

'Here's the Book, Go Teach the Class':

ELT Practicum Support

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Abstract ■ The English language teaching (ELT) practicum has come to be recognized as one of the most important aspects of a learner teacher's education during their language teacher training program. During the practicum, learner English language teachers need lots of support and cooperating teachers are seen as the main source of this support because they are one of the most influential people in a learner teacher's time during teaching practice. However, within English language teaching (ELT) there is a paucity of research that specifically examines the perceptions and experiences of learner English language teachers concerning the role of support they expect, need and obtain during their practicum experiences. This paper presents one such study that explores the perceptions of 60 learner English language teachers' experiences in Singapore during the period of their school placement for teaching practice. The paper also outlines a detailed case study of eight of these teachers with respect to specific problems they experienced during their teaching practice.

Keywords ■ cooperating teachers, novice teachers, practicum support, reflection.

Introduction

Teaching practice has come to be recognized as one of the most important aspects of a teacher education program for learner teachers (Funk and Hoffman 1982). During the practicum, the learner teacher is socialized into all aspects of the teaching profession both inside and outside the classroom and this has been well researched in general education studies. However, in English language teaching (ELT) there is a paucity of such research related to specific experiences of learner teachers during their teaching practice. This paper presents one such study that explores the perceptions of 60 learner English language teachers' experiences in Singa-



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pore during the period of their school placement for teaching practice. The paper also outlines a detailed case study of eight of these teachers with respect to specific problems they experienced during their teaching practice. As Johnson has noted, the field of TESOL knows little about how learner teachers 'conceptualize their initial teaching experiences, and what impact these experiences have on their professional development as teachers' (1996: 30). The purpose of this exploratory study is, in part, to address this research void and to provide survey information on the perceptions and experiences of learner teachers in Singapore while on reflective teaching practice (Farrell 2007). Furthermore, I present a case study of eight of these learner teachers who were interviewed for further detailed information concerning the support they obtained during their practicum experiences. As Richards and Crookes (1988: 22) point out, 'such information is essential in determining the contribution of field experiences to the student's professional development'.

The Practicum

One of the biggest influences of the teacher education course in terms of perceived excitement and development among learner teachers is the field-based experiences they encounter because they are conducted in real classrooms. According to Huling teaching practice experiences offer learner teachers a chance to 'observe and work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings' (1997: 1). These learner teachers assume that they will be able to apply most (if not all) of the theories they have learned in the teacher education courses during their teaching practice. Richards and Crookes (1988) point out that the practicum can offer learner teachers the opportunity not only to gain practical classroom teaching experiences but also to gain skills in selecting, adapting and developing original course materials.

Calderhead (1988) has maintained that the period of placement during the practicum has an important influence on the current and future impressions learner teachers acquire about the nature of the learning and teaching. Most studies in general education and some initial studies on ELT learner teachers have concluded that learner teachers on teaching practice need lots of support during their school placement (Arnold 2006; Farrell 2001). Farrell (2001) discovered that the main kind of support, especially in the skills of teaching and of the emotional kind, can only usually come from the school authorities and especially from the cooperating teachers because they spend so much time with these learner teachers during the period of

teaching practice apart from the supervisor. The most influential person then for the learner teacher is the cooperating teacher because he or she is most available for advice during this period (Guyton and McIntyre 1990). Studies have also indicated that prospective teachers' teaching styles are heavily influenced during teaching practice through direct contact with the cooperating teacher (Randall 1992). Consequently, it is now considered important that learner teachers be placed with competent (although this term is not always defined clearly in the literature) cooperating teachers (these can sometimes be called mentor teachers).

