilities available such as student health and food services. Although participants showed a very positive attitude towards teaching English, they were dissatisfied with the quality of education in their department. When asked to describe their experiences in the department, almost all regretfully indicated that they did not regard themselves as seriously intellectual university students. Their role was to demonstrate learning in exams and then to forget what they had learnt once the exams were over.

The researcher concluded that evaluating the training program spotlights its strengths and weaknesses, and produce useful recommendations for future improvement. A dialogue about student experiences in the pre-service program would be especially useful for the department itself. Hence then the present study, which is meant to reveal

249

the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching practice component at SQU's College of Education from the trainees point of view. Perhaps it will encourage the department to examine its policies, practices, courses and methodologies.

At a time when English proficiency in Oman has become a tool for upward social mobility and for securing jobs, preparing good teachers is crucially important. A study by Fahmy and Bilton (1992) examined SQU's TEFL program mainly from the perspectives of program design and teacher trainees' educational and language background, self-reported English competency, attitudes towards English and its culture and the TEFL program. The results revealed that student teachers studied English for practical purposes, regarding it as important for their studies, future employment and the country's modernization. They especially wanted to improve their grammar and oral skills. A knowledge of English was not a factor that could affect their identity and they rated the study of the culture of English-speaking countries as least important. By contrast, they stressed the importance of gaining more language training and practical school experience before entering the field. Fahmy and Bilton (1992) concluded that "In any TEFL program, whether in Oman, Bangkok, or Jakarta, fact finding of this type should be conducted periodically as the program matures to help keep staff in tune with the attitudes, interests, and motivation of their students and the host community. Steps could then be taken to incorporate this information into the syllabus and instructional materials. The end result will be more promising TEFL education programs that are culturally and linguistically relevant for the participants in their home environment." (p. 115)

Those concluding remarks from Fahmy and Bilton (1992) motivated the present researcher to investigate the perceptions of SQU student-teachers about the teaching practice component of their TEFL program. The study will help in bridging the existing gap in teacher education research in Oman, which hopefully will encourage future research on the area.

The Study

The participants in this study were 30 female teacher trainees, all of whom were fourth year students. None of the male trainees volunteered to participate. The ages of these female students ranged from 21 to 23 years. The sample represents more than 33% of the student teacher population (from the fourth year) because each trainee batch comprises only 90 students.

The study used a questionnaire including open-ended questions focusing on three main components: general perception of the program and the teaching practice components (school practicum), views on classroom observations, and on feedback from their supervisors.

The exercise yielded rich qualitative data. The responses to all questions were categorized according to similarities and differences trainees' opinions. Responses were also synthesised and summarized for concise reporting. A thematic categorization was done and responses at times were tallied for optimal clarity.

Results and Discussion

This section will synthesise and summarise trainees' most important responses. They are presented under two main heads: perceptions of the teaching practice component in general, and perceptions of observations and feedback.

A. Perceptions of the teaching practice component in general

Responses revealed the following:

A discrepancy around what trainees regarded as components of their teaching practice. All included the following as components: the fieldwork, the portfolio (which included their prepared lesson plans, observation forms), and micro-teaching. Some included self-reflection, peer observation and extra tasks as parts of the teaching practice component, a discrepancy reflecting varying professorial teaching styles and demands. It was obvious that some professors demand more of their students than others. For example, there were professors who used Moodle as a platform for reflection and discussion with their students while others did not.

Trainees looked favourably on their field experience, which gave them a feel for the authentic context and provided "a real-life experience which is different from micro-teaching" (student 3, line 6). Importantly, this helped them to practice the theory learned in their Teaching Methods courses. They also valued teaching under supervision and getting feedback on their work. They perceived feedback as necessary at this stage of their training as they expected to make mistakes and learn from them. Teaching in schools gave them a taste of what school conditions are like and so provided a chance to adjust and modify their expectations prior to entering the field. It also gave them an idea about pupil levels and how much patience would be needed to accomplish lesson

252

objectives. All this gave them confidence in their ability to face the teaching career ahead of them.

