

Linking Theory and Practice: The Case of TESL Trainee Teachers

Siti Salina Ghazali

Lee Lai Fong

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam

Email: sitis546@salam.uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate TESL trainee teachers' insights on the link between theory and practice. This study also sought to find out how they viewed the effectiveness of the teacher preparation programme in terms of preparing them to teach secondary school students. The study involved 79 Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Part 7 and 8 trainee teachers from the Faculty of Education, UiTM selected through a purposive sampling procedure. This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure that a wide coverage of areas and detailed explanations of those areas could be gathered. To obtain the quantitative data, the survey method was employed and the instrument used was a questionnaire. On the other hand, to get the qualitative data, interviews were conducted and journal entries were scrutinised. The findings revealed that the trainees felt that they were well-prepared in three crucial areas which were field knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and professional knowledge. The results also indicated that gender and academic performance have no influence on the trainees' perceptions. At the end of the paper, implications of the study were discussed and recommendations were made to further strengthen the teacher education programme at the Faculty of Education in UiTM.

Introduction

Teacher training is an important part of the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Programme in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) since its inception in 1997. Since then, it has produced a few batches of TESL graduates who largely have become

Statement of the Problem

Lately, the quality of some TESL trainee teachers at the Faculty of Education has been questioned by their university (UiTM) supervisors from the faculty. It is undeniable that there are trainee teachers who have done the faculty proud with their achievements in the courses taught in the faculty as well as during practicum. The majority of the schools in Klang Valley have also given very positive feedback on the performance of many of the faculty's trainees during practicum. However, the negative feedback regarding some trainees from the faculty's supervisors has also become a cause for concern. A member of supervisors have commented about some trainee teachers in a number of areas for example, poor classroom management, inadequate subject matter knowledge, poor teaching skills, faculty language skills and a poor attitude towards teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the common complaint from school supervisors is that a few trainee teachers are not very proficient in the English language. It is disheartening because the faculty has provided essential courses based on theoretical perspectives to prepare trainee teachers to teach in secondary schools. The worrying issue that emerges is the inability of some students to put theory into practice, which has prompted this research to study perceptions of TESL trainee teachers with regards to linking theory and practice during the practicum.

Aims of the Study

The main aim of this study was to explore the views of TESL trainee teachers on the link between theory and practice based on their experiences during practicum. In addition, the study hopes to discover how well the Faculty of Education had prepared these trainee teachers for teaching and to propose relevant amendments to the curriculum if necessary to further improve the programme.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. What is the perception of TESL trainee teachers regarding the link between theory and practice based on their experiences during the practicum?
2. Does the Faculty of Education prepare TESL trainee teachers well for teaching?

3. Is there a significant difference in the trainee teachers' perceptions on the link between theory and practice with respect to gender?
4. Is there a significant difference between high and low achievers with regard to their perceptions on the link between theory and practice?

Significance of the Study

This study is important as it can benefit TESL trainee teachers and the teacher trainers at the Faculty of Education, UiTM. TESL trainee teachers can obtain insights on their weaknesses in linking theory and practice during the practicum. With this knowledge, they would be able to improve their teaching skill and pinpoint those areas in the TESL programme that are beneficial in preparing them for the practicum.

In line with the significance to the TESL programme, these strong areas which have been identified by the TESL students can be further strengthened. As for those courses which have been identified non-beneficial by the trainee teachers, steps can be taken to improve on them.

Literature Review

Benefits of Teacher Education and Theory

Aldrich (1990) asserted that teacher education courses are important to effectively prepare beginning teachers for professional tasks. They have a pertinent role so they give an accurate picture of the current and future needs and practices in schools and colleges, as well as motivate students to keep up with and to check their stand with regards to “contemporary issues and problems in education.” Similarly, Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) strongly believe that teacher certification is necessary to ensure the quality of teachers in public schools. These teachers should be screened, trained and qualified before they are allowed to teach so that a set competency level is met and students are not harmed. They cited Hawkins, Stancavage, and Dorsey (1998), Fetler (1999), Lopez (1995), Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2000) whose research findings showed that university teacher certification programmes covering both field experiences and student teaching are required for novice teachers to

gain experience. Besides, they point out that the Holmes Group (1986) cited subject matter knowledge, systematic knowledge of teaching and reflection on experience as three important factors of competent teaching. It was stated that teacher education in universities helps novice teachers to incorporate these factors into their professional lives and in their teaching success. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that better quality teachers are produced by university teacher preparation courses compared to other preparation programmes.

Nettle (1998) examined student teachers' beliefs on teaching before and after teaching practice and found that the teacher education programme was viewed as important as it impacted on student teachers and their beliefs about teacher education courses. The students in his research changed some of their prior beliefs about teaching and teacher education during their teaching practice. Their supervising teachers influenced this change. Positive finding about the important role of teacher education in influencing student teachers' beliefs about teaching has also been cited by Nettle. Among them were Anderson & Bird, 1995; Bramald, Hardman & Leat, 1995; Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Burgess, Briscoe & Williamson, 1994; Carter, 1994; Carter & Gonzalez, 1993; Dunkin, Precians & Nettle, 1994, 1996; Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; Johnston, 1992; Kyriacou & Cheng, 1993; and Winitzky & Kauchak, 1995.