In Singapore (the context of the present study), Ngoh and Tan (2000) surveyed 90 beginning primary school teachers to discover what they needed most during school placement. Results of the survey indicated that these learner teachers regarded support and cooperation from their experienced colleagues (in the form of a mentor) to be most important during their school placement. According to Ngoh and Tan the formal mentoring roles that cooperating teachers usually carry out during the practicum are not voluntary but are usually assigned mainly to senior teachers (designated by years of service) in a school and as such these 'support arrangements are often on an ad hoc basis' (2000: 7). This may be because many cooperating teachers tend to be untrained to work with learner teachers. In English language teaching recent studies have also indicated this to be true (Arnold 2006). For example, Arnold has maintained that simply being categorized as a competent English language teacher is not qualification enough to be appointed as a cooperating teacher in a mentor role because 'mentoring is not a straightforward extension of being a school teacher' (2006: 117). Consequently, the present study sought to discover the extent of support that learner English language teachers received from their cooperating teachers while on teaching practice. Just as other contexts have discovered alarming numbers of beginning teachers quitting in their first years, it is also vitally important for the teaching profession in Singapore, where MOE statistics show that the attrition rate for new teachers is approximately 25% (Ngoh and Tan 1999), to consider the levels of support available to learner English language teachers during their teaching practicum.

The Study

The Context

This study took place in Singapore. Singapore has a heterogeneous multi-ethnic population of more than three million people made up of 77%

Chinese, 14% Malays, 7.6% Indians and 1.4% persons of other ethnic groups (Singapore Department of Statistics 1999). The Singaporean school system is divided into six years of primary and four years of secondary education. These schools are divided into neighborhood schools (government-funded) and privately-funded schools. English is the medium of instruction in all schools in Singapore. Gupta explains: 'The first language is the main medium of education (which is now always English) while the second language is the other language studied (usually the official mother tongue)' (1998: 117). It is not easy, however, to classify the type of English used in the school system because there are many in Singapore who use English as a first, second and foreign language, and a few (usually from the older generation) who do not do not know any English (Gupta 1998). Although second/foreign English language teaching methodologies have been used in the past when teaching English in Singapore, Foley has observed that recently this is slowly changing to using 'methodologies of English as the dominant language of education—using a first-language approach to teaching' (1998: 248).

In early 2000 the NIE in Singapore instituted a new model for the supervision of PGDE students. This new system is called 'The Partnership Model' to address more clearly the problem of who takes responsibility for trainee teachers during the practicum. Chellappah, Chiew and Gopinathan (1999) point out that the Partnership Model involves more collaboration between the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the schools whereby the schools would take more responsibility than before for developing the teachers. Originally, and in the case of the trainee teacher during this study, the NIE supervisor conducted three classroom observations and this accounted for about 80% of the trainee's grade. In the new system the supervisor conducts one classroom observation and this accounts for less than 50 % of the grade. The partnership model works as follows: the school principal is in overall charge of the trainee teachers in the school. The principal then appoints a school coordinating mentor (SCM) from the school who takes care of the NIE trainees in the school during their practicum. The SCM will appoint cooperating teachers (CT) to guide each NIE trainee, the SCM also works closely with the NIE supervision coordinator (NSC). The NSC supervises all the trainee teachers in the school, regardless of subject area, and acts as overall coordinator of the practicum. At the end of the practicum period a practicum panel meets to decide the grades of the trainee teachers. This panel is chaired by the school principal and is composed of the SCM and NSC.

The student teachers in the reported research were studying for a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. Each trainee teacher enters the PGDE program with a BA degree obtained from another university. The students in the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) program take a ten-month program in which they are exposed to teaching practice and theory classes. Typically, each PGDE (secondary) student undergoes the coursework at the institution followed by teaching practice in a secondary school outside the institution. The NIE is the sole teacher training institution in Singapore and is responsible for the supervision of the teaching practice component of all Singaporean trainee teachers. Teaching practice usually occurs towards the end of the PDGE program where the teachers are placed in the schools for nine weeks of practice teaching. The schools where the student teachers in the reported research were assigned to complete the teaching practice component of the PGDE were all neighbourhood schools (government-funded schools).

