THE EXPLORATION OF PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN FIELD PRACTICUM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges that six pre-service EFL teachers of a Bachelor of Education (Sarjana Pendidikan) program experienced in conducting field practicum. This study employs a qualitative research design, with a phenomenological approach. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews. The interview data was then scrutinized and codified, respective to emergent themes through thematic analysis procedures (Merriam, 1988 in Emilia, 2007, p. 84). The findings showed that the pre-service teachers experienced challenges related to lesson preparation, classroom management, and communication breakdown within their field practicum. The study concludes with a recommendation and justification for teacher preparation programs to provide pre-service teachers with: robust theoretical frameworks in order to design instruction; practical experience in classroom management; profound knowledge of English language; and activities that develop strong confidence in teaching. In addition, teacher preparation programs are endorsed to formally inform mentor teachers regarding their roles and responsibilities in the practicum.
Keywords: Pre-service teachers, teacher preparation programs, field practicum

Introduction

Field practicums have been recognized as an important feature in teacher preparation programs. The necessity of incorporating field practicums in teacher preparation programs has been pinpointed in much literature. In literature concerning teacher education, it has been noted that field practicums help pre-service teachers to integrate theories, learned in teacher training institutes, into practice (Hudson & Hudson, 2012, p. 12; see also Tuli & File, 2009, p. 111-12; Haciomeroglu, 2013, p. 132).

Despite recognition of the necessity of the field practicum, the research field of L2 teacher education has not yet recognized cases within field practicum as a distinguished topic. That is, little has been done to conduct a study that embraces field practicum as the central lobe in L2 teacher education research, particularly in phenomena concerning challenges encountered by pre-service teachers in the practicum. Furthermore, there is little literature addressing cases of ESL/ EFL pre-service teachers' difficulties in the practicum, especially ones seen through pre-service teachers' perspective. Therefore, the current study aims to present the topic of challenges experienced by pre-service teachers in the field practicum.

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Literature Review

Field practicums are undertaken to prepare student teachers to enter their professional setting (Richards, 1990, p. 14; Gebhard, 2009, p. 250).). It is included in the workload of teacher preparation programs, which include ESL/EFL teacher education programs, to gear up pre-service teachers with courses related to their respective profession. The courses, as indicated by Shulman (1987, in Randall & Thornton, 2001), need to embed the following knowledge: (1) content knowledge referring to knowledge of English language; (2) general pedagogic knowledge, referring to knowledge of general issues encountered in teaching practice; (3) curriculum knowledge, addressing insights as to material development; (4) pedagogical-content knowledge, referring to knowledge of language acquisition and its correlation with teaching approaches, methods and techniques, (5) knowledge of learners and their characteristics, referring to insights of the significance of students needs and characteristics in learning, (6) knowledge of education context, referring to knowledge of diverse teaching contexts which are under the influence of sociological and institutional factors, and (7) knowledge of education ends, purposes and values and the philosophical and historical issues, covering the understanding of the history of English language teaching methodology (Shulman, 1987, in Randall & Thornton, 2001, p. 27-29; cf. Ellis, 1990, p. 26).

The theoretical frameworks of ESL/EFL field experience are partly credited to contributions of research conducted by Stoynoff (1999 in Gan, 2013). In this research he outlined the principles involved in conducting a TESOL practicum. The principles as summarized by Gan (2013) are as follows: (1) The practicum is a part of an academic program; (2) The practicum involves team work consisting of mentor teachers, supervising teacher educators, language program managers and student teachers; (3) The practicum offers two teaching components: modeling and coaching; (4) The practicum encompasses extensive observations done in organized procedures; and (5) The practicum experience is evaluated using a portfolio (Stoynoff, 1999 in Gan, 2013, p. 93).

Mentor teachers i.e. one of individuals involved in the practicum, as stated by Randall & Thornton (2001) have the following roles: (1) helping student teachers to develop classroom-based skills, (2) enlightening student teachers on curriculum issues, (3) helping student teachers to create teaching goals, (4) assessing student teachers' teaching practice, (5) boosting student teachers' confidence, (6) motivating student teachers, (7) providing time to listen to student teachers' problems, (8) helping student teachers to adapt to school environment, and (9) solving student teachers' problems (Randall & Thornton, 2001, p. 13).

