

Enhancing Teacher Training Quality: Perceptions and Perspectives

تحسين جودة تدريب الأساتذة: التصورات ووجهات النظر

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ABSTRACT:

Education has become the concern of stakeholders throughout the world. It has prompted calls for reform to teachers' practices in order to improve the standard of the teaching/learning process. This requires adequate preparation of teachers to meet the challenges of teaching/learning process. The present paper aims at exploring the issues that emerge in the training courses of EFL prospective teachers. The case study includes 48 Master II students at the department of English, Mostaganem University and 5 EFL inspectors. Following a quantitative and qualitative analysis from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, the results confirm that prospective teachers make links between theory and practice and reveal that training professional teachers has become an urgent need. To render teacher training more effective and achieve better teacher quality, some recommendations are provided. They might be of great usefulness to policymakers as potential areas to address the challenges of developing quality, motivated and professional teaching force at the school level.

Key words: EFL; training quality; teaching practice

مُلْحَصُ بَحْثِ

أصبح التعليم موضع اهتمام المختصين في جميع أنحاء العالم. مما أدى إلى الدعوة لإصلاح ممارسات الأساتذة من أجل تحسين مستوى عملية التدريس / التعلم. وهذا يتطلب الإعداد الكافي للأساتذة لمواجهة تحديات عملية التدريس / التعلم. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف الصعوبات التي تظهر خلال الدورات التدريبية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية المقبلين على التدريس. تشمل هذه الدراسة 48 طالب سنة الثانية ماستر في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة مستغانم و 5 مفتشين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. بعد التحليل الكمي والنوعي من الاستبيان والمقابلات شبه المنظمة، تؤكد النتائج أن الأساتذة المقبلين على التدريس يربطون بين النظرية والممارسة وتكشف أن تدريس الأساتذة المحترفين أصبح حاجة ملحة. لجعل تدريس الأساتذة أكثر فعالية وتحقيق جودة أفضل للمعلمين، يتم تقديم بعض التوصيات. قد تكون ذات فائدة كبيرة لمواجهة التحديات وتطوير التدريس والتكوين على مستوى المدرسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ جودة التكوين؛ ممارسة التدريس

1. Introduction

We live in a globalized world where countries are subject to massive economic, political, and technological changes. Education is also undergoing rapid transformations under the effects of globalization. However, despite its importance in shaping people's life and future, education is always facing continuous obstacles.

It has been acknowledged that promoting teacher quality is a key element in improving education in any system. Indeed, one of the primary goals of teacher training is to have a qualified teacher in every classroom. Research on teacher training has yielded highly inconsistent results. Some studies find that formal education is important and these have been interpreted as support for strengthening existing teacher preparation programmes in universities and increased expenditures on post-college training.

In view of the English language continuous expansion and its increasing role in education and employment, there is great need for highly qualified EFL teachers. However, a mismatch continues between the expected and actual level of competence, and educators claim that EFL pre-service teacher education is inadequate (Nunan, 2003). Certainly, this represents an enormous challenge and even a potential problem that suggest a need for reform in EFL pre-service teacher education. Among many attempts to enhance this field, efforts have focused on developing candidates' teaching practices during the practicum (Hudson et al, 2009).

2. Literature Background

2.1. Teaching Practice: A Means of Learning How to Teach

Teacher education programmes generally take place in the university or teacher education institutions, and the only bridge comes "in observing teachers and in practising classroom teaching" (Freeman, 2002, p. 73). The transmission of knowledge in teacher education at the university is considered as limited and full of problems. This is due to the fact that the knowledge base of university-based teacher education is unable to fill the gap between "theory" in teacher education programmes and the knowledge and skills of experienced teachers at schools.

It is well-known that the quality and extent of the learner achievement are determined primarily by teacher competence, sensitivity and motivation. The role of the teachers in all formal educational settings is vital. They are of course the key agents in all formal educational systems. If well-adjusted and well-prepared, the teachers can motivate their students and meet the challenging task of teaching.

learning to teach is seen as a complex process that involves social interactions within a school context (Farell, 2003; Velez-Rendon, 2006). Research on learning to teach has sought to mainly focus on teachers' beliefs and perceptions (Johnson, 1996), attitudes towards teaching and learning (Street, 2003), understanding of the subject-matter, needs and challenges (Nelson & Harper, 2006), perceptions of initial teaching practice, mentoring processes (Street, 2004), and motivation to teach (Kyriacou & Kabori, 1998). Wang and Odell (2003) argued that "pre-service teachers' initial beliefs, mentors' teaching and mentoring practices, and school contexts influenced pre-service teachers' conceptual development" (p. 147).

