TEACHING PRACTICE IN PRE-SERVICE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERSONAL VIEWS

Sanja Ćurković Kalebić
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Split
CROATIA
sanja.kalebic@st.t-com.hr

Abstract

The paper deals with pre-service teacher education of students of English language and literature at the University of Zadar (Croatia). The aim of the paper is to investigate teaching practice from the perspective of student teachers' experiences and personal views. The discussion is based on the results of a questionnaire that was submitted to the students at the end of ELT methodology course. The results provide data on the difficulties students had with certain aspects of teaching and the level of help they received from the school. Students' attitudes towards the duration of the teaching practice are discovered as well. Finally, students' responses about the learning outcomes, and frustrations they had during teaching practice are considered and commented. On the basis of students' suggestions for the improvement of teaching practice conclusions are made and implications for further research are pointed out.

Key words: teaching practice, student teachers, school-based mentors, difficulties, learning

Introduction

To qualify as a teacher of English in Croatia one has to finish undergraduate study programme in English language and literature. The programme is double-major and it lasts four years. The study programme offers courses in language improvement, linguistic study of language, the study of literature in English and courses on teacher education.

At the University of Zadar courses on teacher education cover only 7% of the study programme for teachers of foreign languages. In the first and second year students follow courses in pedagogy, psychology of education and didactics. In the third and fourth year they follow methodology courses.

ELT (English language teaching) methodology course is offered in the third year of the study programme. It consists of lectures (60 periods), seminars (30 periods) and teaching practice (30 periods).

The objectives of the lectures are stated in the course description as follows:
- to introduce trainees to the key concepts of FLT (foreign language teaching)
- to get trainees acquainted with the teaching methods
- to give trainees a set of criteria by which critically read, observe, analyze and question approaches and methods
- to encourage the trainees to develop a reflective approach to teaching

The objectives of the seminar sessions are the following:
- to teach the trainees how to reflect on the teaching process
- to encourage making decisions in the teaching process
- to get the trainees acquainted with the procedures and techniques in FLT
- to enable the trainees to look critically at the teaching process
- to get the trainees acquainted with the basic research methods
The aim of teaching practice is:
- to learn how to observe (in a non-judgmental way) and notice elements of the teaching process
- to practice lesson planning and teaching according to the plan
- to become aware of different teaching strategies
- to try out different teaching techniques and procedures
- to master basic classroom management skills
- to reflect on own lesson
- to experience being a foreign language teacher

ELT methodology course is offered as a two-semester course. Lectures and seminars are taught on a weekly basis while teaching practice is organised in one block (two weeks) in February.

Students are assigned to one school in February to do classroom observation and teaching. Teaching practice implies first observing the mentor teach a certain number of lessons and then the trainees' own teaching.

Whenever possible the trainees observe a variety of lessons (different age of learners, different levels of knowledge etc.). During observation periods the trainees fill in the observation sheets they get from the teacher trainer. Observation sheets contain classroom observation tasks the aim of which is to raise the trainees' awareness about some aspects of the teaching process. Before observing lessons the trainees familiarize themselves with the observation charts and the procedures they are supposed to follow. Upon accomplishing teaching practice the trainees write a seminar paper in which they analyse the data collected by the observation sheets and report on what they have learnt from a particular observation task. These reports usually contain the trainees' comments on the nature of teacher or learner verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

When preparing their own teaching lessons the trainees have to write a formal lesson plan. When planning the trainees follow the model of the planning process that is suggested by the teacher trainer. The trainees are expected to discuss the content of the lesson plan with school-based mentor. The lesson plan should also contain a section where trainees can write comments about own teaching in terms of any changes of the lesson plan they have made while teaching. The aim of writing these comments is to promote self-reflection as an important factor of the process of learning to teach. The trainee is expected to discuss his/her comments with the school-based mentor in a post-observation session.

While they teach students are observed by mentors. Mentors fill in the so-called mentor's report which provides space for assessing the following areas: lesson planning, student teacher's behaviour, the use of teaching strategies, student's language use, ability to reflect upon own teaching. Each area covers a certain number of items. There is a five-point scale and space for comments for each item. At the end the mentor comments on the general presentation and gives a total score.

This paper considers teaching practice from the perspective of student teachers.

**Aim**

The aim of the paper is to investigate teaching practice with regard to student teachers' experiences and personal views.

The paper attempts to answer the following questions:
1. What are student perceptions of the level of difficulty of some aspects of teaching?
2. What are student perceptions of the level of help received on certain aspects of teaching?
3. What do the students think about the duration of teaching practice?
4. What are the students' views of the learning outcomes of teaching practice?
5. What frustrated the students during teaching practice?
6. What aspects of teaching practice would the students like to change?