It is worth noting that field experience, as affirmed by Richards & Crookes (1998) offers pre-service teachers a window of opportunity to (1) gain teaching experience in the classroom, (2) put theories in the practice, (3) observe teaching practice of mentor teachers, (4) expand views on teaching techniques, (5) develop self-awareness of personal teaching style, (6) sharpen lesson design skill, (7) develop material selection ability, (8) build awareness of present teaching techniques and methods (Richards & Crookes, 1988, p.11).

Furthermore, as a part of the preparation program, field practicum or field experience, support is devised for the professional development of student teachers. Professional development, a widely discussed concept in pre-service teacher education, is the bridge to achieve a number of goals. The goals, as Pennington (1990) puts forward, are as follows: (1) knowledge addressing theoretical foundation of language learning and classroom research, (2) knowledge of self and students, (3) attitudes of flexibility and openness to change, (4) decision-making skills and communication skills, (5) analytical skills

for judging different teaching situations, (6) awareness of alternative teaching approaches, (7) confidence and skills to change teaching approach, and (8) practical experiences using different approaches (Pennington, 1990, p. 150).

It is indicated that the concept of professional development is interrelated with the concept of reflective teaching in which the latter is a process to build professional development (Ferraro, 2000, http://searcheric. org/digests/ed449120.html; Crookes, 2003, p. 180; AMEP, 2006, p. 1). Reflective teaching in field experience, as put forward by Ferraro (2000), comprises of two aspects: (1) coaching or mentoring, referring to a means used by teacher educators to help student teachers to improve their teaching performances; and (2) peer involvement, referring to a means to build professional developing by discussing teaching practices with fellow student teachers (Ferraro, 2000, http://searcheric.org/digests/ ed449120.html).

A number of studies focused on field practicums have shed light on the matter of pre-service teacher challenges in the practicum. Numrich undertook such a study, scrutinizing the experience of 26 novice ESL teachers while their conducting teaching practicum. The study, which used students' journals to gather the data, produced records that the student teachers found it hard to manage class time, give clear instructions, adopt to learners' needs, teach grammar, evaluate learners, and give attentive focus to learners (Numrich, 1996, p. 142-45). Another study was carried out by Çelik, investigating the concerns of 133 student teachers in field experience. By employing close-ended questionnaires to collect the data, Çelik (2008) noted that out of 40 possible concerns, student teachers marked that coping with the balance of attention between the practicum and individual commitments, dealing with learners' disruptive behavior, and establishing a good rapport with their supervisor were among the most frequent concerns of pre-service teachers (Çelik, 2008,

p. 100-05). With a different data collection instrument Gan (2013) used reflective journals and in-depth interviews to gather data on the difficulties encountered by 16 student teachers conducting field experience. In this study of the field practicum challenges related to the sustainability of teaching approaches, classroom management, and language barrier (Gan, 2013, p. 98-102) were recorded.

Methodology

The current study adopted an exploratory design. The design was preferred as it scrutinizes a phenomenon, which "has not been studied in detail before (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 308; Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012, p. 459). Furthermore, the current study preferred qualitative methodology due to the fact that the methodology can work with subjective data and (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38) and yield in-depth insight of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 206; Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012, p. 436-37).

The present study was guided by phenomenological approach, a scientific approach used to examine subjective experience (Englander, 2009, p. 15; see also Lester, 1999, p. 1; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011, p. 13). In regard to this; semi-structured in-depth interviews were solely as the data collection instrument. The interviews were conducted with six pre-service teachers of a teacher preparation program. The eligible pre-service teachers were ones who had conducted a field practicum. The reason for choosing six participants was in relation with Dörnyei's suggestion that six participant may be enough as initial samples for an interview study (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 127). After gathering data from the initial samples, it was found that the data gathered had reached saturation, meaning that the data was sufficient to answer questions the study sought to answer. This further suggests that there was not need to add more participants (see Dörnyei, 2007, p. 127).

The interviews were in the form of a one-on-one interview, meaning that the

interview was conducted with one participant at a time. Participants were asked about their perception of the practicum, challenges experienced in the practicum, possible causes of the challenges, and strategies to overcome the challenges. All inquiries were made to allow the participant to describe and elaborate on their individual experience and perception of the experience. After the participant had granted approval to record the interview, each interview was then audio-taped. All but one interview was conducted in English. One interview was carried out using Indonesian to fulfill the request of the participant in which the participant felt that she could not fully express her comments if the interview were to be conducted in English. All the interviews were then transcribed verbatim, while the interview using Indonesian was later translated into English. During transcribing the interviews and later on analyzing and interpreting the data, pseudonym names were used to preserve participant's anonymity (Orb, Eishenahuer, & Wynaden, 200, p. 95). The participants were referred to as Dwi, Aila, Edi, Dian, Ario, and Satria. Each participant was asked to clarify his or her comments if an entity of a remark was not clear. This procedure of member checking was done in order to improve the accuracy of the data (Stenson, 2004, p. 68)