Tercanlioglu (2004) studied perceptions on school-based teacher education with the aim of improving the quality of English teacher education in Turkey. She conducted her study in Southampton schools among five Post-Graduate Certificate in Education students, five curriculum mentors and one mentor trainer, and five teacher educators from five different universities. She interviewed them individually about lesson planning, teaching, and teaching reflections. She also visited and observed practicum students in Southampton schools; observed teacher training sessions conducted at a university and attended training session for mentors in Modern Languages. Her study found that trainee teachers perceived that a university programme was good at importing theoretical aspects which were useful to them only at the start of teacher training course. They found that the university taught them theories; the "how", for example, "how to control a class", "how to relate to students" and these theories were more aligned to classroom management rather than actual language teaching and learning. However, four students acknowledged that both theory and practice were useful as they were connected. They were more confident during their practicum as what they had learned in university was used in school. As for the mentors,

they stated that some student teachers were not interested in theory because they did not realize it was important and relevant to teaching and learning in classrooms. These mentors viewed schools as providers of practical experiences which were related to theory learned in universities. The findings of this research show that a good theoretical basis before the practicum is important. Trainee teachers should understand the importance of subject knowledge for teaching and knowledge about language. They learn theory which they can use in classrooms. Consequently, in the process of teaching, they learn more new knowledge.

Zeichner (2005) believes that teacher education has a vital role to help novice teachers grow. It helps them make accurate judgements for them to use in certain practices for specific situations in teaching. Teacher education also helps to provide scaffolding for novice teachers to become experts at teaching. It helps them to learn to “plan instruction, form suitable curriculum, select instructional practices and classroom structures, and analyse learning of students.”

Shortcomings of Teacher Education

Puk and Haines (1999) cited Eisenhart, Behm and Romagnano (1991), Garmon (1993), Goodlad (1990) and Kagan (1992) who viewed teacher education courses to be orally theoretical to help students in the classroom. All of them, trainee teachers are not given enough practical classroom know-how. Puk and Haines are concerned that trainee teachers want specific solutions and techniques to assist them in the classrooms. They are not reflective, do not inquire, do not ask for deep and thoughtful analysis or challenge their intellect. They viewed the practicum as an important period for trainee teachers to experiment with ideas learned during their teacher education programme and not just to conform to what is expected in teaching.

Deng (2004) also voiced similar concerns. He acknowledged that teacher preparation programmes had an important function in helping pre-service teachers to be knowledgeable about education, schooling and human development and learning; enhance intellect and morality in order to make professional decisions. He said that foundation courses such as philosophy of education, history of education, sociology of education and psychology of education, are taught to students to provide knowledge and help students to reflect, but the way these courses are taught is not

linked to the reality in schools. Thus, a realistic approach to teacher education is needed. Theory, undeniably, is part of classroom practice, but its usefulness should be weighed with other concerns for example, learners' learning processes, purpose of education and subject matter. Pre-service teachers should be taught which skills to use in particular circumstances. They also have to consider that when using a theory, how much it helps to develop students intellectually, morally and socially to enhance learning as it is supposed to do.

Gore, Griffiths and Ladwig (2004) noted that foundation studies, curriculum studies and field experiences are not well linked. As for practical, focuses mainly on practising teaching and hardly on what trainee teachers teach and the quality of learning. Likewise, Loughran and Berry (2005) are of the opinion that teacher education that teaches teaching through telling is artificial and causes gaps between knowing and doing (theory and practice). They stated that teacher educators can teach theory, but in real classroom management, students may not know how to do it although they know what to do. Russell (1997) also agreed that teacher education is a TELLING cycle, ie., telling someone how to teach and this causes the contradiction between theory and practice.

With regards to the dichotomy between theory and practice in teacher education, Khortagen (2001) blamed the transmission model of teaching as telling. This model has three main assumptions which form the core of traditional teacher education. They are: teachers teach better with the help of theories; these theories are scientifically proven; and the theories taught in teacher education programs should be decided by teacher educators. In the transmission model, teachers are likened to technicians with a prescribed curriculum and the importance of experience is neglected (Kane, 2003).

Pandey's (2004) review of teacher education research in India, found that teacher education generally equipped trainees with the basic skills of a good teacher. Among them were content knowledge, ability to communicate ideas clearly, classroom management, providing feedback and reinforcement to students. The intention to produce good trainee teachers was good, but Pandey pointed out that studies by Singh and Malhotra (1991), and Panda (1977) found teacher education curriculum to be irrelevant and unsystematic respectively. He also cited Wallia (1992) who found the Bachelor in Education (B. Ed) course too theoretical while Kumar (1996) and Goyal and Chopra (1979) found the teacher education curricula out-of-date. As for teaching practice, it was found to be inadequate; a rush job with demonstrations done on paper; unrealistic,

and theories taught to trainee teachers in methodology classes were not allowed to be practiced by school teachers. The researcher then concluded that all this had impaired the quality of teacher education in India.

Another problem seen in teacher education programme besides quality of the course is the quality of its student teachers. Pushkin (2001) cited Levine (1999), president of Teachers College, Columbia University and Bostein (1999), president of New York's Bard College who claimed that many poorly qualified student teachers were certified although they were not prepared to teach. Parents were also concerned that college-level education courses were taught by people who did not have current classroom experience, and "nuts and bolts" of classroom work were ignored in favour of "educational fads." Pushkin asserted that student teachers need to be trained to be critical and creative thinking individuals who understand the holistic nature of education and that teacher education should have a strong philosophical basis.

Koster et al. (2005) found that for teacher education to produce competent teachers, the quality of teacher educators should also be a prime consideration. Competency in content areas, the ability to communicate and reflect the ability to organise and pedagogical competencies are important qualities in teacher educators. Slick (1998) (in Koster, 2005) emphasized that an important function of teacher educators in teaching student teachers is to close the gap between theory taught to student teachers and teaching practice in schools. This can help to optimize the effectiveness of teacher education programmes.

Similarly, Smith (2005) in her research on 40 novice secondary school teachers and 18 teacher educators also found flaws in teacher education. These novice teachers were unhappy as the quality of their teacher education was impaired by teacher educators who did not bridge theories and practice and had poor knowledge of school and children. They wanted teacher educators who kept abreast with changes in schools, had recent experiences as school teachers and updated theoretical knowledge. She also cited Nieme (2002) who reported that Finnish student teachers commented on teacher educators who taught passively, and whose theories of studies were not linked to actual life.

