

The Place of Educational Research in Pre-service Teachers' academic and professional development in the Pre-service Education College-Bouzareah-Algiers

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Abstract:

Many educational institutions around the world call for the need to involve pre-service teachers to engage in research based learning. Bower (2010) claims that: 'There has been a recent international emphasis towards integrating research-based learning into the undergraduate curriculum'. The research paper or 'le mémoire de fin d'étude' that student teachers present at the end of their undergraduate studies in the pre-service education college-Bouzareah in Algiers is one form of research based learning that fosters pre-service teachers' academic and professional development. Because the research paper in the school is not given the place it deserves at the end of the five year pre-service training, there is an urge to revisit its role which is that of equipping student teachers with the academic teaching skills they need to acquire for their future teaching career. This paper aims to highlight the extent to which the involvement of pre-service teachers in educational research is indispensable for training them academically and professionally. More specifically 'integrating research into the pre-service teacher curriculum includes the development of students' ability to think critically, learn material deeply, link theory with practice, perform research processes, collaborate with others, and to cope with super complexity'(ibid). In addition, one of the main objectives of this paper is to show that the components of the research paper or 'mémoire' should be both the accumulation of theoretical knowledge about teaching and engagement in doing research. If student teachers focus their attention on writing research papers of a purely theoretical nature, this will prevent them from engaging in 'real' educational research which involves more than knowledge of theories about teaching. The paper closes with recommendations for the standardization of the objectives of the research papers across all educational subjects in the school.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, research paper, research based learning, educational research, theory, practice.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with educational research and its significance in promoting pre-service education. Pre-service training in most institutions offer programs that include educational research lectures and projects. This is the case of the pre-service educational college in Algiers-Bouzareah. The inclusion of educational research in training pre-service teachers is of significance to their academic and professional development. This is because it prepares the student teachers to be involved with research before entering the profession.

In the Algerian EFL context, educational research has its place in undergraduate curricula. The pre-service education college, for example, designed research lectures and projects in the fourth and fifth year programs. Student teachers of the fourth year program go through a module that provides theoretical principles about researching education. All fourth year students i.e. middle and secondary pre-service teachers are initially acquainted with the subject of research. In the fifth year, however, pre-service teachers are required to write a research paper i.e. mémoire that is necessary for graduation. In this final year, student teachers prepare the short dissertation either individually or in pairs under the supervision of a teacher from the school.

The issue at hand

It cannot be denied that the undergraduate program in the pre-service education college-Bouzareah, Algiers does involve some elements of research in its curriculum. However, educational research in EFL contexts such as Algeria is still immature. Fifth year pre-service teachers have to prepare a research paper under the supervision of a teacher from the college. Yet, most dissertations are not original, student teachers lack knowledge and skill to carry out true research. Some students just copy theories about their topics along all the work and some others try to involve in practical investigations but they fail. Another issue in writing the mémoire is that of supervision, teachers do not have a unified system of evaluation or a common grid to evaluate students' research papers. The teacher supervisor is the one who corrects the work and gives the mark to the student(s). This raises the issue of objectivity in research. The teacher supervisor cannot be totally objective with his/her own students and work i.e. he/she cannot give a low grade to his/her own supervision. Thus, students do not give much importance to the research paper and sometimes rely on one of the members to carry out the work. Another problem student teachers encounter is the feedback

they receive from their teachers. The students either do not take the remarks seriously or the teachers take a lot of time to give back the feedback to the students.

In the present paper, focus is put on the value of the memoir in the pre-service education college from the student teachers' perspective. This research project that has to be usually presented in the final years of graduation has been the subject of inquiry by a number of researchers.

The teacher researcher

Teachers at all levels of education engage in making research for their professional development. This is because teacher development is nowadays associated with researching. Therefore, involving teachers in investigating the different educational matters is no longer an issue. What is problematic, however, is to engage teachers and more particularly pre-service teachers in research that is worthy i.e. they are expected to investigate practical issues and find solutions that apply directly to what teachers need in their classrooms. Gitlin et al. (1999) reported that: 'The problem of getting research to practitioners no longer dominates the landscape. Instead, there is a growing focus on enabling practitioners to engage in research such that 'what is known and worth knowing about teaching is related to the practical knowledge possessed by teachers of how and when to act in actual teaching situations (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. 41).