After all interviews had been transcribed, the data was arranged by category (Emilia, 2007, p. 84; Creswell, 2012, p. 473). This step was followed by using a thematic analysis to discover themes in the transcriptions. The method was selected based on a justification that it "reports experiences, meanings and reality of participants" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). The themes emerged were then condensed (Emilia, 2007, p. 84).

Data Presentation and Discussion

Challenges related to lesson planning

Of six pre-service teachers, four of them (Dwi, Aila, Edi, and Dian) alluded to the idea that designing a lesson is a daunting activity.

They seemed to note that evaluating learning materials was overwhelming in which they indicated that it was hard to select materials that best fitted students' learning behavior and students' needs. An instance was described by Dwi:

"Most of the students couldn't understand the text [that I assumed was appropriate for them]"

This particular phenomenon seems to point to a flaw in the preparation courses in the preparation program in preparing pre-service teachers with knowledge to suitably pick learning materials (Katz & Snow, 2009, p. 67). That is, little experience in selecting and evaluating materials was gained when taking the courses. The similar case is documented in Numrich's study in which material evaluation was among the difficulties encountered by student teachers in field experience (Numrich, 1996, p. 142-43).

A student teacher's (Dian) responses indicated that the difficulty in preparing a lesson, was to do with her inability to adapt to diverse learners' needs. More often than not, she found it hard to ask her students to write a single paragraph throughout the field practicum. This case shows a flaw of courses in the preparation program to address the issue of material adaptation (see Katz & Snow, 2009, p. 72).

Student teachers who experienced difficulty in lesson planning noted that they turned to fellow pre-service teachers for advice on the problem. This supports the idea that good rapport among student teachers has a beneficial effect when one (student teacher) faces a problem (Crookes, 2003, p. 175). In addition, student teachers when faced with a problem concerning lesson design, consulted their mentor teachers. Both instances show that the concept of reflective teaching was adopted in solving the problem related to lesson planning. This may indicate that student teachers are on their way to build professional expertise (Ferraro, 2000, http://searcheric.org/digests/ed449120.html).

Challenges related to classroom management

Much effort was made by pre-service teachers to try to establish good classroom management. That is, there were times when student teachers needed to put a lot of energy in dealing with disruptive behavior – such behavior that could sideline the lesson. Student teachers particularly noted that unnecessary noises were the main problem in running a lesson. Such a case was recounted by Dian who commented, "it was hard to deal with the noises the students made". This seems to suggest that the participants might not have sufficient experience in dealing with disruptive behavior. In other words, the teacher preparation program has failed in preparing student teachers with knowledge on classroom management (see Shulman, 1987, in Randall & Thorton, 2001, p. 27-29). This case is similar to that described by Gan (2013) in which he claimed that little has been done to provide practical experience to assist in dealing with students with disruptive behavior (Gan, 2013, p. 104).

With regard to the aforementioned case, four pre-service teachers (Dwi, Edi, Dian, and Ario) shared similar accounts about the learners' misbehavior being intertwined with their motivation to learn. They commented that a number of students did not show enthusiasm in learning English. The case presented here may indicate that the pre-service teachers might have developed the knowledge of students, which is one of the goals of professional development (Pennington, 1990, p. 150). Furthermore, a student teacher (Dwi) identified learners' poor opinion of English might have influenced the abovementioned view. Dwi noted that some of the students believed that English was difficult to learn. This enhances the view that "language learning is one of the most face threatening school subjects because of the pressure of having to operate using a rather limited language code" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 40). In addition, two student teachers (Dian and Satria) commented that poor learner-learner relationship was among the causes of learners' misbehavior. The torn attachment among students is illustrated in the form of some learners were unwilling to work with particular classmates. This fact is further related to the ability of pre-service teachers to create cohesiveness in the class. That is, it is possible that pre-service teachers are not aware of what makes a group cohesive to create cohesive groups (see Dörnyei, 2001, p. 101-102; see also Murray & Christison, 2001; p. 191).

