



Teachers Candidates' Experience in a Practicum for English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: Continuous improvement of teachers' preparation programs is necessary for enhancing training and equipping Teacher Candidates (TCs) with the required teaching skills. The present study is conducted for a practicum on teaching English as foreign language. It attempted to answer the following main questions: What opportunities / practices that the practicum enables teachers candidates to explore at the schools? What are TC's perceptions of more and less successful practicum? What parts do TC's think the practicum played important roles in developing their in-service teaching practices? What are TC's recommendations for developing successful practicum and their pre- service teaching practices? A questionnaire was used as an instrument for data gathering. A follow-up semi structured interviews were conducted with 10 of the participants. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the quantitative data. Thematic analysis approach used to analyze the qualitative data. Data analysis showed that the practicum component of the teacher preparation program is effective in some areas and needs improvement in other strands. The researcher will present and discuss thoroughly the areas that are effective and the reasons behind their effectiveness, the areas in the practicum that needs major improvement and TC's recommendations for improvement.

Keywords: EFL, practicum, pre-service teachers, teacher preparation, field experience

1. INTRODUCTION

The practicum component of any teacher-training program is considered the core element of prospective teachers' pre-service training. This is because this element of the program provides prospective teachers with real teaching experience in an authentic setting. In addition, it provides these trainees with the necessary basic experiences, skills, competences, strategies and knowledge required for starting successful careers as teachers. Further, it allows TCs to apply what they have learned at the university to a real teaching context. In Palestine, teacher education and training programs offer a Certificate or a Diploma that prepares prospective teachers to pursue teaching careers. This teaching diploma became a requirement qualification for all those interested in becoming teachers. Palestinian students enroll in such a program concurrently while they are pursuing their Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in their university major (in this case English). Alternatively, they could enroll in the program after they complete their BA degree. The diploma program is composed of 30 credit hours. Five of those credit hours is the practicum courses.

Practicum 1 allows students to develop the ideological and educational framework for learning and teaching in classrooms. It also focuses on the definition of the practicum, its objectives and the analyses of its tasks. Further, it explains and discusses the teacher's basic competences and performance skills. It focuses also on learning ethics that serves as a resource that students could refer to during their teaching at schools. Practicum 2 is designed to equip students with the skills required to perform specific planning and teaching tasks in classrooms. This is achieved in cooperation between the hosting / mentor teacher and the academic advisor at the university. The emphasis in this course is on developing the teacher's teaching, assessment and classroom management skills.

In such a unique context where student teachers do not follow the standard practicum used internationally due to scheduling constraints, it is vital for us as teacher educators and trainers to ask the following question. "Do the pre-service training of these prospective teachers in Palestine really prepare them to become successful teachers who are equipped with the necessary skills and

knowledge? The current study investigated the effectiveness of the Palestinian teacher education and training program at one of the Palestinian universities. In particular, it studied the effectiveness of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) diploma program. To determine its effectiveness the study raised the following research questions:

1. What opportunities / practices that the practicum enables teachers candidates to explore at the schools?
2. What are Teacher Candidates' perceptions of more and less successful practicum?
3. What parts do Teacher Candidates think the practicum played important roles in developing their in-service teaching practices at schools?
4. What are Teacher Candidates' recommendations for developing successful practicum and the pre- service teaching practices?

To the best of the author's knowledge there are no studies investigated the effectiveness of the practicum as it is offered by the Palestinian teacher education and training programs. The method in which the practicum is offered and implemented is unique to the Palestinian Context. It is fundamentally different from similar programs in other Arab countries and western countries. Thus, it is worth investigating the effectiveness of such a program. The goal is to utilize the findings of the study to make the necessary required changes in order to improve the practicum component of the Palestinian Teacher education and training programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above there are no studies that investigated the effectiveness of the Palestinian teacher education and training program particularly the practicum component of this program. In this section, the author will try to report the findings of studies that investigated the effectiveness of such programs in other contexts. Studies reviewed did not describe the practicum procedure being followed in those contexts. They reported only the findings of their studies on the effectiveness of preparing prospective teachers. It will be very beneficial to know such procedures and comparing them with the Palestinian one.