The theory behind teaching practice and the expected outcomes of the process are quite similar in all teacher training institutions in the world. But the way of putting practice process into operation differs from one institution to another. This is due to factors such as the characteristics of the content, the teacher and the learner that may lead the practicum to be conducted differently in different situations (Zeichner, 1990).

2.2. Perceptions around Teacher Education and Training

Teacher education is preparation of individuals enabling them to become professional teachers. It is a programme that is related to the development of teacher proficiency and competence that would help the teacher meet the requirements of the profession and face the challenges therein.

Adequate preparation entails a solid teacher training programme and pre-service activities that will equip the trainees with the prerequisite skills for facing the challenges of the new job.

Teacher education is not teaching the teacher how to teach. It is the initiative to keep it alive, to minimize the evils in the process and to save time, energy and trouble of the teacher and the learner. Teacher education is needed for developing a purpose and for the formation of a positive attitude for the profession. It refers to the policies and procedures designed to equip teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the school and the classroom. Ranga (2005) states that “.....teaching can regain its early noble status in case the quality of teacher education is improved” (p. 05). A successful teacher is required to be equipped with the characteristics like the mastery of the subject-matter, professional training, sound physical and mental health, and devotion and dedication to his profession.

In the United Kingdom, the General Teaching council (2003) conducted a large-scale survey on teachers’ perceptions of teaching. The findings provided three key factors that motivated teachers to enter initial teacher education courses. The three motivating factors were: working with young people, a sense of personal achievement and the stimulating nature of the teachers’ role.

The constructivist view of learning suggests that teaching cannot be reduced to a limited number of learnable skills that could be mastered and then applied to particular teaching contexts. Rather, teachers need to be experts in professional problem-solving and highly informed about subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Ball et al., 2008). They also have to develop a wide repertoire of educational techniques that they can use to build flexible and evolving strategies to face the obstacles of their day-to-day work. Therefore, the preparation of prospective teachers involves learning about several areas such as, the education systems, teaching and learning, the subjects to be taught, and subject pedagogy.

Developing the practical skills is also the concern of intending teachers who apply such knowledge as part of their teaching experience. This will enable them to convert their authentic academic knowledge that can be applied in real teaching contexts. However, new teachers must be prepared to enter the teaching force with the idea that they will not be equipped with solutions to all the challenges they face, but with confidence to develop suitable solutions (Taber, 2010).

2.3. Conceptualization of Quality Teaching

Language teaching is an enterprise that is shaped by the views of the nature of language, teaching and learning a specific language, teaching and learning in general, and by the sociocultural settings in which the enterprise takes place. Richards (2011) considers that a language teacher needs some specific competencies in order to teach effectively. These include the ability to comprehend texts accurately, to maintain fluent use of the target language in the classroom, to select the appropriate language resources, and to give correct feedback on learner language.

It is challenging to ensure that teaching is and remains a job that attracts a number of quality applicants (Mulkeen et al., 2007). The issue of quality in teacher training, especially pre-service, is of great importance, because it has consequences for the whole education system in any given context. Different viewpoints about the quality of a teacher have forced the adoption of more regulations and requirements a person must meet before being declared fit to be a teacher.

According to the Mckinsey Report, teachers are seen as the key players and the most important people in the success of students (Barber and Mourshed, (2007). The report also focuses on the variation in the quality of student learning in schools which is controlled by the quality of teachers. The findings of Hattie’s research (2009) also show that the quality of teachers in a school has a more significant impact on the positive learning of students than the quality of the implemented curriculum, the prescribed teaching methods or the structure of the school.

3. Methodology

3.1. Scope of the Study

This study investigates the reflections of EFL student teachers and EFL inspectors on the effectiveness of the current pre-service English teacher education programme in an attempt to provide insights into how prospective teachers are likely to be prepared for their career of teaching. The purpose of the study is to explore what prospective EFL school teachers need to know and how they learn to teach. The review of the literature relevant to the issues under investigation led to refine the research questions as follows:

1. What kind of knowledge do EFL pre-service teachers need for effective language teaching?
2. What opportunities are available for effective practice in their pre-service training?
3. To what extent do these opportunities help prospective teachers meet the challenges of teaching English at school?