Theory and Practice in Teacher Preparation

Research by Beach and Pearson (1998) on 28 pre-service teachers on types of conflicts and tensions faced during their one-year clinical experience and first year of teaching, and how they coped found the following results. Two of the main conflicts were disparity between planned and actual events in the curriculum and instruction, and conflicts between university and school expectations (contextual and institutional). At first, the pre-service teachers tended to blame these conflicts on the teacher education programme. Later on, as they became more well-versed at refining their theories and recognizing the complex nature of teaching through reflection and interrogation, they tried to look at or explain conflicts and tensions by linking them to their personal theories/beliefs by adapting theories and beliefs in different areas for example, what was learned in coursework and what actually happened in schools. This research recommended that pre-service teachers should be given help and support to define, explain and deal with their conflicts and tensions, and look at them as avenues for growth.

Koeppen (1998) believed that student teachers face multiple difficulties in classroom instruction as theory versus practice occurs. Her case study of a student teacher found that the student had problems linking university courses and classroom context during practicum. What the student had studied for example, planning instruction and modeling did not match the reality he found in school. This student teacher struggled to reconcile himself to the teacher-centred teaching he was doing which was totally against the theory of teacher-centred learning which he had learned in his course. The student was so preoccupied with finishing his lesson plan that he rushed through his lesson, answered his own questions and ignored the students in his class. Koeppen recommended that teacher education should give time for student teachers to practice, in this case the process of planning.

Brown and McGannon (1999) studied how fourth year teachers at the Faculty of Education at Monash University incorporated their beliefs, knowledge and skills with their experiences during their practicum. Students discussed their observations of language teachers at work after their first teaching practice session of two weeks. Students were then asked to reflect in writing on the skills they had and those they felt needed to be developed after the second teaching practice session of four weeks. At the end of the final session of teaching practice of four weeks, students reflected on incidents that shaped their understanding

of being a teacher. It was found that the highly practical and reflective process of the teaching practicum had helped students to refine and reconcile theories, resulting in them being more effective teachers. More importantly, the researchers found those students' personal theories of language teaching and learning played a stronger role in teacher education than theories from experts. Thus, it appears that teacher education should take into account prior beliefs of students about teaching and learning and not to force them into using contain "set" theories.

Deng (2004) analysed the problems and limitations in applying theory in teacher preparation in the National Institute of Education in Singapore. He found that teacher training taught student teachers theory and skills, and practical experience in learning to teach. For example, it helped them to help handle planning, communicating, managing and evaluating. However, some influential theories were informal as student teachers formed them from their own experience or by observing their teachers. This is similar to the personal theory stated by Brown and McGannon (1999) and has a strong influence on what is learned in teacher education as student teachers need to question, revise and change. Thus, Deng concluded that theory has another more important role which is to educate student teachers on the "complexities, intellectual and moral dimensions of classroom practice" (p. 155).

Carr (2003) stated that generally the concept of good teaching is problematic as teachers need to learn theoretical knowledge from preservice education and training and use it in practice. Many pre and inservice professionals doubt the importance of theory because they notice that the effectiveness of practical classroom has not improved significantly. Some student teachers have high achievement scores in philosophy, psychology and history related to teaching but they are not good in practical teaching, and vice versa. In other words, one cannot assume that theories are directly used in educational practice even though basic teacher education philosophy prescribes to this belief. Consequently, conflict occurs between some student teachers and mature professionals who think it is not important as opposed to teacher educators who viewed it as essential. In the end, Carr believes that teacher education needs to reconsider the premise that although theory can enhance professional judgement and practice, student teachers also need intellectual and moral resources to interpret information critically and use appropriate techniques wisely in educational settings. To illustrate, rote learning is successful in helping students to learn multiplication, but it may not be suitable in other instances. Thus, teacher education should teach student teachers to

question the appropriacy of a theory before it is used in learning and schooling.

Thiel (2005) studied 20 B.Ed. TESL preservice trainee teachers in a Malaysian teacher training college who were doing their practicum in government secondary schools. This study found that gap between theory and reality existed and constant adaptation was required as the trainee teachers received knowledge, but not experiential knowledge. The study also noted that although supervisors from both the college and schools gave suggestions for lesson planning and teaching strategies, moral support and feedback on observed lessons, there was inadequate advice on specific classrooms or students, and lack of time to guide and counsel trainees respectively. Trainee teachers needed such support greatly to link theory from college and practice in schools.

Improving Teacher Education

Munby and Russell (1996) believe that school experience should be given to preservice and trainee teachers before they are taught theories to close the gap between theory and practice. They disagreed with the traditional way of theory before practice in schools. They cited Honcher's (1996) research with preservice teachers to support their stand. These preservice teachers were given sixteen weeks of school teaching before education courses in campus. Initially, these teachers were unsure, shocked, nervous and scared but after four months, they were developing their own confident teaching style, teaching comfortably, encouraged and supported by staff, and learning "how to swim". Griffin (1989) (in Munby and Russell, 1996) stressed that teaching is not learned during teacher preparation. Many teacher education programmes neglect the importance of practical teaching and focus more on-campus courses, although ironically they stress the importance of practice. Russell (1977) reiterated the same stand. He is of the opinion that "how" teacher educators teach trainee teachers is more influential than what they are taught. Trainee teachers should be exposed to the idea of "the learning is in the experience" and not "from the experience" (p. 39). Trainee teachers need to have the experience of teaching to help them understand or to challenge the "what" they get in teacher education.