Subjects
The subjects in this study were third-year students of English language and literature at University of Zadar.

Methodology
A questionnaire was submitted to third-year students at the end of ELT methodology course. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of the questionnaire in Lefoka et al (2001). The questionnaire consisted of three parts (background information, teaching experience, personal views). In the first part students were asked to give some personal data (sex, number of observed lessons, number of taught lessons, type(s) of feedback they obtained from school-based mentors). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of items which aimed to discover students' experiences in their initial training in terms of difficulties they had had with certain aspects of teaching and the level of help they had received on certain aspects of teaching. The third part of the questionnaire attempted to discover students' personal views on the teaching practice. In this part of the questionnaire students were encouraged to give their views on the teaching practice as a learning experience and to give suggestions for improving the teaching practice activity.

Results and discussion
1. Background information
   The students' answers to the background questions in the first part of the questionnaire were analysed and summed up as follows:
   
   60 students (58 (97%) females and 2 (3%) males) filled in the questionnaire.
   
   All the students observed the required number of lessons (15) while 7 (12%) students observed more lessons (20-25). Also, they all taught 2 lessons while 5 (8%) students taught 3 lessons.
   
   The students report they were observed by a school-based mentor each time they taught a lesson.
   
   All the students report they were given a grade for at least one lesson they taught. 30 (50%) students were given a grade for all the lessons they taught. They were always given verbal feedback/advice for all the lessons they taught. They were given written feedback for 61% of the lessons they taught. There was not a single case where the student was given no feedback.
   
   All the students claim they discussed teaching practice several times in their class since they returned to the university.

2. School experiences
   In the second part of the questionnaire students were asked to comment on the level of difficulty they encountered with some aspects of teaching and whether they got help with such aspects.
   
   The following two tables show the responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of teaching</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Moderately difficult</th>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Student comments on the level of help they got from school with certain aspects of teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of teaching</th>
<th>No help</th>
<th>Some help</th>
<th>Enough help</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning</td>
<td>16 (27%)</td>
<td>20 (33%)</td>
<td>20 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding on appropriate teaching strategies</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
<td>30 (50%)</td>
<td>22 (37%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding appropriate teaching materials</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
<td>21 (36%)</td>
<td>28 (47%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom control</td>
<td>16 (27%)</td>
<td>22 (37%)</td>
<td>20 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>28 (47%)</td>
<td>22 (37%)</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal interaction with learners</td>
<td>22 (37%)</td>
<td>22 (37%)</td>
<td>14 (23%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The patterns shown in Table 1 suggest that students' greatest difficulties concerned deciding on appropriate teaching strategies. Timing, classroom control and lesson planning can also be problematic while they found finding appropriate teaching materials and verbal interaction with learners relatively easy.

When asked to comment on the level of help received on the aspects of teaching many student teachers' responses were fairly positive, but it was clear there were also gaps in the support they were given.

Taking these two tables together, one can see that in some areas where they had little support, such as finding appropriate teaching material, most felt confident about handing it on...
their own. Conversely, in areas such as timing which many find difficult it is worrying that about one half felt they had received no help at all.

3. Personal Views
3.1. Duration of teaching practice

Students were asked to comment on the length of TP. 33 (55%) students think that the length of TP was right while 18 (30%) students think that teaching practice should be longer. Only 15% of the students think that teaching practice should be organised in two blocks. No respondent thinks that it should be shorter.

The reasons for their responses are summed up in the tables below.

Table 3 Reasons for not changing the duration of TP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for not changing the duration of teaching practice activity</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is enough time for the first experience with learners.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was enough time to see how teaching really looks like and practice it as well.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I managed to see and experience everything I wanted.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no time during the year to do more, doing less would not be as effective, so it is the right length.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reasons for not changing the duration of TP reveal several attitudes students have towards TP. The first attitude refers to the students' understanding of the aim of TP. Many students see TP just as the first encounter with teaching when they are not expected to learn everything about teaching. Thus, these students do not think TP should be longer. Secondly, significant number of students think it is enough time to get an insight into teaching and to practice it as well. Thirdly, some students find the reasons in their prior expectations and wishes concerning TP. They feel their expectations were fulfilled and their needs met. Few students take an objective view when considering the duration of TP and find that there are no possibilities with regard to the study programme requirements to have longer TP.

Table 4 Reasons for extending the duration of TP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for extending the duration of teaching practice</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We should teach a bit longer to gain some competence that would prepare us for the future job.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is not enough time to get an appropriate insight into what it means to teach.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is not enough time to overcome fear and to develop your own attitude towards this profession in such a short period.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two weeks are not enough to get the atmosphere in the classroom.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reasons for extending the duration of TP concern several areas. The largest group of reasons refers to teaching competence. A large group of students believe they would gain more competence if the teaching practice lasted longer. The second group of reasons refers to getting insight into the nature of teaching. Some students think that the time they spent at school and the number of observed and taught lessons were not enough to get such an insight. The third group of reasons deals with personal factors. Two students feel it was not enough time to overcome stage fright and develop own attitude towards teaching. One student

657
believes that a longer teaching practice will enable students to get atmosphere in the classroom.