For instance in Malaysia pre-service teachers found their practicum training helpful in assisting them in understanding the teaching –learning process and classroom management as a result of their academic supervisors support and guidance. The practicum allowed them to gain invaluable teaching experience that prepared them to become successful teachers (Yunus, Hashim , Ishak and Mahamad (2010). In Japan, Japanese EFL teachers reported that their practicum experience equipped them with the necessary skills. Further, they wished that their practicum experience taught them more about English as a foreign language learners' characteristics, improved their language skills being non-native speakers and learned more about language teaching methodology (Igawa, 2011). Other studies such as Dhea & Rokhyati (2021) found out prospective teachers filed placement assisted them in mastering learning material taught at schools quantitatively, but mastery of the material still needs improvement as practicum supervisors reported.

The challenges that non-native prospective EFL teachers face was a focus of a study conducted by Gan (2013) in Hong Kong. The length of the practicum was eight weeks. Gan found out that there is a gap between the pedagogical principles that the pre-service student teachers were taught in their program and the practices at Hong Kong classroom that heavily emphasize using textbooks and examination preparation. In addition, motivating learners and dealing with misbehaviors were other challenges that trainees faced. Another interesting challenge that Gan found was that the inadequacy in English language competence appeared to affect these student teachers' teaching performance. For instance, some preservice teachers were not able to use the appropriate levels of English language to communicate with the students. In addition, some student teachers appeared to have difficulties in providing clear task instructions or coherent explanations of language points.

The role of university academic supervisors in training prospective non-native EFL teachers to teach English to non-native speakers was a focus of a study in Oman. The researchers found that student teachers were well prepared to teach English as a foreign language skills in general and teaching grammar in particular (Al-Mekhlafi & Naji 2013). In addition, the study revealed that the Omani

English foreign language student teachers' perspective were consistent with their supervisors' perspectives pertaining to the effectiveness of their supervisors' roles in developing student teacher's grammatical teaching strategies. More specifically, the student teachers felt that their supervisors fulfilled their roles during the practicum. The student teachers reported that their supervisors fully performed their supervision responsibilities. Student teachers indicated that their supervisors frequently provided them with what they need in modeling pedagogical practices.

The efficacy of teacher education programs in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context was also investigated. It has been found that the majority of Teacher Candidates felt that they were most prepared for managing classrooms effectively, selecting appropriate material to use in the classroom and design effective lesson plans. On the other hand, they felt least prepared to teach ESL literacy, teach English for academic purposes and teach English in a foreign language context. In addition, most of them reported that the practicum experience was the most useful component of their training program. Increasing the duration of the practicum component and including more practical aspects of teaching were some of their recommendations (Faез and Valeo (2012).

Having a mentor at the school where TCs spend the practicum period will definitely expose students to a variety of teaching practices and support. It has been found that mentored pre-service teachers during their practicum received more psychological support than those who completed their practicum without a mentor. The support that they received in terms of listening, counseling, trusting, and considering one another as friends made their practicum experience more effective and enjoyable (Nguyen, 2103).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The current study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. A questionnaire composed of open and close - ended questions was used for data collection. The researcher distributed 29 questionnaires but only 26 questionnaires were completed. The response rate was 89.6 %. A follow-up semi structured interview was also conducted with 10 of the participants. As to statistical procedures, means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the data quantitatively. On the other hand, the researcher adapted the thematic analysis for analyzing the qualitative data. The sample consisted of all the students who graduated in the year 2014 / 2015 academic year. These are 29 Birzeit University English as a Foreign Language Diploma Graduates who were working as in -service English as a foreign language teachers at the Palestinian public and private schools during the second semester of the scholastic year 2015-2016. There were 2 males and 24 females. Their ages ranged from 24 – 54 years old.