Inquiry orientation to teaching has become an active way for teachers to be immersed in educational research. Ibid (1999) claimed that No longer is educational research used only as a way to prescribe pre-service and practicing teachers' actions. Instead, an expanding number of teacher education programs have adopted some form of inquiry orientation. Teacher educators championing inquiry-oriented approaches ask pre-service teachers to engage in a variety of activities including becoming critical consumers of research, participating in action research projects, and generally developing a reflective approach to decision making (Day, 1984; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Eliot, 1990; Zeichner, 1994; Tom, 1985; Stenhouse, 1985). In addition, a common characteristic of inquiry-oriented teacher education programs is a desire to expand research beyond its traditional fact-finding mission, thereby enabling pre-service teachers to become *critical consumers of research* and/or engage in *practitioner initiated inquiry* (Tom, 1985).

What is worth mentioning is that when pre-service teachers are early initiated to formal research, they acquire more teaching experience and thus can cope with educational problems.

Grimmett (1988) proposed that formal research 'is one source of information whereby teachers apprehend practice as they reconstruct their classroom experience' (p. 12).

Thus, research based learning as integrated in undergraduate curricula prepares pre-service teachers for lifelong research career. Initially, research-based learning is a learner-centred knowledge building exercise where learners "pursue their own new questions and lines of inquiry, in interaction with the knowledge-base of the discipline" (Jenkins and Healey, 2009, p.26, adapted from Levy, 2008). It goes, hence, in line with developing learner-centeredness that is a characteristic claimed by the new educational system in Algeria.

Moreover, teaching is highly dependent on context and teachers are required to refine teaching practices accordingly. These changes in teaching practices can be possible by active involvement in research based learning in early stages i.e. pre-service education for undergraduate students.

Bower (2010) pointed out to the reasons behind integrating research into the undergraduate curriculum from two sides: 'On a pedagogical level it promotes student-centred learning, views the learner as a potential producer of knowledge, and provides students with research capabilities that they may apply in their professional world and beyond. At a departmental or even institutional level, creating opportunities for undergraduate research is a powerful way to reinvigorate the undergraduate curriculum, potentially breaking down barriers between teaching and research into one integrated system of performance (Jenkins and Healey, 2009). Besides, pre-service teachers early research attempts raise their awareness to issues of current focus in the field of education and teaches them to link theory to practice. This means that they are required to apply theoretical principles from the literature to the teaching context. What is further is the acquisition of some research concepts that have to be used carefully in the teaching profession. Notions of validity, reliability and ethics for instance are not only to be applied in doing research but also in teaching and assessing learners. Ultimately, It has been commonly argued that self-study research contributes to the professionalization of the work of teacher education because it enables teacher educators to take more control over their own continuing development and provides a supportive system of professional development for beginning and experienced teacher educators that result in

innovations and concrete improvements in the quality of teacher education practice (Russell and Korthagen, 1995. In Zeinchener, 2007).

In the study at hand, the place of 'memoire' as a form of research is investigated from the point of view of pre-service teachers in the pre-service education college in Algiers.

Research participants and tool

The paper aims to gather data about the place of research, in the form of writing the memoire, for pre-service teachers' academic and professional development. The context of the study is an Algerian EFL context, the pre-service education college in Bouzareah. Fifty five pre-service student teachers participated in the study. They answered a questionnaire designed by the researcher about the importance of the research paper they have to prepare at the end of the final year in order to graduate. The fifty five students constitute the majority of the fifth year students who are made up of two groups of about 37 students each. The pre-service teachers answered the questionnaire at the end of the academic year 2012-2013 i.e. just before graduation. They answered the questions in a session of 30 minutes and turned back the answers immediately in the presence of the teacher researcher.