Table 5 Reasons for organising TP in two blocks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for organising TP in two blocks</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We should have more time to think about our teaching (realize our mistakes). We only had 1-2 days</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between the two lessons we were supposed to teach.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student needs to gain self-confidence, it takes time.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some students would prefer teaching practice in two blocks. They believe that with such a schedule they would have more opportunities for self-reflection and for building self-confidence.

3.2. TP as a Learning Experience

Students were asked to identify the three most important things they learned during teaching practice. Table 6 presents the list of comments in summary form.

Table 6 Things the students think they learned during TP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things the students think they learned during teaching practice</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approaching and motivating children</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing verbal communication with children</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language teaching strategies</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching techniques</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing in front of the class</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being patient with children</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A detailed analysis of the responses suggests that the student teachers feel they are learning a lot of things. Approaching and motivating children unsurprisingly ranks high on the list since it can best be learnt in practice, on the job. Subject specific aspects of teaching seem also to be learnt such as establishing verbal interaction with learners and using strategies for language teaching. Besides having developed a lot of professional skills student feel they are developing some personal skills such as being patient with children, overcoming fear, better understanding of the nature of teaching etc.

3.3. Students' Frustrations during TP

Students were also asked to identify the three things that frustrated them during TP. A list of the things that frustrated them most is presented in Table 7.

Table 7 Things that frustrated students most during TP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things that frustrated students most during teaching practice</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils' behaviour in the classroom – not willing to participate/chatting</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers' attitudes towards pupils - neglecting weaker students</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers' attitudes towards us – not cooperative with us/not enough help</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own behaviour- being nervous/lack of self-confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students expressed various complaints which can be grouped into those concerned with pupils' behaviour, with mentors' behaviour, and with own behaviour. The biggest group of complaints concerned pupils' behaviour in the classroom. Students mostly complained about the pupils' lack of interest for what was going on in the classroom. Another group of comments concerned the teachers i.e. their attitude towards pupils and towards student-teachers. Students mostly complained about teachers who neglected weaker students during classroom interaction. The third group of complaints concerned mentors' attitude towards teachers. Students complain about mentors not being cooperative and not providing enough help. One student wrote mentors were just looking forward to getting done with the students' teaching practice as soon as possible. There were some aspects of own behaviour that frustrated students such as concerns about not doing everything properly and on time, nervousness, stage fright etc. It is worth mentioning that about 20% of the respondents reported that nothing frustrated them during teaching practice.

3.4. Suggestions for improving TP

Students were asked to give suggestions as to how TP could be improved. Table 8 summarizes the most frequent answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestions for improving TP</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More lessong taught by student teachers</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More teaching materials and teaching aids</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more school-based mentors (instead of only one mentor)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More advice from the teacher trainer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better cooperation between the University and school</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better organization (one visit to school per week throughout the year)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students give suggestions for improving several areas. These areas are students' teaching opportunities, teaching and learning conditions, cooperation between students and the teacher trainer, cooperation between school and university and organization of TP. About one-third of the students would like to teach more that two lessons. This suggestion is in accordance with previously mentioned reasons for extending the duration of TP. Also, students suggest more teaching materials and aids. The latter refers to the availability of modern equipment such as computer, LCD, DVD etc. Some students think teaching practice will be improved if they have the possibility to observe more mentors. Some students explain that by observing two mentors they will have the possibility to improve their observation skills and critical thinking. Students also think they should get more advice from the university-based teacher trainer and suggest better cooperation between school and university. These suggestions primarily refer to better instructions concerning the students' stay at school. Few suggestions concern better organization in terms of the structure of the observation schedule. These students think TP could be improved if observation sessions take place throughout the academic year instead of in a two-week block.

Instead of a conclusion

The aim of this paper was not to evaluate teaching practice but to investigate it from the perspective of student teachers' experiences and personal views.

The results of the survey show, among others, that teaching practice is a complex activity. Each stakeholder, i.e. student teacher, school-based mentor, teacher trainer, plays an important role in it. To get a better insight into the complexity of this activity it will be useful to investigate teaching practice from the point of view of school-based mentors and teacher
trainers as well. Such an investigation would lead to better understanding of the nature of this activity and the roles of its participants. The findings of such investigations should be the starting point for changes i.e. for the improvement of teaching practice.

References