

Searching for Quality in ELT

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Edited by Ulker Vanci-Osam & Gül Celkan

Necdet Osam (Editor in Chief)



Evaluation of Practice Teaching

Sitkiye Küter

Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus

sitkiye.kuter@emmu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Abstract - Pre-service teaching programs are critical in trainees' lives because they not only provide training in the subject matter but also promote trainees' development by exposing them to the content of instruction in real classroom settings. This research study elaborates on the findings of a small-scale research implemented to find out the effectiveness of the practice teaching course as regards its contents, structure, logistics and supervision provided, and to make suggestions for the ongoing improvement of the program. Examination and triangulation of the multiple qualitative-quantitative data provides interesting findings regarding the effectiveness of the program. The results also yield invaluable suggestions to improve the quality of the practice teaching course.

Introduction

In a teaching certificate program, the significance of the practice teaching course cannot be underestimated as Richards and Crookes (1988) state that this course provides the fundamental basis for the trainees to acquire the experiential skills and knowledge required to function as an effective language teacher. Thus, while designing such a course, special consideration should be given to provide meaningful experiences for the prospective teachers by 'bringing them into contact with reality through various training experiences and actual teaching encounters with children in the classroom' (Smith, 1969, quoted in Cruickshank and Armaline, 1986).

Now there is a shift in initial teacher education towards a more school-based approach where considerable knowledge, expertise and goodwill of experienced teachers are fully utilized to help trainees learn how to become competent in the classroom (Rhodes, 1994). The carefully organized field- or campus-based experiences help student teachers not only be more 'reflective and thoughtful about teaching and schooling' (Cruickshank and Armaline, 1986) but also develop their own professional skills before entering the profession (Furlong, et al, 1988).

The current study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the practice teaching course -EDUC420- with regard to its contents, structure, logistics and supervision provided, and to make suggestions for the ongoing improvement of the program.

Literature Review

Internship was reported to be one of the most helpful professional experiences in MA TESOL programs (Richards and Hino, 1983, quoted in Richards and Crookes, 1988). One of the major purposes of teacher education is to expose the novice teachers to classroom contexts to acquire the skills and competencies of effective teachers and discover the working rules effective teachers employ in their classes (Richards, 1990). These opportunities also help trainees gain the investigative and decision-making skills they need to function as responsible and self-directed teachers (Gebhard, et al, 1990). In this respect, this course can be considered as a vital cornerstone of teaching profession for future teachers.

In such a course, the development of students' classroom and wider professional competence can be fostered with the implementation of integration of levels - direct practice, indirect practice and disciplinary theory - whose aims is the development of competent and knowledgeable practitioners. Trainees experience teaching to real learners in direct experiences, while they are exposed to observing real teaching in indirect practices. On the other hand, disciplinary theory aims to improve students' theoretical knowledge on language teaching (Furlong et al, 1988).

Schools are the best places for trainees to learn the skills as regards experiential knowledge and it seems right that schools should take responsibility here to provide the students with a range of experiences to help their personal learning progress in a variety of ways (Evans, 1994).

Therefore, trainees should be exposed to direct and indirect practices in actual classes for getting optimum benefit from their experiences.

Another crucial point in training programs concerns how carefully and systematically the teaching experiences of trainees are planned. Primarily, liaison between the institution and the school is of utmost importance and special consideration should be given to establish collaboration and cooperation between school and training institution (Wallace, 1997) for the success of the program.

Methodology

The present survey was conducted to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of EDUC420 course, and to make suggestions to improve the program. This evaluation is summative in nature as it took place at the end of the course to provide information for the ongoing improvement of the program (Nunan, 1994). The survey was mainly concerned with the interpretation of self-report data gathered from multiple perspectives.

The study was carried out in the two groups of EDUC420 course, a five-credit practice teaching course offered to English teacher candidates by Educational Sciences in the second semester of the forth year in Eastern Mediterranean University.

This course is designed within a combined theory-practice framework, which is intended to help the prospective teachers to observe and teach a group of students under supervision. It aims to build up teaching skills, improve trainees' teaching performance, and develop an awareness of how students learn. The students are required to visit predetermined schools and do their observations and teaching practice under the supervision of the class teacher. They are also supposed to reflect on their observations and teaching by completing the tasks in their portfolios.

The self-report data was collected from twenty-eight students via questionnaire in two terms consecutively. Besides, forty students' program evaluation reports in their portfolios were considered to consolidate the data collected by the questionnaire. Only thirteen trainees (out of 22) filled out the questionnaire at the end of the program in spring 2000. Then the questionnaire was completed and returned by fifteen trainees (out of 35) in fall 2001. Most of the trainees did their practice

teaching at the School of Foreign Languages; only three trainees did their teaching practices at the Eastern Mediterranean College. The practice teaching periods in both terms were pre-planned with the administration of the School of Foreign Languages. In spring 2000, the interns had a five-week period for their internship, while it was a twelve-week period in fall, 2001.