Methodology

Data were collected over a two-year period by means of a questionnaire and follow-up interviews of eight randomly selected participants. Additionally, the researcher kept a reflective journal during the period of the study as a daily log of research activity and as a personal reflection (Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Lincoln and Guba 1985). A total of 60 English language learner teachers were administered a questionnaire (adapted from Pennington and Urmston 1998) designed to assess their attitudes and concerns related to teaching practice. Prior to the main study, the questionnaire as used in Pennington and Urmston's (1998) study and Urmston (2003) was piloted (with permission) with ten other learner teachers and the results revealed that the original 55 questions as used in Urmston's (2003) Hong Kong study were far too time-consuming for the learner teachers and they noted some questions were repetitive and other questions yielded unnecessary information. So, as a result, the questionnaire for the present study was redesigned and cut drastically to nine questions to ensure that a greater focus was placed on what support the learner teachers needed and received during their teaching practices. The final questionnaire (see Appendix A) used in the study thus surveyed three main areas of concern for learner English language teachers while on teaching practice (TP) in Singapore: Section I: Instructional Planning; Section II: Teaching Approach; and Section III: Professional Relationships.

Each of these is explained as follows: Section I, instructional planning, was designed to examine the teachers' views on the importance of lesson planning. The reason for including these questions was to see if their lesson planning was self-directed or influenced by their CTs and/or the school syllabus. Section II, teaching approach, was seeking to get the teachers' beliefs about their approach to teaching and the content of their lessons and also if this was influenced by the CTs or the school. Section III, professional relations, asked the teachers to note both their experiences with school colleagues during the practicum and what to expect during their first year as a teacher.

Regarding the use of interviews, Mishler (1986) and Spradley (1991) have pointed out the benefits of in-depth interviews to gauge research participants' attitudes and points of view. So, after administering and tabulating the results of the questionnaire, I invited eight (randomly chosen) of the 60 teachers to review the results and also asked them for comments and/or clarifications about their own answers to the questionnaire, and invited them to make any further suggestions and recommendations that they feel would enhance future English language trainees' experiences while on teaching practice, especially in Singapore.

Findings

The survey had a 100% return success rate: 60 questionnaires were returned from a total of 60 originally sent to trainee teachers. The eight teachers who were subsequently interviewed mentioned that this may have been because the questionnaire was short and easy to answer quickly. The tabulated results of the questionnaires returned by these 60 teachers are outlined first and followed by a discussion that includes many of the interviewees' comments.

Instructional Planning

Section I of the questionnaire, questions 1 to 3, covered instructional planning and decision making.

Question 1: Participants were asked if it is impossible to have a successful lesson that has not been well-planned in advance. From a total of 59 answers to these questions, the majority (50) either absolutely or quite agree. However, the open-ended comments produced some interesting insights that conflict with the results such as: 'A well-planned lesson doesn't mean it will be successful' and 'Well-planned is a relative term. In my limited

Practicum experience, most if not all lessons are prepared one day or the morning in advance of classes' and further, 'Sometimes a well-planned lesson only looks good on paper but is not workable due to circumstances beyond teacher's control'.

Question 2: Teachers were asked if they should be more responsive to student needs than the set syllabus. The majority (54) either absolutely or quite agree. However, the open-ended comments again revealed the dilemma these learner teachers must solve while teaching in a real classroom such as: 'The problem is...how to accommodate 40 different needs in ONE class! Moreover I have 4 classes. That makes 160 students.' Another revealed that the Ministry of Education (MOE) imposed syllabus may not be helpful in class if the teachers are required to follow it too closely; she continues 'Some listening comprehension exercises in the syllabus are really boring and if the students feel that way too, then there is no point teaching them listening comprehension using these exercises since they will lose motivation'.

Question 3: Teachers were asked how often they had to change their lesson plan during teaching practice and it is interesting to note that most say they do not change their lesson plans while teaching, with 42 mentioning they sometimes changed, while 16 mentioned rarely or never. Typical answer: 'I changed it sometimes and often because the students needed more time for the activity or discussion. However, I tried to finish the planned lesson and shortened the time for other parts of the lesson.'

Teaching Approach

Section II of the questionnaire covered questions 4 to 6 on the topic of teaching approach.

Question 4: Participants were asked to consider if a class should be strictly controlled by the teacher and all lesson content directed by the teacher and most (50) reported that they absolutely or quite disagreed with this as represented in the following open-ended comments: 'Students should at all times be allowed opportunities for both independent and cooperative learning' and 'A teacher should be able to manage the class and facilitate learning, NOT "monopolize" it'.