Taking these questions into account, the following hypotheses have been suggested:

1. Adequate knowledge about language and teaching skills is needed for effective teaching;
2. Teaching practice may raise prospective EFL teachers' motivation to teach;
3. Pre-service training may help prospective teachers meet the challenges of the job.

In order to get sufficient data about the issue under investigation, a quantitative and qualitative approach was adapted, seeking a wide range of information to understand whether pre-service training designed for the trainees is effective and useful or not. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of EFL inspectors having a long experience in teaching English prior to this position. Data were also collected from a questionnaire administered to 48 Master II students at the department of English, Mostaganem University.

3.2. Findings and Discussion

3.2.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The process of analysing data was quite time consuming, since it required transcribing the information obtained and reporting the participants' comments in relation to the aim of the study. As previously mentioned, my interviewees were five EFL inspectors (supervisors) who taught English for a long time in different schools. The questions of the interviews turned around the following preoccupations:

- Evaluation of the teaching situation of English in the Algerian school;
- The role of the university under the LMD system in preparing new EFL teachers;
- Assessing novice teachers' ability to design lesson plans and manage their classrooms;
- Inspectors' expectations and suggestions for change.

As far as the first point is concerned, the interviewees claim that the situation needs improvement because of many reasons; for instance, the recommended approach is not well-mastered by most of the teachers, textbooks designers deny the students' learning styles and mixed abilities, and newly recruited teachers need more support.

Concerning the role of the university under the LMD System, the inspectors confirm that the system does not respond to the needs of the market and university students are not offered adequate pre-service training for successful integration within teaching. That's why they lack proficiency in English, and there are, in most cases, precarious pedagogical and didactical aspects of teaching.

In light of the shortcomings, the group of inspectors believe that the need for change in English teaching policy seems to be a must. They call the decision-makers to:

- Think seriously about implementing TEFL courses theory-practice in all universities;
- Sign conventions with the Ministry of National Education to make connection between the students and the field;

- Invite teachers and inspectors to deliver sample lessons and workshops and invite the students to attend lectures and seminars with EFL teachers.

3.2.2. Student teachers' Questionnaire

For eliciting data from the informants, a questionnaire was administered to 48 Master II students. The aim was to investigate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher training. The majority of the respondents were female and their age varies between 23 and 26 years old.

Gender	Number	Percentage	Age group	Number	Percentage
Male	8	16,66%	23	23	47,92%
Female	40	83,33%	24	18	37,5%
			25	6	12,5%
			26	1	2,08%

Table (01): Student Teachers' Gender and Age Group Distribution

The first part of the questionnaire consists of some open- ended questions that focus mainly on teaching English and how prospective teachers are prepared for the job. The respondents claimed that English has proved its importance as an international language, and people need to teach and learn it because it is the language of politics, education, law, medicine and technology. The informants also argued that preparing prospective teachers should be given a great importance. They focused on pre-service training as an initial attempt for them to expose their capacities to innovate, take risks, free them from pressures and put theory into practice.

The second part of the questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions in which the participants were required to select the appropriate answer. To investigate the level of their English proficiency, the informants were provided some statements and were asked to select the appropriate one that best describes their English abilities. The collected answers showed that a few participants (27%) said they had sufficient ability to teach, and (30%) confessed their English level was not satisfactory, but they could conduct classroom lessons. On the other hand, (43%) stated that they were not confident enough with their linguistic level and felt anxious about teaching.