Many trainees complained about numerous problems which they faced in their teaching practice. Among these were problems related to the pupils- their misbehaviour and minimal respect for student-teachers, their low level of English, and their tendency to use the mother tongue in class. Some found it hard to deal with large mixed ability classes, although language proficiency is generally unsatisfactory in most groups. Hence most trainees struggled with classroom management issues, some saying they were unsure how to secure pupils' attention. This problem is not unique to the Omani context. Japanese student teachers, for example, have indicated that they need "more practical advice and lessons focused on classroom management" (Howe, 2008, p. 343). Pupils' negative attitudes towards trainees might indicate an unfavourable attitude towards English, which is also reflected in their low levels of competence (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010). This finding sheds some light on the result of the educational reform which took place in Omani public schools more than ten years ago with the introduction of the Basic Education system, which entails teaching English from first grade - a supposedly positive change. However, the system advocates change-based learning, though the infrastructure to support this is largely absent (Moates, 2006). In addition, school teachers do not have adequate training or background in the system to know what is expected of them in the classroom. Feedback on how the new system is faring is confusing. While Ministry of Education officials feel very positive, many teachers are doubtful of its outcomes (Moates, 2006). The few students who have graduated from the experimental schools that inaugurated the system do not seem to fare any better in higher

253

education institutions. It is important to note, however, that the necessary research into this matter has not yet been carried out.

Trainees found some 'cooperating' schools and teachers unhelpful. Some teachers demanded that the trainees attend all their classes. And, these same teachers observed trainees' lessons, which was felt to be an intrusion on trainees' right to try to be unmonitored for a while during teaching practice. A few said that cooperating teachers looked down on them and called them "university students" in front of their classes, which damaged their morale and caused their pupils to respect them less. This finding echoes the one by Farrell (2008).

Most trainees found no balance between the theoretical and practical components of their program. They noted that most emphasis was placed on theory though what they actually learnt in theory courses was not always applicable in real contexts. They wanted more practice and they called for "gap bridging" between theoretical courses and authentic classroom practice.   Similar concerns were voiced by student teachers elsewhere in the world (see the study conducted by Ferdig, Roehler & Pearson, 2002).

In terms of preparedness for school work after two semesters of teaching practice, most students felt that they were properly prepared. However, when asked to evaluate their skills in lesson planning, materials development, test writing and classroom management, their answers varied. Almost all felt adequately prepared to write effective lesson plans, but only about half felt suitably trained to write materials or to manage their classrooms effectively. Less than half felt they could set good tests. In fact, most participants rated their test setting skill as weak because they never had to prepare one during their teaching practice.

The trainees specified particular courses in their training program that had helped to guide them in their teaching practice. The majority agreed that the methods courses (Teaching Methods I and II) helped them the most. Six mentioned micro-teaching as an important course that contributed to their efficiency in real classroom teaching while another six highlighted the course on aims and objectives. Five praised the course on curriculum. Four thought the educational psychology course was useful and another four viewed positively Instructional Technology. Among other responses, one mentioned benefiting from the course on the educational system in Oman, another Measurement and Evaluation and a third Teaching Skills. Thus, the methods courses emerged as the most important for helping trainees in their teaching practice.

Overall opinion on teaching practice experience suggests that it was useful and essential. It qualified trainees to be teachers because it taught them how to deal with pupils and how to manage classes well. It also taught them the importance of striking a balance between strictness and sensitive flexibility. Through this experience, they learned that patience is a crucial trait for dealing with pupils and other teachers alike.