3.2. Instruments

The researcher used Busher's and Lawson's (2013) questionnaire with some modifications to suit the Palestinian educational context for data collection. The questionnaire comprised of 22 items, divided into two main parts. In its first part, the participants were required to fill in information about their demographic variables. These variables included gender, age and the length of their educational profession experience. The second part was divided into four sections: The first section consisted of seven statements that reflected how the institutional and policy contexts affected these teachers' experience of the practicum besides two open- ended questions. The second section consisted of one statement and only one open- ended question that reflected the sample's perceptions of more and less successful practicum. The third section also consisted of nine statements that reflected the parts that the teachers thought practicum played important roles in developing their in-service teaching practices. Finally, the fourth section consisted of two open- ended questions which reflects the sample's recommendations for developing successful practicum and pre- service teaching practices. The five – response scale: Five (Strongly agree), 4 (Agree), 3 (Undecided), 2 (Disagree), 1 (Strongly Disagree) was used for the closed statements in the questionnaire.

3.3. Data Analysis

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed by calculating the means, standard deviation, frequencies and percentages. Mean scores that ranged between 1.0 and 2.9 were considered as "low", mean scores that ranged between 3.0 and 3.9 were regarded as "medium", while mean scores that

ranged between 4.0 and 5.0 were regarded as “high”. Thematic analysis method was used to analyze the qualitative data collected by the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the data collected through the follow up semi-structured interviews.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Opportunities / Practices Enabled through the Practicum

Table1. Means for Items on the Opportunities / Practices Enabled through the Practicum (Scale 1-5) N= 26

No.	Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The practicum offered me chances to: put the theory I learned in the university into practice in the classroom	2.00	5.00	3.8846	.86
2	understand the overall content of the school	2.00	5.00	3.8077	.80
3	develop my understanding of what happens in a classroom	2.00	5.00	4.0769	.69
4	develop appropriate resources for teaching	2.00	5.00	4.0769	.89
5	Develop effective classroom management strategies	2.00	5.00	4.0000	.89
6	learn from my mentor(s) in the school	2.00	5.00	3.6154	.85
7	have the opportunity to cooperate and collaborate with experienced teachers	1.00	5.00	3.7308	1
	Total Average			3.8846	.86

The above table presents results pertaining to the opportunities / practices enabled during the practicum. As displayed in this table, the highest mean scores were reported for the following items: (3, 4, & 5). The reported means were: (4.07, 4.07, & 4.00) respectively. While, the medium scores were recorded for items: (6, 7, 2, & 1). The reported means were: (3.61, 3.73, 3.80, & 3.88) respectively.

In addition to the quantitative results showed in Table 1 above the qualitative analysis of the data collected as an answer to the open-ended question concerning how the TCs experience at the schools assisted them in developing their teaching skills seven main themes emerged. These themes were: “applying the methods and the suitable teaching strategies in practical real contexts”; “teaching planning and preparation”; “dealing with students with different needs and difficulties”; “classroom management and discipline”; “understanding the schools’ educational environments, particularly, what happened inside classrooms”; “learning from the experienced teachers” and finally, “confronting students”.

In addition, eleven main themes were concluded as answers for the question about the ways in which the practicum’s guidance documents were useful to the TCs during their practicum. These were: “implementing different teaching- learning methodologies, teaching strategies and grouping”; “dealing with students’ needs, problems, skills and individual differences”; “helping the teachers in their teaching planning and preparation”; “implementing classroom management strategies”; “using the practicum’s guidance documents for evaluation, assessment and feedback”; “making change and challenging the school administration”; “dealing with teacher’s book and curriculum; learning certain skills”; “understanding schools’ environments” and finally, “using the practicum’s guidance documents as references for preparing illustrations and exercises”.