Question 5: Teachers were asked to reflect on their teaching practice and consider if their students learned English better through (1) interaction with other students, (2) through direct instruction; or (3) with no difference between 1 and 2. From a total of 60 responses, the majority (26) said that their students learned English through interaction with each other while 18 (or

30%) thought direct instruction would be best and 13 suggested there is no difference in instructional effect between interaction and teacher-directed instruction indicating some were unsure as to what approach to take while teaching. An open-ended comment summed this confusion up quite well as follows: 'There were cases where students learnt the wrong things from other students. I choose direct instructions. Teaching through interaction like the blind leading the blind, BUT! Number three (on the questionnaire) is also possible because I have some kids who help their friend.' Most, however, worried about their students not speaking English if allowed to interact with one another with representative comments as: 'Students resort to speaking in mother tongue when asked to do group work and may not always speak or write correctly in English' and 'Most of the students I have encountered during the Practicum rarely use spoken English with their peers. They prefer to learn English from the teacher, as observed from their questions and requests during lessons.'

Question 6: Teachers were asked, in a follow-up to the previous question, to comment if they would describe their teaching style during the practicum as learner-centered or teacher-centered? Most of the respondents (43, or 70%) mentioned they follow a learner-centered style while 17 reported a very or mostly teacher-centered style.

Professional Relations

Section III of the questionnaire covered questions 7 to 9 and dealt with the topic of professional relations.

Question 7: Participants were asked to point out from a list of people who were most helpful to them during the period of their practicum and from a total of 55 answers 60% (33) pointed out that their practicum supervisor was most helpful and this was followed (but not closely) by the more experienced teachers in the school (10) and fellow first-year teachers (9). It is interesting that only one of the participants indicated that the school coordinating mentor (SCM) was helpful while no participant indicated that the principal of the school was helpful during the period of their practicum.

Question 8: Teachers were asked who they think will be most helpful during their first years of teaching? Interestingly and strangely, out of a total of 54 answers just under half of the participants (26) indicated that the practicum supervisor would continue to be most helpful to them during their first years as teachers. This was followed by fellow first-year teachers (12) and more experienced teachers (8) in the school they would be posted to. Again the principal was not mentioned nor was the head of the department (HOD) of English in the school where they would be posted.

Question 9: Teachers were asked if they teach English in the future, to what extent do they expect to be working closely with other teachers, for example, to share materials or discuss teaching ideas? Out of a total of 59 answers most agreed that they would very much (34) or provide some (23) help to their colleagues in future.

Discussion

Most of the learner teachers who answered the questionnaires indicated that they were most positively influenced by their practicum supervisors and not their cooperating teachers and definitely not the SCM or principal of the school they were placed in during the period of their practicum. This is a similar finding to the results of a case study conducted some time ago in the same context (Farrell 2001) where, in a learner teacher's case, support was completely lacking from the school authorities: the principal, the Head of Department (HOD) and the Cooperating Teacher (CT). Pennington and Urmston's (1998) study in Hong Kong made a similar discovery about how influential practicum supervisors were during the practicum. In fact, during the interviews all eight learner teachers spoke about the conflicting roles and not too cordial relationships they had with their cooperating teachers. For example, Shu Jun mentioned that the CT was 'too controlling and wanted us to everything his way'. Her sentiments were echoed by Verpa who said that her CT had given her 'no freedom to do what I wanted because she was scared I might mess up exam grades'. Andy reported that his CT 'abandoned me completely during the practicum and saw my teaching as a break for them'. As she said: 'Here's the book, go teach the class'. Of course, he also said that the CT had observed him for the required number of classes in order to be able to evaluate him. In addition, the learner teachers mentioned that for the most part, they had to teach in unsupervised classes as the CT saw the 'trainee teacher' as someone who would take over his or her class, a similar finding to the case study conducted in the same setting (Farrell 2001). In their defence, some cooperating teachers complain that they have to re-teach the classes the learner teacher had while on his/her practicum.