B. Trainees views on observations and feedback

A number of salient points emerged from trainee responses regarding these two aspects of their teaching practice. Prominent are the following:

Trainees were observed by a number of people. All were observed by their supervisor(s) on the purpose of evaluation. However, while most trainees were observed more than once, a few reported being observed only once which they felt was not enough at that time of the semester. Those who reported being observed more than once were

255

either observed by the same supervisor or by two different ones. Many reported being observed by peers and by their cooperating teachers. A few did not mention receiving any peer observations or observations by the cooperating teachers, a discrepancy in practice that needs to be addressed. A minimum number of observations needs to be specified for supervisors, peers and cooperating teachers as this will ensure that all trainees are observed and given post-observation feedback. Trainees felt that their supervisors' observation frequencies, which ranged from once to three times, were not enough to pass any valid judgment on classroom performance. Thus, they requested more observations.

Observations are usually conducted with the observer sitting at the back and jotting down comments on an observation sheet, which are discussed either immediately after class or later in the supervisor's office.

Most trainees reported receiving immediate feedback, though a few reported a delay of two or three days after the observation. Trainees received the observation sheet and the comments made were discussed. Typically, both positive and negative comments would be noted by the supervisor, but a few trainees indicated that the supervisor seemed to dwell more on the negative comments, which greatly discouraged them. While most trainees felt being able to respond to these comments, some regarded such an attempt as futile because they thought it was unlikely to change the observers' mind regarding the grade given. Therefore, a few trainees said that they just accepted what they were told about their lessons. They remained silent and attempted no negotiation of any kind. These findings show a degree of hesitation on the part of trainees to discuss their

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concerns because they think that supervisor power is absolute, which indeed is usually the case.

Some trainees showed an over-concern for grades and wanted to negotiate about them with their professors, a practice that they should abandon. Instead, they should pay attention to the comments they receive in order to discover what they can do to improve their classroom performance.

A few trainees reported feeling confused by contradictory advice received from methods courses professors and teaching practice supervisors.

Varying methods of assessment and evaluation were reported. These included observations, lesson plans, reflection, interviews with teachers, and school assessment. While observations and lesson plans were reported by all trainees, reflection, interviews with teachers and school assessment were only mentioned by some. While some trainees reported submitting to their professors- for evaluation- a portfolio that might have included observation sheets, lesson plans and reflections, others mentioned that one of their supervisors used Moodle and they had to post their reflections there. Thus these trainees could discuss different aspects of their field experience, a practice which they found very useful. Responses on assessment methods demonstrate that different professors might be using different methods. Not all use Moodle, for example, which may disadvantage those who do not interact through this medium. Common ground among professors should be established so that all students may benefit from methods that are working well. And professors need to share their experiences with one another in order to benefit all trainees.

More than 50% of the trainees reported having positively on feedback they received from supervisors; the rest were not very satisfied. Ambivalent feelings about negative comments they received from their supervisors might have been a factor here.

Now might be time for an evaluation of the courses, an evaluation should take into consideration the opinions of the student teachers as they are the most important stakeholders in the training program.

Conclusion

The present study shows that trainees valued the teaching practice component because it gave them an opportunity to put into practice the theory they learned in their theoretical courses. However, they complained about the gap between theory and practice. While they valued the two methods courses they studied, they felt that much of what they learned could not be put to real use. This finding suggests the need for a more in-depth examination of the methods courses to see how they can be made to reflect classroom reality.

Different professors gave them contradictory advice which sometimes confused them. This is a drawback that needs to be addressed by the professors. Cooperation and liaison between them needs to be emphasized.

Cooperating schools and teachers were not always helpful. In fact, cooperating teachers looked down on trainees, which in turn caused reduced pupil respect. To address this problem, guidelines outlining the rights and responsibilities of both trainees and cooperating teachers should be drawn up between the college and schools and documented as a code of practice to be respected by everyone involved.