4.2. Practicum Students’ Perceptions of a Successful Practicum

Table2. Means for the items about how teachers’ practicum experience matched their expectations (Scale 1-5). N=26

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
10 My experiences during the practicum match up my expectations before I started the practicum.	2.00	5.00	3.6923	1.01071

As Table 2 above shows, the mean for how the TCs experiences during the practicum matched their expectations before they started is 3.69 (Medium).

Qualitative data analysis of the data collected pertaining to how TCs practicum experience matched or did not match their expectations is illustrated in the following table:

Table3. *How the Practicum Experience Met Teacher Candidates' Expectations*

Theme	Met Expectations	Did not Meet Expectations
Preparing and planning lessons.	Yes	
learning how to manage classes.		NO
dealing with students' individual differences and learning difficulties		No
applying some teaching theories and teaching methods and strategies.		No
Number of students in the classrooms		No
assessing students and providing them feedback	Yes	
dealing with school administration		No
students' levels in English language.		No

4.3. Developing TCs' Teaching Practices

Table4. *Means for the Areas that the Practicum Played an Important Role in Developing TCs Teaching Practices. (Scale 1-5) N=26*

Item		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
12	Identify my weaknesses	2.00	5.00	4.0	.688
13	Improve my practice in areas that needed development	2.00	5.00	4.0	.98
14	Extend the range of teaching strategies I used in the classroom	2.00	5.00	3.96	.66
15	Be more reflective about my teaching skills	3.00	5.00	3.92	.63
16	Focus on school students' learning	3.00	5.00	4.07	.63
17	Choose and use appropriate technologies for students to use	2.00	5.00	4.00	.849
18	Prepare lesson plans according to students' needs	2.00	5.00	4.07	.796
19	Decide on appropriate teaching methods, approaches and techniques to use with particular students	3.00	5.00	4.03	.528
20	Use a number of assessment techniques, including assessment for learning	2.00	5.00	4.00	.848
	Total average			4.02	.73

As displayed in Table 3 above, the highest mean scores were reported for the following items: (12, 16, 18, 19, 13, 17, & 20). The reported means were: (4.07, 4.07, 4.07, 4.03, 4.00, 4.00, & 4.00) respectively. While, the medium scores were recorded for items: (14, & 15). The reported means were: (3.96 & 3.92) respectively.

4.4. TCs Recommendations for Developing a Successful Practicum

Qualitative analysis of the data collected pertaining to the most beneficial aspects of the practicum according to TCs comments were: training how to use the appropriate teaching methods, strategies and approaches, training how to prepare and plan lessons knowing how to use various methods of assessment, evaluation and providing feedback, learning how to manage classroom time, learning how to confront students without fear, strengthened my personality, learned how to deal with students misbehavior, control and manage the class, learning how to build good rapport with students and how to deal with students with learning challenges, how to integrate technology in teaching & learning, becoming aware of schools' environments. In the words of one of the participants commenting on the effectiveness of the practicum pertaining to assessment

It gives different assessment techniques as self- assessment, peer assessment and assessment for learning not just for evaluation and having marks". It helped me to assess students through using observations, oral questions, tests and how to correct their papers and give them feedback.

Pertaining to the least beneficial aspects of the practicum qualitative data analysis showed that most of the TCs found that training how to manage classrooms effectively, the short time period of the practicum at schools are the least beneficial. Few of the participants reported that training how to deal with gifted students, training how to develop exams, and doing assignments during the practicum are the least beneficial. In the words of one of the participants “I think that students should spend more time at schools to get more familiar with teaching, teaching 20 lessons is not enough”.

5. DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the practicum component effectiveness in preparing prospective Palestinian teachers. The method in which the practicum component implemented is unique in this context. Many including the author questioned the effectiveness of such a program. In order to find out to what extent such a program is helpful in training the prospective Palestinian teachers this study had been conducted. It was conducted to provide concrete evidence for changing or improving the practicum component of the Palestinian teacher education program.