In order to further improve teacher education, Munby and Russell (1996) stated that schools should be responsible to teach systemic functions (classroom management, attendance, testing and grading) as they are

the main concerns of trainee teachers. The university should take over the rest. Munby and Russell are certain that knowledge of teaching will increase if trainee teachers practice systemic functions and understand issues in education in university through practice before theory.

Similarly, Bullough (1997) also agreed that theory should be founded on practice. He cited Hunt (1987), “unless theories come from practice, they will not apply to practice” (p. 20). He believed that foundation courses which were taught before fieldwork had resulted in the huge divide between theory and practice. In line with this, Hatton (1994), Griffiths and Tann (1992) and Eisner (1984) viewed “private theory”, that is, personal experiences and implicit theory or common sense as being more important than “public theory” (theory that is taught to trainee teachers in teacher education) in making decisions (in Bullough, 1997).

Following this, Bullough and Gitlin (2001) came up with five assumptions to enhance teacher education. First, certification should be the start and not the end of teacher education, pre-service should be joined to ongoing in-service teacher education. Second, work contexts should be studied and criticized. Third, teachers concept of themselves have biographical and experiential basis. Fourth, systematic reflection that affects decisions by teachers are important. Fifthly, teachers should have collegiality and actively help one another to develop. These assumptions resulted from the concerns that student teachers were more preoccupied with survival and in obtaining a favourable teaching evaluation, rather than incorporating in their teaching what they had learned during their preservice teacher education.

Likewise, Korthagen (2001) also emphasized the importance of experience to improve teacher education. He proposed the pedagogy of realistic teacher education in which trainee teachers learned to understand themselves as teachers through their experience, “the ways they make meaning from, and interpret classroom practice” (Kane, 2003, p. 372). This form of perceptual knowledge (phronesis) is very important in teacher education, he claimed.

Jackson (1999) asserted that teacher education programmes in Asia should change their way of teaching methodology to improve theory and practice. She suggested documenting the realities of local teaching practice which are relevant to trainee teachers. She commented on the lack of suitable texts in Asia for trainee teachers and thus, developed cases for case-based pedagogy for teacher education programmes. These cases emulated situations in real classrooms. Trainee teachers analysed the cases and tried to solve the situations portrayed by using critical

thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills. To illustrate, she highlighted the pedagogical, curricular and administrative problems faced by Chinese teachers of English in Hong Kong. Jackson asserted that case-based pedagogy can decrease the difficult task of preparing trainee teachers and develop inquiry, dialogue and teachers' voice in teaching and learning among trainee teachers. Besides, case-based pedagogy which are problem oriented can help trainee teachers link theory and practice (Harrington, 1994; Jackson, 1997; Merseth, 1991; Shulman, 1992; Welty and Silverman, 1995 in Jackson, 1999).

Loughran and Berry (2005) advocated explicit modeling to connect theory and practice in teacher education. They developed this model in the preservice education program in Monash University to enable student teachers to learn about teaching by being explicit about what one is doing and why. Two areas involved in explicit modeling were professional critique and pedagogic intervention. The first dealt with positive criticisms with regards to the teaching and learning approaches of student teachers and teacher educators. The latter dealt with actions to point out specific examples in the teaching of student teachers. The researchers depicted this concept of explicit modeling to their students in a Developing Pedagogy classroom. One of them taught, while the other was the de-briefer. Areas that were focused on by the de-briefer were teaching procedures, as well as the manner and response of students. After the teaching session, the de-briefer had discussions with student teachers and the "teacher". Student teachers also questioned the "teacher" and the de-briefer. It was a highly interactive session as student teachers reasoned, exposed their feelings and viewpoints, and reflected. These student teachers through explicit modeling were given the experience of "talking aloud" and "debriefing teaching" to learn about teaching. They understood practice through practical wisdom and knowledge and not just from conceptual theories.

Aside from the above, reflection by student teachers has also been highlighted as a way to improve teacher education. To illustrate, Dunne (1993) carried out a research to see how student teachers linked practical and theoretical aspects of a course on children's learning. Student teachers were strongly reminded that as teachers, they needed to reflect about their practices, the principles behind these practices and "the value-laden nature of educational activity" (p. 106). These student teachers were exposed to subject matter, curriculum, children's learning, teaching skills, teaching styles, classroom organization and assessment. When they went for their school practice, reflection and self-analysis about their teaching

and its consequences were focused on. They found that ideas that appeared good in the taught course were not easy to implement in school. However, as shown by their required diary entries, many of them reflected and tried to link what they had learned in the courses with their practical experience. There was “a constant development of theoretical understanding.” At the end of the course, many understood the meaning of theory better although not fully, and believed that theory should be useful. They had taken many of the principles and beliefs learned in the course about teaching children and tested them in the classroom. Their evaluation and reflection improved their knowledge, developed their personal beliefs and thoughts about the expertise they wanted to develop. They were also aware of the mismatch between theory and practice in some areas and realized that although compromise was needed, their beliefs should not be affected.

Similarly, Kettle and Sellars (1996) pointed out that self-reflection by student teachers, whereby they critically check and justify their actions in the classroom, purpose and self-effectiveness can help them to build a practical theory. This can help them to assess their practical and intellectual experiences and improve their knowledge of teaching and learning. Koeppen (1998) also suggested trainee teachers’ use of reflection on lessons to check on their success. In line with that, teacher educators should teach trainee teachers about planning as a recursive process and allow them time to practise the planning process. These can help trainee teachers’ deal with the confusion on how to present a lesson and to be sensitive to the needs of their students.