Almost all trainees felt that two semesters of teaching practice were enough to prepare them to enter the workforce; but they felt inadequately prepared in areas such as classroom management, materials writing, and test setting. Since they often practiced lesson planning, they felt they were adequately prepared to write effective lesson plans unsupervised. Increased concentration on these areas of trainee concern is important in the micro-teaching classes and the methods courses so that students may be better equipped to deal with classroom realities. Trainee expectations should also be examined by their professors so to align them with real-life classroom situations.

Trainees differed in terms of the observations they received or which they carried out for other teachers and peers. In addition, different supervisors used different assessment methods with their students, which indicates a regrettable inconsistency in practise. This finding calls for increased observations by supervisors and for establishing a degree of uniformity in assessing them.

Feedback received from professors was almost always immediate, but some trainees felt reluctant to discuss their supervisor's comments, believing this would not lead to fruitful results. Although feedback focused mainly on negative points in the trainee's lesson, as indicated by some trainees, all trainees felt that feedback was necessary for their growth and development as teachers. Some, unfortunately, were mainly interested in negotiating their grades with the professor during feedback sessions and should be shown how to improve their performance instead of being grade-oriented. To foster performance orientation, this element should be integrated into the methods courses, especially in the form of simulations and role-play.

To the extent of the researcher's knowledge, SQU's College of Education has not carried out any systematic, research-based evaluation of the EFL teacher education program since its inception. It is time, therefore, for such a comprehensive evaluation to take place. This can be neither comprehensive nor valid if trainees are not involved. Involving them on the other hand, would highlight the program's positive and the negative features. The College, then, could capitalize on the program's strengths and work towards finding solutions to its problems.

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263

Appendix

Questionnaire

**Perceptions of the EFL Student Teachers of the
Teaching Practice Program at SQU**

This study attempts to investigate the perceptions of the prospective teachers of English about the teaching practice (TP) program at SQU.

You are kindly requested to answer the following questions, <u>in Arabic or English</u>, in as much detail as possible.

Your cooperation is very much appreciated.

A. Questions about the TP Course as a whole

1. Please, describe in detail the components of the teaching practice program in the College of Education.

2.   From your perspective, what are the major advantages of the teaching practice program?

3. From your perspective, what are the major problems that you faced while attending teaching practice?

4. Describe the practical experience you have received in your training as a prospective English language teacher in the college of Education.

5. Describe your experience with the micro-teaching component.

6. To what extent is there a balance between the theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the teacher training program (the courses, micro-teaching and teaching practice at school)?

7. How well prepared are you as a teacher in the following areas:

    a. material development (writing supplementary material)
    b. test writing
    c. classroom management
    d. lesson plan preparation

8. What is it that you feel you have learned from the teaching practice program?

9. What courses prepared you best for your role as a teacher?

10. Do you think that you have had enough teaching practice that qualifies you to be an English language teacher?

B. Questions on Field Observations

1. Who was involved in observing you while you were practicing teaching in school (e.g. university supervisor, cooperative teacher, others?

2. How many times were you observed during the teaching practice semesters in the course of the semester? Was that adequate? Why or why not?

3. Describe how observations were conducted?

4. Have you ever conducted peer observations (observation of your fellow students who were teaching in the same school as you)? How many and how often?

5. Did you observe other English teachers in the school? How many and how often?

6. How cooperative were the English teachers working in the school where you did your teaching practice?

7. Besides observation, what are other methods of assessment your cooperating teacher used to evaluate your teaching performance?

8. Besides observation, what are other methods of assessment your professor used to evaluate your teaching performance?

9. If you ever had a problem with an observer (e.g. regarding a grade or a feedback point) what options did you have to resolve the problem?

C. Questions on Feedback

1. Describe the feedback session with your supervisor?

2. How often was it given?

3. Was the feedback immediate or not? Explain

4. If you were informed of a problem in your teaching, were you given any suggestions on how to improve? Was there any follow up after observation and feedback?

5. What are some of the problems you faced with your supervisor's or cooperative teacher's way of giving feedback?

6. How did you feel about the way in which feedback was given?