The presentation and analysis of the qualitative-quantitative interpretative data collected by means of a questionnaire and reports is to be introduced successively to evaluate the effectiveness of program.

Questionnaire

Considering the theoretical components of the course, 33% of the student teachers reported that 16-week theoretical input was very satisfactory to prepare them for the teaching job. However, 25% of them indicated those sessions as satisfactory. 14% of the interns stated their doubts about the effectiveness of the 16-week theoretical sessions. Those classes were reported as unsatisfactory by 21% of the trainees and very unsatisfactory by 7% of the trainees.

With respect to the duration of the actual practice teaching at the School and College, 11% of the student teachers reported that the course is very satisfactory, while another 11% of the students indicated it as only satisfactory. Another 11% of the interns stated that they are uncertain if the duration of the actual practice teaching is satisfactory or not. The length of the actual teaching practice at the School and College was ranked as unsatisfactory by 60% of the trainees and very unsatisfactory by 7% of the trainees.

As regards the supervision provided for the self-development during the practice teaching, 57% of the interns indicated that very effective supervision was provided, whereas 29% of them reported it as effective. While 7% of the trainees stated their concerns about the effectiveness of the supervision provided, 7% of them ranked it as ineffective at all.

Concerning the impact of the program on students' self-improvement, 43% of the students stated that they improved themselves to a large extent, while 53% of them reported their self-improvement to some extent. 4% of the interns reported no improvement at all.

Regarding the students' thoughts and suggestions for the development of the program, almost all students reported the length of the program as too short. Very few students stated that the contact hours should be increased, while some other students indicated that the students should have been given chances to do their practice teachings at various schools with various teachers. Moreover, three students reported the difficulty to cope and balance the requirements of the projects, homework, exams of the other courses with the requirements of the Practicum altogether. One student reported that teachers at the College should be trained, while another student reported that cooperating teachers should be chosen from experienced ones.

All these students reported that more teaching opportunities should have been given to them, and suggested to extend the duration of the course to one semester at least. Eleven trainees stated that the course should be separated into two as theory and practice.

Reports

With respect to the self-report data obtained from the final evaluation of the practice teaching course in the portfolios, the program was reported to be helpful and useful by around 73% of the interns. The seriousness of the program, students' self-improvement as regards experience and their self-development in learning, and applying various techniques and methods are the main points stated in this part.

However, the duration of the course was found to be too short by around 73% of the trainees. Nearly all these students reported that EDUC420 should be taken alone in one semester and the theoretical part should be taken before the practice sessions. Nearly all these students stressed on the deficiencies as regards the insufficient teaching opportunities and the limited time spared to practise the skills learnt in theoretical classes.

About 10% of the student teachers reported their problems encountered with the portfolio. These students mainly focused on the unclear, unsuitable and redundant questions and tasks in the portfolio. Very few trainees reported that there is lack of communication between the School of Foreign Languages and the Department and added that they should have studied theoretical input and techniques beforehand and then practise them in EDUC420 course. Some other trainees reported the

feedback given by his/her tutor as insufficient, while a few trainees stated that the teachers at the College should be trained for supervision.

Conclusion

Pre-service teaching programs are crucial in trainees' lives since they not only provide training in the subject matter but also enhance trainees' self-development by exposing them to the content of instruction in real classroom settings.

According to the research findings, the practice teaching course was considered helpful and serious. Trainees' reports on their self-development throughout the program proved the program's success. Furthermore, more than half of the trainees expressed their strong contentment about the supervision provided in the course. They reported their supervisors and teachers as encouraging and motivating, and expressed their positive feelings regarding the assistance provided. However, very few interns reported their concerns about the lack of communication between their teachers and supervisors and insufficient feedback provided by their teachers.

As regards the theoretical input given in the course, the findings display that although more than half of the students are happy with those classes, 42% of the trainees are not. The two hours allotted for the weekly practice teaching sessions were reported as insufficient to cover the theoretical components effectively. The interns found themselves in applying the skills and teaching techniques in the classrooms before studying and discussing them in their weekly theoretical classes.

The duration of the course was reported to be the main weakness of the program. The data exhibited that most of the trainees found the duration of the course too short and they requested more teaching opportunities in teaching. Some trainees reported the problems that they faced in managing the requirements of the internship and other departmental courses in a single semester. Furthermore, nearly all participants suggested that the duration of observations and teaching practices should be extended to at least one semester. Nearly all trainees stated that the theoretical and practical sessions should be offered separately in two consecutive semesters.