Brown and McGannon (1999) cited Schon (1983, 1987) who proposed reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and Kagan (1992) who proposed self-reflection to improve teacher education for trainee teachers. They claimed that trainee teachers do not learn much about classroom practice from teacher training, thus they need to reflect about their teaching and learning. Reflection can help trainee teachers for example, to focus on procedural knowledge, interact with pupils, control the class, account for cognitive dissonance, and prepare for teaching. Smith (2005) in the same vein, stated that teacher educators need to improve teacher education by helping student teachers to learn reflection skills to bridge the theory learned by student teachers at their institution and actual teaching practice in schools. Moreover, teacher education can be improved if teacher educators form new practical and theoretical knowledge. The first refers to new curricula for teacher education and the latter refers to knowledge from research.

Research Methodology

Sample of the Study

Using purposive sampling, 79 students from Semesters 7 and 8 at the Faculty of Education, UiTM Shah Alam campus were selected for the study. These students entered the programme through one of the following three ways: after TESL matriculation, after obtaining a diploma, or after Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) which is equivalent to A-Level. They were selected to enter the course after their ability in the English Language was ascertained to be competent as seen in their academic results and ability to use the language through interviews, as well as the reading and writing placement tests. Overall, the subjects had average to high level of proficiency in the English language.

Data Gathering Instruments

Since this study utilised both quantitative and qualitative approaches, there were three types of instruments used: questionnaires, interviews and journals. These instruments were used to extricate relevant information and also used for triangulation purposes.

i. **Questionnaires**

To obtain the quantitative data, the study employed the survey design using questionnaires since they can gather a lot of information easily within a short period of time. The questionnaires aimed to gauge the perception of the subjects toward the link between theory and practice based on their experiences during practicum and also to find out whether the faculty had prepared them well for teaching.

ii. **Interviews**

In-depth interview sessions were conducted with ten students who had responded to the questionnaire. During the interview, the students were asked to explain the connection between what they had learnt and their actual teaching experience. They were also asked to clarify some of their comments as well as those of their friends in the open-ended section of the questionnaire.

iii. **Journals**

The journals were kept by the subjects during the duration of their teaching practicum. The subjects were required to record their teaching experiences, teaching successes and disappointments,

reflections, and measures taken for improvements. Excerpts were taken from the journal entries to further verify the findings from the questionnaire.

Method of Data Analysis

The quantitative data derived from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS version 11.5 programme. In order to answer the first and second research questions on the link between theory and practice as well as the success of the faculty in preparing the trainees for teaching, the descriptive statistics of frequencies, means and percentages were used. For the third and fourth research questions that sought to find out whether there were any statistically significant differences in their perceptions with respect to gender and academic achievement, the T-test for independence of means was adopted.

The qualitative data were derived from the interview and journal. Firstly, the researchers listened to and evaluated the interviews manually. The content was classified into themes. The excerpts from the interview were utilized to support the quantitative data, and provided details that were not mentioned in both the questionnaire and the journals. Secondly, the researchers extracted the relevant information from journal entries needed for the study. These excerpts were also used for the purpose of triangulation.

Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile

All together 79 respondents answered the questionnaire. 19% of the sample were males and the remaining 81% were females. The majority (77.2%) of the trainees belonged to the age group of 21-25 years. The other 22.8% were trainees above 25 years of age that joined the faculty after matriculation or after obtaining a diploma from various courses. On the whole, the students' ages ranged from 21 to above 35 years of age.

Out of the 79 respondents, 86.1% were single, 12.7% were married and 1.3% opted for the category of "others". In terms of race, the majority (82.3%) were Malays from East and West Malaysia, and the remaining 17.7 % were from East Malaysia, namely Ibans and Kadazans.

They were all TESL students from semester 7 (44.3%) and semester 8 (55.7%). This was because the respondents belonged to two separate batches from the three-year and four-year programme of B. Ed. TESL.

Trainees' Perceptions toward the Link between Theory and Practice

The results indicate that 72.6% of the trainees believed that generally the teacher education programme had succeeded in equipping them with the field knowledge that comprises knowledge of the subject matter or area of specialization, and theories needed in order to be effective teachers. Only 27.4% thought that they were inadequately prepared in terms of field knowledge. As mentioned in the studies in the previous section, some students could not see the link between the theories learnt and the actual teaching in the real school setting. It is true that although some theories are not applicable in certain settings, trainees have to be flexible and creative in handling certain unexpected situations. Unfortunately, some trainees felt that they had not acquired the skill. This is because as future teachers, they would encounter such situations throughout their career.

More than 86% of the trainees agreed that the Educational Psychology and English courses adequately prepared them for their teaching practicum. 80% of them also believed that the course on curriculum and instruction provided them with useful information about the curriculum and teaching in the real school setting.

The majority of the trainees (76%) viewed that the teaching experience alone was not enough to learn about what they needed to know about teaching. More than 70% believed that teachers do teach better with the help of theories.

It is also not surprising to discover that slightly more than half of the trainees (54.4%) were not only concerned about incorporating what they had learned in their teaching, but were also concerned about their grades. This is understandable since the system of education in this country is very much assessment-oriented, and paper qualification is highly stressed. These students have been exposed to this system for many years and it would be difficult to change unless their mindset of the whole system is not revised.

On the whole, more than two-thirds (77.5%) claimed that the university had prepared them well in terms of pedagogical knowledge or the teaching skills that they needed to deliver the content of their lessons

and to manage their classrooms. Approximately 85% stated that they benefited a lot from the methodology courses that they took at the university. Those courses helped them in terms of the teaching methods employed and the activities carried out in the classroom during the teaching practicum.

In terms of lesson planning and preparation of instructional materials, the majority of the trainees, 83.5% and 82.3% respectively, believed that the courses they took at the university helped them in carrying out their duties as teachers.

Pedagogical knowledge is regarded as equally important as field knowledge. Having the ability to deliver a good lesson is as important as having content knowledge. If a teacher has the knowledge but fails to make the students understand the lessons, he or she would be regarded as an ineffective teacher.