The questionnaire

The research tool employed in the current study is a questionnaire for the pre-service teachers in the college (see Appendix A). It contains seven questions ranging from multiple choice questions, yes/no questions and open-ended questions. The questions investigate the significance of writing the memoire, its place in the school and from the student teachers perspective. The paper attempts to correlate the findings of the literature presented on the central role research plays in promoting pre-service teachers professional development and the student teachers views about carrying out the research paper in the final year.

Discussion and analysis of the questionnaire results

Question **one** of the questionnaire asks the students whether they consider writing the as important or not. Out of 55 students, 46 students stated that it is important, 8 reported that it is not important and 1 does not know. The student teachers who claimed the importance of the memoire justifies their answers as follows:

- The writing of the memoire is related to teaching; it can discuss teaching matters so that pre-service teachers are well informed about them so it offers teaching background.
- It opens the door for further studies.
- It promotes methodology skills such as referencing and time management skills.
- It provided teaching and learning background.
- It trains for scientific research and to become a researcher.
- It is a reference for future teachers and students.
- It can provide insights about learners and teachers preferences.
- It improves writing styles especially writing for academic and research purposes.
- It can explore and solve educational problems.
- It improves the language proficiency level through reading, writing...etc
- It is a way to discover new horizons of research.

However, 8 students claimed that the memoire in not important arguing that:

- It is not very practical as they need more practice than theory in teaching.
- It is not given much importance in the school.
- The educational solutions suggested by the memoire cannot be applied and reality cannot be changed.
- It is time-consuming.
- It is purely theoretical.

What can be noticed from the pre-service teachers' responses to the first question is that the majority consider it as vital in their undergraduate studies whereas few students view it as a burden.

Question **two** of the questionnaire investigates students' consideration of the memoire; whether as a paper to obtain a degree or a paper to learn from or both. The results are presented in the table below:

	A paper to obtain a degree	A paper to learn from	Both
55 students	5 (9%)	10 (18%)	40 (73%)

Out of 55 students, the majority of students (40) consider the memoire both as a paper to obtain a degree and a paper to learn from. However, a few (5) take is as a paper to obtain a degree and 10 students consider it only as a paper they have to write to learn from. This shows that students are aware of the research paper

as both an academic document for graduation and a research project for academic and professional growth.

Question **three** targets the positive aspects of writing the memoire, pre-service teachers listed an important number of these aspects. These are summarized below:

- The writing of the memoire provides background knowledge on the subject of the study and develops methodology skills.
- It is an initiation to research methodology for pre-service teachers.
- It raises motivation through gaining a sense of achievement and self-confidence.
- It is a kind of practice to develop reading and writing skills for research purposes.
- The memoire is a way to find solutions to educational problems.
- It develops the sense of cooperative work and collaboration between students and students and teachers; particularly supervisors.
- It raises awareness to research principles and characteristics.
- It involves pre-service teachers more in the field of researching and teaching and thus fosters teachers' development.
- It helps obtain a graduation degree.
- It fosters autonomy.

Question **four** tackles, on the other hand, the negative aspects of writing the memoire from the pre-service fifth year teachers point of view. These are listed below:

- It is time, effort and money consuming.
- Lack of supervision and support from teachers.
- The research paper is neglected in the school.
- Writing the memoire raises anxiety levels.
- Unavailability of references.
- Plagiarism, students just copy other researchers work.

What is noticeable from the students' answers is that the memoire has many advantages in the eyes of the pre-service teachers. Yet, they also state some of the drawbacks of writing the research paper that need to be addressed.

Question **five** seeks to find the relationship between writing the memoire and the student teachers' future career. The answers are presented as follows:

	YES	NO
55 students	45 (82%)	10 (8%)

From the table above it is noticed that the majority of pre-service teachers confirm the existence of a relationship between the memoire and the teaching career. They justified their answers by stating that:

- The memoire can be a reference to the teacher especially when the topic is closely linked to classroom practices.
- The recommendations of the memoire can be applied in the language classroom.
- The memoire can provide teachers with solutions to cope with classroom issues.
- It is a source of motivation for novice teachers.
- It raises teachers' awareness to some pedagogical notions.
- The memoire is a source of deep insight about the topic of the study.
- The memoire improves writing style.