The interview discussions with the eight learner teachers also touched on the topic of teaching approach and the influence of the CTs on their actual teaching methods. All eight reported that the CTs strongly encouraged the learner teachers to 'rigidly follow' their way of teaching and that they felt pressure to conform to the CTs' way because after all,

the CTs would be evaluating them at the end of the practicum. For example, regarding the usefulness of encouraging interaction among the students in class during teaching practice (an approach that was pushed in the teacher education courses at the NIE), most of the eight teachers who were interviewed said that during teaching practice they used a teacher-centered approach even though they may have preferred a learner-centered approach, especially when they were being observed and evaluated by their CT. Stella said that for her, student-student interaction would 'work for a good class but not for a weak class. And as such I would be reluctant to use it if I was being observed by my CT.' In addition, Fong said that she herself was uncomfortable each time she used pair work and group work because it 'was difficult to monitor these students as they play around a bit and this could be a big problem if the CT is evaluating us'. Christine echoed Fong's concerns with being evaluated by the CT and said that she did not use group work because she wanted to 'control the class when the CT was there and this can only be achieved by a teacher-centered approach'. Related to teaching approach, Kaya said that she was 'astonished' at what she observed her cooperating teacher (CT) do in class: 'All testing and no teaching'. Kaya was upset with this because she got conflicting feedback from this same CT in that she 'admonished me and told me I did not know how to teach when I suggested that she was testing a lot'. Christine said she decided to take a strategic view to the practicum by asking her CT 'what exactly they wanted' and she tried to follow their instructions exactly as she maintained, 'they are the CTs after all and they evaluate us'. Vic was totally against a teacher-centered style but not because of fear of CT evaluation; he said, 'Teacher-centred approaches were stifling and students would be just trying to keep awake. Anyway, most of the students that I have come across do not interact with their peers using English.' During the interviews the eight learner teachers also made comments regarding lesson planning and mostly agreed that lesson plans are necessary especially for the supervisors and CTs but as Stella suggested they need not write 'every single step of the plan'. Jenny was also against writing lesson plans and said 'As long as you keep asking yourself why you do certain things, then no need to write but the CTs require us to write them'. Regarding change of lesson plans during the practicum, Jenny said that when students 'didn't respond especially after a class or recess' she changed her plans. Verpa suggested that she would change her lesson plan if she realized that 'students were not learning as a result of using a particular method, and then need to change the method and make the change on the

spot'. But she also said that she realized that this is 'very difficult' and all agreed that they would not change any plans if the CT was observing them. They noted that the only times the CTs were in their classes were when they were required to observe and evaluate the pre-service teachers; at all other times during their placement, all eight teachers said that they were left alone to teach the classes and that the CTs regarded them as 'substitute teachers'.

The above findings have a number of implications for improving the quality of teacher preparation in initial language teacher education by rethinking the selection and role of the mentor teachers, especially the selection of cooperating teachers. In general education research the literature leads to the conclusion that the procedures used by many schools to select cooperating teachers depends heavily on either the judgment of the school principal and the teacher's self-selection—volunteering to act as a cooperating teacher (Guyton and McIntyre 1990). In English language teaching Richards and Crookes (1988: 23) have noted that the role of the cooperating teacher has been poorly defined, and that 'classroom teachers are usually not well prepared for the task of supervising a student teacher'. From informal discussions with many of the CTs who mentored the learner teachers in the present study, most of the selections of cooperating teachers were non-voluntary appointments made by the principal of the schools, and most of these were based on the availability of the cooperating teacher rather than any consideration about the ability or background of such CTs. It seems that no consideration was made about the teachers' qualifications to be a CT, or if they have had any training for the role of cooperating teacher.