As for professional knowledge, the trainees held the view that the teacher education programme at the university had successfully trained them to be professional teachers. The mean percentage shows that 76.3% of the trainees agreed that they were well-equipped with professional knowledge which referred to general knowledge and beliefs about teaching that they required in order to put theory into practice. This aspect of knowledge assisted them in performing their duties as professional teachers.

Among the items in this dimension, more than 90% of the students reported that generally all the courses taught at the programme had helped them in their teaching either directly or indirectly. The same percentage also believed that the teaching experience was equally important as the educational theories learnt prior to their practicum. Both were necessary for them to become better teachers.

About 80% of the trainees also claimed that the programme at the university had great influence on their beliefs about teaching and had prepared them well to become professional teachers. They also agreed that they had managed to adapt the theories of learning and teaching in light of new knowledge and experience.

However, only about 56% of the trainees felt that the programme managed to provide them with a realistic view of teaching in a full classroom/school context. It was implied big quite a large percentage (44%) that the programme did not successfully portray the realistic view of teaching in the real school setting. This is a cause for concern for the faculty which should look into the matter to ensure that the reality in school is explicitly portrayed to the trainees. Even though only less than

half of them felt this way, the faculty still needs to evaluate the matter seriously. This will be further discussed in the following section.

On the whole, it was verified that the majority of the trainees ranging from approximately 73% to 78% purported that the teacher education programme at the university had prepared them well in the three dimensions: field knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and professional knowledge. This is very important for the faculty to know because these aspects of knowledge are crucial in nurturing the students to become effective teachers for the nation.

Results of the T-test

The results of the T-test conducted in identifying whether there were statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the trainees with respect to the following variables: i) gender and ii) academic performance.

Gender

RQ3 – Ho1 : There is no statistically significant difference between genders in their perceptions on the link between theory and practice.

The result shows that there were no significant differences in terms of gender for all the three dimensions. It was found that for the field knowledge dimension, $t = .293$, $df = 77$, and $p = .770$. For the pedagogical knowledge dimension, $t = .211$, $df = 77$, and $p = .833$. Lastly, for the professional knowledge dimension, $t = .768$, $df = 77$, and $p = .445$. All the results revealed that they were insignificant. The test conducted failed to reject the Null Hypothesis implying that gender does not influence the trainee teachers' perceptions towards the link between theory and practice. Even though it is commonly accused that males and females tend to think differently, the results of this study do not indicate that gender influences trainee teachers' perceptions of the link between theory and practice.

Academic performance

RQ4 – Ho2 : There is no statistically significant difference between high and low achievers with regards to their perceptions on the link between theory and practice.

The trainees were categorised into high and low achievers according to the CGPA they obtained in the previous semesters. The results of the T-test indicated that there were no significant differences between high and low achievers in their perceptions on the link between theory and practice. For all the three dimensions: field knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and professional knowledge, the values were $t = -1.371$, $df = 77$, $p = .174$; $t = .298$, $df = 77$, $p = .767$; and $t = .371$, $df = 77$, $p = .711$, respectively. Again, the Null Hypothesis failed to be rejected. What this means is that academic achievement has no influence on the trainees' view on the link between theory and practice. This is contradictory to the general belief that low achievers would tend to be more critical of the programme offered at the faculty due to their inability to perform well during the practicum.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Written Data and Interviews

The written data include the open-ended section in the questionnaire and the trainees' journal entries. These sections sought to find out their additional comments regarding the link between what the trainees learnt in the teacher education programme and their teaching experience in school. Besides the written data, as mentioned in the previous section, ten trainees were also interviewed to find out their views and to help clarify some of the vague comments gathered through the questionnaire. Generally, the written data show more than 85% of the trainees felt that the faculty had succeeded in preparing them for the teaching practice. Many thought that the courses taken and the theories learnt helped them in their teaching practice. One of the trainees asserted that the teacher education programme "did help in moulding" his "skills and ability to become a teacher." Another trainee claimed that the programme "enhanced" and "enriched" her teaching experience. Another student also gave a positive comment by saying that

"Most of the knowledge that I've obtained within the programme had given me a wider view of the teaching profession. It taught me a great deal on how to manage a class or handle students. The pedagogy and methodology helped me a lot in conducting lessons (J4)."

However, there were also those who thought that some of the theories learnt did not match the practice. Despite the mismatch, they still benefited

from what they had learnt. Among some of the encouraging comments made were:

“Basically, what I have learnt at the teacher education programme for the past four years has given me a picture about what I must be able to do and master before I can start teaching...From my teaching experience, a few of the theories learnt are not applicable to the local school context but others are applicable. The thing is that I must know how to relate what I have learnt to the real world...However, it cannot be denied that what I have learnt here has prepared and exposed me to the school expectations. I have a rough picture of the classroom situation and able to use the knowledge where appropriate (J3).”

Another trainee also expressed what she felt about the link between the theories learnt and her authentic teaching experience:

“The programme helps to build confidence in me...It is somewhat true that to a certain extent theory isn't the same as practice but through what we have learnt at the faculty; students could have an idea on how to teach; the initial procedure (lesson plan, etc) and so on. Not all school students are the same, and not all classrooms are the same. It all depends on one's creativity to make the lesson interesting, but without the knowledge gained from the faculty, students will be of 'zero' teacher (J6).”

Some also gave very positive comments regarding specific subjects taught at the faculty, namely Literature, Educational Psychology, Curriculum and Instruction and the methodology courses. One of the trainees voiced her opinion that the faculty's teacher education programme had a strong relationship with her teaching experience. She said that the programme provided her with “the realistic view of teaching in the classroom.” She further expressed that courses such as Teaching of Literature (TOL), Methodology of Teaching Reading and Writing (MTRW), Methodology of Teaching Listening and Speaking (MTLS), Curriculum and Instruction and Psychology of Education were very important because they exposed her to “real (authentic) teaching.” Another trainee also agreed that TOL “really helped” her during the teaching practicum.