Thus, the pre-service teachers who claim the existence of a relationship between the research paper and the teaching profession establish the close link between conducting research and teaching. Teachers should engage in making investigations about the different educational matters encountered in their classrooms.

Question **six** conversely investigates the pre-service teachers' answers about the relationship between the writing of memoire and the pre-service teachers' studies. The answers are presented below:

	YES	NO
55 students	33 (60%)	22 (40%)

The pre-service teachers who claimed the existence of a relationship between the memoire and studies argued that:

- The topics of the research papers are relevant to the subjects of study, for example, writing, didactics, psycho pedagogy, methodology, etc.
- Most research topics have been dealt with in the courses of study.
- The subjects of study such as linguistics and didactics are sources of topics for the memoire.
- The research paper is a detailed investigation of issues that have been studied.

According to their answers, pre-service teachers claim the close link and the existing relevance between the research paper and their studies. Those who do

not see any relevance between them justified this by considering the writing of the memoire as something totally different from studies and as a subject that is independent from other subjects.

Question **seven** is about the new skills acquired by the writing of the memoire. Out of 55 students, 53 students confirmed the acquisition of the skills, whereas two denied it. The student teachers provided examples of these skills:

- research methodology skills such as quoting, referencing, comparison of information...etc
- Writing and reading skills such as paraphrasing, linking, summarizing...etc
- Organization skills.
- Group work management.
- Critical thinking skills
- Listening and interaction skills.

As reported by pre-service teachers, the memoire teaches students new skills and train them to use them since the writing of the memoire takes a whole year to be completed with the regular feedback provided by the supervisor. This is of considerable value for the 'would be' teachers as a kind of practice for their academic and professional development.

Conclusion and recommendations

The paper at hand sought to shed light on a crucial aspect of undergraduate studies in the pre-service education college in Algiers-Bouzareah which is that of writing the research paper for graduation. The aim is to highlight the place and importance of the research paper in the pre-service education college in Algiers-Bouzareah from the final year students' perception. The study employed a questionnaire for fifty five final year students about the status of the memoire in the college. From their responses, it is clear that the majority of pre-service teachers value the place of memoire at the end of their studies. Most of them consider it highly important as an official academic paper to obtain a degree and a paper to benefit from in their teaching career. As for the positive and negative aspects of writing the memoire, the pre-service teachers demonstrated through their responses that the 'memoire de fin d'étude' is of considerable significance for their career development as language teachers. However, there are still some points to be considered and revisited as far as the place of the memoire in the school. The system of evaluation, the content, supervision, references as well as other aspects need to be addressed for a more efficient implementation of

research based learning in the college and elsewhere in the Algerian EFL context.

What is recommended is, first of all, to reconsider the place of the research paper in the college since it is of paramount importance for the pre-service teachers. Besides, teacher supervisors should provide constructive, regular feedback to their students so that they take the writing of the memoire vigorously with the aim to develop as academics in the field of education. The evaluation of the research papers at the end of the academic year has to be revisited by creating a unified grid of evaluation for all the student teachers. The grid should contain the standard criteria decided upon by teacher supervisors to write an academic, scientific research paper. What is also worth mentioning is that the research paper ought to have priority in the school since the student teachers consider it highly valuable and effective for their professional and academic development.

What can be suggested also is a model of strategies for the incorporation of undergraduate research into the pre-service teacher curriculum.

There are ways in which research features in the undergraduate curriculum of many universities:

Research-led: learning about current research in the discipline through lectures, academic staff-led seminars, laboratories and course work.

Research-tutored: engaging in research discussions through staff-led academic tutorials and seminars.

Research-oriented: developing research skills and techniques through course lectures, practical and laboratory classes and course work.

Research-based: undertaking research and inquiry through final-year dissertation or capstone research and inquiry projects. (Jenkins and Healey, 2009. In Bower, 2007)

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