Findings showed that institutional policy and the context in which the practicum component is implemented have major effects on TCs experience during the practicum. In particular, the practicum guidelines at the university and the school restrictions at which TCs perform their teaching duties limit their opportunities to apply what they have learned at the university. The mean average of the items concerned with how the practicum enabled the participants to perform certain practices is medium. This means that in spite of limited opportunities and school restrictions TCs were able to perform their duties as much as they could. In any practicum the goal is to prepare exemplary prospective teachers. Such preparation is not possible if TCs are not provided with plenty of opportunities to apply what they have learned in their teacher education programs. In addition, without schools support and the hosting teacher assistance and guidance TCs will not have the opportunity to practice freely and extensively what they have learned at the university.

Meeting TCs' expectations contributes to a successful and rewarding practicum experience. The current study found out that their experience during the practicum did match to some extent their expectations before they began their placement at schools. There were some areas in the practicum that could have been much better implemented in order to meet the TCs expectations. Such areas include dealing with learners' individual differences, learning challenges and the opportunity to apply the learning methods and strategies acquired during their training. One of the participants said

“It didn't match in dealing with students who have learning difficulties; I can't deal with them or integrate them because they are marginalized”. In addition, It does not match in terms of classroom management and in dealing with students' individual differences”.

Even though some of the TCs expectations were not met during the practicum, when asked about which elements of the teaching practicum played a more significant role in developing their teaching practice the means for most of those elements were high (See Table 3). That is the practicum experience was great enough to allow them, for instance, to use various teaching and assessment method. One of the participants said

Personally, I was able to challenge the school administration with the new methods and ideas given. I could refuse clearly the traditional ways of teaching. The practicum empowered me and improved me as a teacher before it helped me improve my students.

For those areas that the practicum experience fell short in meeting the TCs expectations or did not play a major role in developing their teaching practices the TCs recommended improvement in some parts of the practicum. Some of these areas include lengthening the period of placement, more training on classroom management, and including training on inclusive practices that engage all students

The implications of the results in the current study are multifaceted. At the university level, it is vital to review the policies of the teacher preparation and training programs at the Palestinian post-secondary intuitions to allow TCs the best opportunities to apply what they have learned in those programs in authentic school contexts. At the ministry of education and school levels, it is also significant to review their policies regarding TCs placements that allow them to have a meaningful placement experience.

In spite of the restrictions, that both post-secondary institutions' policies and the context policies pertaining to TCs placement at schools the results of the study in general showed that the training that Palestinian prospective teachers receive is good. This could be attributed to the following reasons a) devotion and resiliency of the Palestinian teacher candidates b) the desire to be a great English teacher with a high command of the English language and its pedagogy, c) sincerity and devotion of most of academic advisors and mentors at the schools who sometimes bend the rules to allow TCs develop the required teaching skills, e) the challenging life in the Palestinian Occupied Territories taught all involved in the placement process to take advantage of every single opportunity to improve one's skills in any area possible, f) and finally acceptance of the fact that particularly in the Palestinian context that nothing is perfect and conducting ones business requires flexibility, perseverance and taking advantage of every opportunity regardless of educational policies and rules.

The aforementioned reasons that might explain the success of the practicum in training Palestinian EFL teachers were based on a group of twenty seven graduates who were in-serve teachers at the time the study was conducted. These twenty seven teachers are the whole population. This is because each the university graduate 25 – 35 EFL teachers. Thus, the small population of the study might be a weakness in the study.

Future studies that will investigate the training of prospective teachers in other disciplines such as social studies, teaching science and math in the Palestinian context are strongly recommended. This will allow for comparison of the results in various disciplines. In addition, a study that takes all prospective teachers regardless of their specialization is worth conducting. Such a study will provide evidence to policy makers at the ministry and postsecondary institutions levels about the effectiveness of the teacher preparation and training in Palestine.

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Citation: Dr. Anwar Hussein-Abdel Razeq. "Teachers Candidates' Experience in a Practicum for English as a Foreign Language" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 10, no. 2, 2022, pp. 313-8. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1002004>.

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