Besides the positive comments about the faculty's teacher education programme, the trainees also gave several suggestions to further improve the faculty. The suggestions can be categorised into six areas:

i. *more exposure to the real school setting*

18.99% of the trainees acknowledged the fact that they would like to have more exposure to the real school setting, so that they could be mentally prepared about the reality in school before they were thrown into the deep end. Some would like to have the opportunity to observe experienced teachers teaching school children. According to them, the few opportunities they had during the four years at the university were not enough. Very few courses required them to do school observation. They believed that the early and more frequent exposure to school reality would make them better teachers.

They would also like to have the opportunity to mingle with school teachers and students, so that they could have some idea about what the real school teachers and students were like compared to what they had learnt at the university. According to some of them, from their short experience in school, they saw a mismatch between their expectations and the reality in school in terms of teachers' and students' behaviours. Some teachers and students were very cooperative but there were also the ones who were not. There were many types of personality that they had to deal with. This exposure could better prepare them for the real teaching experience.

Besides that, the trainees would also like to familiarise themselves with the school infrastructure and facilities. Knowing what was really available in school could reduce their frustrations when they embarked on their teaching practice. Some trainees were very enthusiastic about using the latest technology they learnt at the university. Unfortunately, when they went to school, they were informed that the facilities could not be used because they were not available or not well maintained. This also led to frustration on the part of these students.

ii. *more exposure to the latest school syllabus and lesson plan*

Approximately 16.5% of the trainees viewed that there was not enough exposure on utilisation of the current school syllabus and involvement in drawing up of lesson plans as required by schools. Although they were taught to do detailed lesson plans as required by the university, when they did their teaching practicum, they discovered that some schools wanted them to adhere to the school lesson plan as provided by *Selangor Ministry of Education (JPNS)*. The school lesson plan is a more simplified version compared to the one used at the university.

It is worth mentioning here that the university version is more detailed because supervisors need to monitor the students' understanding of the objectives of the lessons and their implementation of the lessons through planned detailed activities. Supervisors are not present in school all the time; therefore, the detailed lesson plans are crucial for supervision purposes. The simplified version is more suitable for experienced teachers or the ones who have undergone training. Some of the trainees understood this fact but some did not. As a result, they felt pressured when they were asked by the school to also produce the simplified version.

- iii. *more English grammar courses to be included in the study plan*
It is surprising that about 7.59% of the trainees would like to have more grammar and proficiency classes. An extreme case is highlighted when one of the trainees said that she would like to "have grammar classes every semester." At present, students receive proficiency training only at pre-degree level of either one or two years, depending on their performance largely in five areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar. There are also drama and other education classes that they have to take at the pre-degree level which also contribute to the students' CGPA.

However, when they enter the degree programme, there are no more grammar classes and one of the trainees recommended that

"the management should put grammar in the syllabus. Some of the TESL students lack this. How do we teach pupils if we ourselves are not well-versed in grammar...(J10)"

During the interview, a few trainees voiced their concerns regarding some of their friends who despite being weak in the language, managed to stay in the system with borderline passes during the selection to the degree level. At the degree level, they had no chance to further polish their proficiency because there were no more grammar classes and they were too engrossed with assignments and projects. They claimed that the teaching experience was miserable for those weak trainees who were given good classes during teaching practicum. Some school students even "challenged and made fun of them."

iv. *more input on classroom management and control*

About 6.33% of the trainees claimed that they did not receive enough input on how to manage and control their classrooms. They would like to know more on the various ways of how to deal with students of the new millennium which to them were different from students from the earlier batches. They claimed that some of the students were “uncontrollable.” They would also like to be taught how to identify students with disciplinary problems so that they could identify them right away when they met them.

When asked during the interview about whether classroom management and control was also dealt with in methodology classes, the trainees gave affirmative answers. Some even said that no matter how much they learnt about students’ behaviours, the real school experience would still give them challenges in dealing with the various types of student personality. One trainee pointed out, “I can’t rely on what I have learnt at the faculty only, I have to be able to figure it out on my own also...”

v. *lengthen the pre-practicum and practicum period*

6.33% of the trainees reported that they would like to have more courses conducted during the pre-practicum period. Among the comments was

“I think that pre-practicum courses should be taught in the semester because so much useful information from pre-practicum cannot be covered because of time constraint (only one or two weeks) (J2).”

Another trainee wanted the pre-practicum session to be conducted “more than two weeks” because they enjoyed the tips and exposure to the reality in school. They felt that the detailed explanation and discussions of case studies were really useful for their teaching practicum.

As for practicum, the same percentage of trainees proposed that the teaching practicum period be extended between three and six months. They said that the ten-week period was not enough for them to effectively put theory into practice. This was in line with the suggestion made by trainee teachers from various local higher learning institutions who participated in the study conducted by the *Jawatankuasa Penyelarasan Pendidikan Guru (JPPG)* in 2005. Many wanted the duration of the practicum to be extended to 16 weeks (JPPG, 2005).

There were also trainees who suggested that the practicum sessions be conducted twice or more during their four-year study at the faculty. The trainees felt that the wider opportunities they had in order to experience teaching in an authentic environment, the better they would be in terms of teaching performance.

- vi. *more exposure to school administrative duties and school politics*
It is quite interesting to find out that 1.27% of the trainees thought that it was necessary for them to be exposed to how to handle administrative duties and politics in school. The trainees urged the faculty to provide students with these skills so that they would be better prepared to handle non-teaching duties like writing minutes and reports using a specific school format for a particular programme or activity conducted in the school. The trainees would also like to know specific ways of how to handle teachers and school politics.