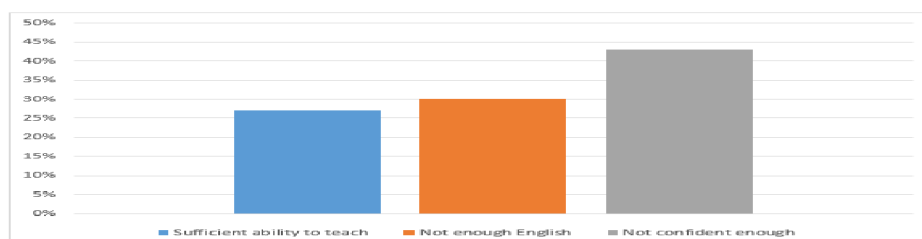


Figure (01): Trainees' English Ability

As shown in *figure 02*, the participants had different views about the initial training programme provided for them by the end of the course. The findings show that (35%) of the respondents found their training difficult and tiring, (43%) said that it was challenging, (61%) pointed out that it was a stimulating programme that enabled them to be in touch with the context of teaching. There were also (37%) of the participants who found the programme important, but according to them, it lacked organization and time. Whereas, only (22%) mentioned that they just received instructions, and they were not provided enough time and adequate material for effective practice.

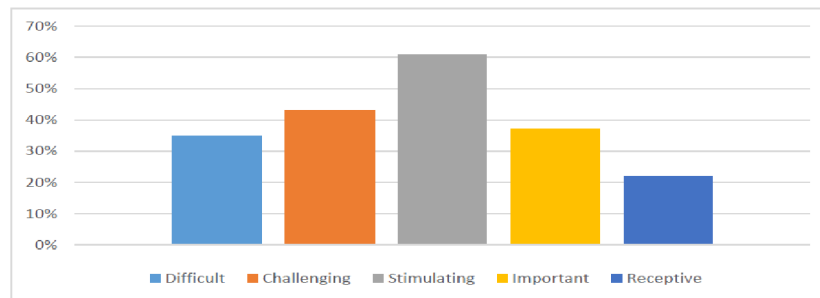


Figure (02): The Trainees' Perceptions about their Initial Training

Figure 03 shows that the majority (73%) of the respondents stated that the observation sessions and the presentations they were in charge with made them change their views towards teaching, either positively or negatively. On the other hand, (22%) confirmed that they got confused, because they did not have the opportunity to be previously involved in such an experience. Therefore, they found it difficult to be adapted to the context of teaching.

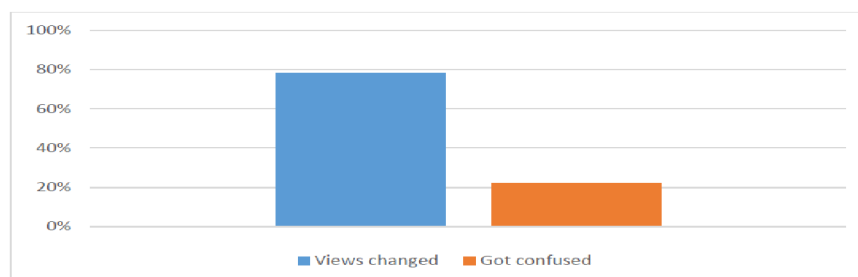


Figure (03): Trainees' Views about Teaching after Practicum

It seems that the participants had different views about the elements that the training course should contain. Methodological approaches of language teaching were the main focus of the respondents as pointed out by (80%) and school text books by (68%). Besides, basic skills of using power point were selected by (56%) of the informants, basic computer skills indicated by (44%), and basic skills of using Internet Applications considered by (32%). There were also (39%) of the participants who stated that language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) could help them improve their linguistic knowledge. Whereas, (30%) mentioned that translation could be introduced in the training course, and only (18%) pointed out that English TV programmes might be among the contents of the course.

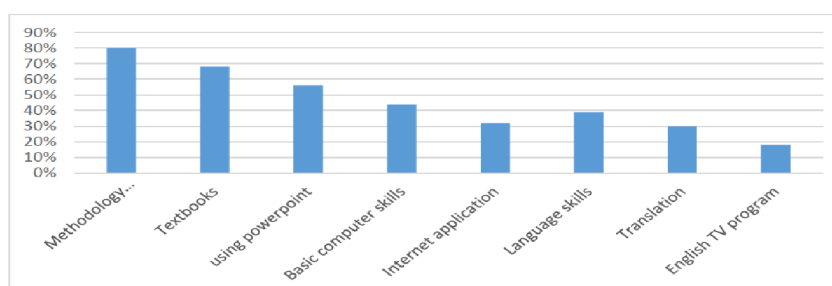


Figure (04): Instructional Needs in the Training Course

According to Graves (2009), the key aspects of a second language teacher education curriculum include understanding teachers as learners, defining goals for teacher learning, knowing what to teach and how to teach them, and evaluating the effectiveness of teacher education process. Since pre-service EFL teacher training is an important and challenging topic, the discussion focuses on the participants' perceptions about the quality of teaching practice provided for EFL students during their last semester.