So it is clear that selection procedures for suitable cooperating teachers need to be revisited in the context of the present study. Clearly, school principals need to be heavily involved with the selection of cooperating teachers but they can also be assisted by teacher education institutions who could develop criteria about the roles and responsibilities of cooperating teachers and convey this information directly to each school. However, the mere appointment of a cooperating teacher mentor to a learner teacher during teaching practice is no guarantee that the collaboration will be successful because mentoring relationships may sometimes be unpredictable, unless the mentor has been trained for this role. Tomlinson (1995) has noted that some mentors who have been appointed because they are senior teachers may feel unclear about their roles and responsibilities. Tomlinson suggests that as experienced teachers 'they may have become so intuitive they find it difficult to articulate what in fact they are doing'

(1995: 18) to learner teachers. The results of the study reported in this paper suggest that the above mentioned concerns may in fact be true because the learner teachers received very conflicting and inconsistent feedback (if they received feedback at all) from their CTs during their teaching practice. What happens in many schools at present is that the cooperating teachers already hold a position of responsibility and an additional position of responsibility as cooperating teacher only adds to the workload, thus putting the whole process of mentoring under a strain.

The results of this case study strongly suggest more quality collaboration between the triad of the supervisor (the teacher training institution), the cooperating teacher (including the principal and HODs) and the learner teachers. It remains to be seen whether the Partnership Model recently instituted in Singapore will be successful in promoting this collaboration because as the results of this study suggest, the learner teachers did not go to the SCM or the school principal when they wanted guidance. As Ngoh and Tan have previously recommended, 'What is needed in each school [in Singapore] is a systematic and structured program of induction that has teacher mentoring as its key element' (2000: 7). It is worth noting that overall, the eight learner teachers who were interviewed reported that they felt the practicum was a 'worthwhile experience' and that they are all motivated as a result of their experiences to become successful English language teachers in Singapore.

Conclusion

In the study outlined in this paper the learner teachers experienced a short (nine weeks) placement in a school they had never been in before. It seems that many of the schools may have seen this role as a burden and the cooperating teachers seemed to see their mentoring role as an interruption of their teaching and time. The results of the study suggest that learner English language teachers need and want more support while on teaching practice and that the support and guidance of personnel within the schools can help to build positively on learner teachers' success in the initial teacher education course.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHING PRACTICUM QUESTIONNAIRE

The following short questionnaire is to be used as a part of a research project which aims to look at the concerns of English language teachers on school placement in Singapore. Your responses will be kept completely confidential. Please take a little time to consider each item carefully and respond as fully as you can.

Section I: Instructional Planning and Decision Making

Questions 1 to 2

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please indicate by circling the numeral that corresponds to ONE of the four statements:

1. Absolutely agree
2. Quite agree
3. Quite disagree
4. Absolutely disagree

1. It is impossible to have a successful lesson that hasn't been well-planned in advance.

1 2 3 4

Comments: _____

2. Teachers should be more responsive to student needs than the set syllabus.

1 2 3 4

Comments: _____

3. During your Practicum, how often did you find you had to change your lesson plan?

1. Always
2. Usually
3. Sometimes
4. Rarely
5. Never

Section II: Teaching Approach

Questions 4 to 6: Do you agree with the following statements? Please indicate by circling the numeral that corresponds to ONE of the four statements:

1. Absolutely agree
2. Quite agree
3. Quite disagree
4. Absolutely disagree

4. A class should be strictly controlled by the teacher and all lesson content directed by the teacher.

1 2 3 4

Comments: _____

5. In your Practicum, did you find that students learn English better through interaction with other students or through direct instruction from the teacher?

1. Through interaction with other students
2. Through direct instruction
3. No difference between the two

Comments: _____

6. Would you describe your teaching style during the practicum as learner-centered or teacher-centered?

1. Very learner-centered
2. Mostly learner-centered
3. Mostly teacher-centred
4. Very teacher-centered

Section III. Professional Relationships

7. During your Practicum, who was most helpful to you?

1. Fellow first-year teachers
2. More experienced teachers in school
3. The SCM of the school
4. Principal
5. Practicum supervisor
6. Your Cooperating Teacher (CT)
7. Others (please specify) _____

8. Who do you think will be most helpful to you during your first few years of teaching?

1. Fellow first-year teachers
2. More experienced teachers
3. Principal
4. HOD English in school
5. Practicum supervisor
6. Others (please specify) _____

9. If you continue to teach English in the future, to what extent do you expect to be working closely with other teachers, e.g. to share materials or discuss teaching ideas?

1. Very much
2. Some
3. A little
4. Not at all
5. Others (please specify) _____