Nevertheless, the researchers believe that the knowledge of writing minutes and reports was already provided in the foundation English courses that they took at the university. Even though the specific format of minutes and reports may be different from those practiced in school, the trainees need to learn to adapt to the various ways of writing minutes and reports in various educational sectors. The university can only provide the foundation of that knowledge.

Implications of the Study

It is important to highlight the implications of the study for two parties namely the Faculty of Education and the TESL teacher trainees.

- i. For the Faculty of Education lecturers, they can rest assured that generally they have done a good job in nurturing TESL trainee teachers. The basic curriculum structure designed has managed to equip the trainees with the necessary knowledge and skills required to begin their journey into the teaching profession. Nevertheless, the trainees would like to further enrich their knowledge by having more exposure to real school experience and more topics to be covered during their four-year programme at the faculty. Thus, some minor amendments to the curriculum structure or content of the courses may be able to strengthen their needs for their real teaching practice.

- ii. As for TESL trainee teachers, generally they have acquired the minimum requirements of becoming school teachers. However, they still need to be creative and flexible in tackling the challenges of teaching school children. They need to be aware of the fact that there are many types of student and teacher personalities that they will deal with in school. A lot can be learnt through experience, and the theories only provide the foundation of education. They serve as a guide for the trainees to understand the teaching and learning processes. They are not supposed to dwell on theories alone, but instead they must be innovative and wise in evaluating the situations they are in.

In terms of language proficiency, the trainees who are not very proficient in the language need to double up their efforts to improve their command of the language. They need to use the language in their everyday lives because practice makes perfect. They also need to polish their knowledge of grammar rules.

Recommendations for the Faculty and TESL Trainee Teachers

The researchers would like to recommend the following in order to further strengthen the B. Ed. TESL programme at the faculty:

- i. *have the students do teaching practicum twice during their course of study*

In order to not shock the trainees with the realities in school, they need to be in the school environment more than once. Doing the teaching practicum only once during their fourth year is quite a late exposure to the school system. It is recommended that a shorter version of the teaching practicum be carried out during the semester break after semester 5. The duration can be between five and six weeks. If this is done, there is a lot that they can learn before they experience their actual independent teaching in semester 7. During the five or six weeks, they can observe and assist their mentors in teaching the real school students.

In terms of getting the consent of schools to accommodate the trainees, it may be quite difficult in the beginning because there are not many schools in Shah Alam and Klang to accommodate both Semester 5 and Semester 7 trainees. However, we believe it can be

done with the assistance of *Jabatan Pelajaran Negeri Selangor* (JPNS). A few higher learning institutions in the country also require their trainees to undergo teaching practicum twice. We can also allow our trainees to do the same. If need be, trainees can even do their practicum at schools located in Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya and Kuala Lumpur.

ii. *expose the students to more fieldwork incorporated in existing courses*

It is undeniable that a few courses at the faculty do require the students to go to school to collect data for certain projects. It would be good if more courses can do the same and ask the TESL students to do more fieldwork like school observations and interviews with principals, teachers or even school students as part of the course requirements for relevant courses. These can familiarize the students to the school environment.

iii. *lengthen the School Orientation Programme (SOP)*

At present, SOP is carried out during pre-practicum for one week. This is too short a duration because the students need time to adjust and be familiar with the do's and don'ts in a particular school. It is advisable if the programme is lengthened to two or three weeks so that the students have the opportunity to mingle with school staff and familiarize themselves with the actual teacher roles and responsibilities in school. This exposure will prepare them mentally about what they are expected to do as teachers.

Besides that, they can explore the teaching materials and syllabus used in school. They can also observe the school infrastructure as well as the teaching and learning facilities. This will better prepare them for the school experience.

iv. *expose the students to the JPNS lesson plan format prior to practicum*

Currently, students are only exposed to the faculty lesson plan format in their Curriculum & Instruction and methodology courses. It would be wise if they can also learn the JPNS format so that they are not shocked when they are asked to produce their lesson plans using that format.

The researchers believe that the university format that is taught is very detailed, comprehensive and suitable for pre-service teachers. However, the students also need to know the actual simplified JPNS

version for the lesson plan. This serves as a back up for the students if schools require them to do so. This knowledge and exposure can also boost their confidence.

v. *have remedial classes for students with weak language proficiency*

Even though students have undergone screenings during their Pre-TESL years, some students managed to get through in their exams because they were better test takers. When it comes to speaking the language, they could not apply what they have learnt because they have not reached the state of “automaticity”. According to Brown (2000), this is a state whereby students have acquired the language and their speech is automatic.

There is no doubt that these students need to polish their language skills independently using traditional means or new language softwares available in the market, but it is also advisable that the faculty assist them by providing remedial classes weekly during each semester. Once they have reached a certain satisfactory level, they are exempted from attending those classes. Their progress can be monitored through writing and speaking assessments.

Conclusion

The Faculty of Education has produced many batches of TESL teachers for schools throughout Malaysia. Both the academic and non-academic staff have worked very hard to make sure that the faculty is on par with other faculties of education in the country. The faculty has generally received very positive feedback from secondary schools regarding its trainee teachers, even though lecturers are still dissatisfied with the performance of some of the trainees.

Preparing pre-service ESL teachers is not an easy task. The faculty needs to ensure that the students have acquired the necessary content and pedagogical knowledge as well as adequate command of the English language. Unlike teaching non-language subjects, English language teachers must be proficient in the language to start with. They must be comfortable using the language in order to show their credibility as teachers.

On the whole, this study further strengthens the positive feedback obtained from school teachers each semester that the trainees were well-prepared to begin their teaching career. In general, the trainee teachers also perceived that they were well-trained for teaching and ready to immerse into the school system.

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