It is noticed that there is a need to focus on teaching practice in the host institutions. This will enable EFL pre-service teachers to observe all what goes on in the classroom and will prepare

them for purposeful post lessons discussions about specific questions. As a result, prospective teachers will make links between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge and gain more experience in preparing for entry into the teaching profession.

The inadequate mentoring perceived in this study should be addressed and adjusted in order to provide suitable education for EFL pre-service teachers and produce quality teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Furthermore, the quality and degree of collaboration in field experience programmes can help EFL prospective teachers develop as future practitioners.

4. Implications and Significance of the Findings

From the findings and the literature review, it is noticed that:

- Teaching practice is important, because it prepares prospective teachers for the real experience of working in schools as part of the journey to become teachers (White, 2009).
- There is a need to emphasize teaching practice in the host institutions. This will allow pre-service teachers to have enough time for observation and actual teaching.
- There should be a balance between theory and practice in learning how to teach.
- On the other hand, feedback from teacher educators and supervising teachers is essential to detect the weaknesses in the trainees' performance. This could be realized through the assistance and visits of supervising teachers.
- Scaffolding is also essential to educate pre-service teachers about the pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge for effective education practices.

5. Suggestions and Recommendations

The content of teacher education curricula is important in realizing the significance of the English subject in today's school. Therefore, the responsibility is providing prospective teachers with the required training which will enable them to respond to the needs of teaching English. This would mean that the focus of initial training should be on providing student teachers with a set of high-level beginning competences to be built on through the continuum of teacher education (Teaching Council, 2017).

In fact, practising teaching is a way that helps the trainees improve their abilities in dealing with pupils' problems and gives them the chance to know the school curriculum and how to deal with it. The initial experience in teaching is an opportunity to extend the trainees' self-confidence, familiarise them with the teachers' roles and responsibilities, make the link between theory and practice, and share experience with mentors and school staff through collaborative work. This may enable student teachers to gain access to teachers' professional knowledge (Hagger, 2002).

Peer collaboration is a productive learning that connects work and learning, integrates field experience, and its main purpose is to provide support without the pressure of underlying an evaluation. Moreover, supervisory practices require pre-service teacher candidates to play the role of instructional supervisors in observing and conducting post observation discussions with school teachers. This enables pre-service teachers to feel they are on a more level plane with in-service teachers when talking about specific aspects of the teaching/learning dynamic.

Since teaching is an organized sequence of activities, it is important to introduce transformation that matches the learners' cognitive capacities. To gain such insight, an effective training programme should be implemented to create the appropriate environment that ensures the suitable transformation of the scientific knowledge into teachable knowledge. Therefore, at the pre-service stage, seminars should be held to establish the general framework on which prospective teachers rely once they embark on the job. These meetings might represent official training programmes that can be a key tool for professional development.

When the students reflect on microteaching, they apply and assess the concepts they are learning, and they learn how to give and receive criticism. Video recording should also be given special value, because it enables the student teachers to assess the non-verbal aspects of their teaching and reflect on their communicative competence, including their language proficiency and knowledge

of essential language functions. So, classroom observations should be recorded. This helps the observer to reflect on the videos and develop practice in the short term.

Investigating teachers' knowledge is a pre-requisite and a starting point for any successful innovation. So, the balance between theory and practice in pedagogical related courses can be attained by allocating more credit points to those courses that focus on practical activities integral to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Strong positive attitudes towards the benefits of technology to English language teaching and learning have been advocated. However, more emphasis should be put on the use of ICTs during teacher training to instruct the trainees how to search for and use learning resources on the Internet and show them the usefulness of integrating technology into instruction.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, it would be reasonable to say that training future teachers is essential, but it is vital to make them become well-involved and interested in the teaching/learning process in order to guarantee effective educational change. Critical engagement with current realities should serve to guide teacher educators, as they consider the effort in preparing tomorrow's educators. Reforming education always implies reforming the curricula, their educational aims and the conditions for their effectiveness.

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