In addition, all student teachers noted that they had to teach in a class whose learners' level of English competencies varied. Implied in their comments, they noted that this was, by some means, related to decision-making of the placement school. This is relevant to the Brown's view that the placement of students with multiple language proficiency is "a by-product of institutional placement procedures and budgetary limits" (Brown, 2001, p. 197-98). Moreover, two pre-service teachers (Dian and Edi) commented that the problem in running a lesson was associated with their anxiety to impose rules. Of particular interest is Dian who, in a hypothetical situation, noted, "If only I was stricter, the students might show disciplined-behavior". This case might show that the practicum was colored with insecurity of pre-service teachers in establishing a code of conduct in the classroom. This, thus, seems to oppose the suggestion that it is important to build strong personal quality in teaching (Brookfield, 1990, as cited in Crookes, 2003, p. 166). Furthermore, this might indicate that mentor teachers of both pre-service teachers might not know their roles in the practicum, one of which is to boost pre-service teachers' confidence (see Randall & Thornton, 2001, p. 13). Yet again, this raises the issue of mentor teachers' formal training concerning their roles in the practicum (see Yang, 2001, p. 101; cf. Malderez, 2009, p. 263-64).

Two student teachers (Dwi and Ario) further noted that one of their weaknesses in the practicum was regarding knowledge of English language. Both pre-service teachers

seemed to point out that knowledge barrier had impeded them to run a lesson. This particular phenomenon is possibly on the other side of what teacher preparation programs need to consider in their courses (see Stoynoff, 1999; Richards, 2010 in Gan, 2013, p. 101-02). Despite the significance of incorporating content knowledge in the courses, this case may indicate the failure of teacher preparation programs to fill in the gaps in student teachers' knowledge of English.

Not only did student teachers have to deal with students' unnecessary noises, but they also encountered problems in managing class time. Five student teachers (Dwi, Aila, Dian, Ario, and Satria) experienced the disagreement of time management. That is, at times they had to find their lesson set back from original plan and further fly away from intended plan. Regarding this, literature on ESL/EFL teacher education has identified that the discrepancy of time allotment in lesson plan and in actual teaching practice is a common problem faced by new teachers (e.g. Brown, 2001, p. 153). However, it is worth noting that such circumstances might have occurred owing to the fact that pre-service teachers did not recognize the importance of having a backup plan (Harmer, 1998, p. 121-24). That being said, courses in the preparation program might not help student teachers to recognize the components of a good lesson, which include the component of unexpected circumstances in teaching practice (see Numrich, 1996, p. 146; Brown, 2001, p. 195-96).

In spite of some issues found in classroom management, pre-service teachers used an array of strategies to overcome the challenges. One of the tactics was establishing a good rapport with learners. This is illustrated in Dwi's case in which he was not bothered with students' misconduct since he had a good relationship with the students. He affirmed that his students would feel sorry once they started to show disruptive behavior. He further claimed that this was due to the fact that he

knew all students names. This case is relevant to the suggestion of Crookes that knowing all students names can help student teachers to deal with learners with misbehavior (Crookes, 2003, p. 163). Another strategy employed to deal with disruptive behavior was engaging students with persistent misbehavior in conversation about their misconduct. Of a particular interest is Aila who commented:

"When I scolded one of the students he was, like, disappointed at me so I just talked with him in person. After that, we had a good relationship again and he never made any trouble at class anymore." (Aila)

The above-mentioned experience is an instance of Aila's awareness to build a good rapport so that she can "solve the problems of uncooperative classes" (Harmer, 1998, p. 130).

Furthermore, there were numerous indications in the data of where student teachers need to improve their individual qualities. Such phenomenon in comments by by five student teachers (Dwi, Aila, Ario, Dian, and Satria). They pointed out that using clear and loud voice was a necessity; with some of the pre-service teachers acknowledging that this was one of their weaknesses. As Brown (2000) affirmed, it is essential for teachers to have clear voice as it can help them to deal with problems created by disruptive students (Brown, 2000, p. 194).

It is worth pointing out that two student teachers (Aila and Dwi) provided the same account that it is important to build and demonstrate nonverbal communication. This is distinct in Dwi's narrative, commenting that using nonverbal cues e.g. hand gestures came in handy when giving a lecture. It is important to note here that pre-service teachers develop awareness to express nonverbal language so that their students could learn better (Brown, 2000, p. 195).

In addition, poise may help in coping with unexpected circumstances in the class, particularly conditions that affect class time management. As evident in the Satria's

account, poise helped him to overcome unexpected circumstances:

> I could manage them quite well and I didn't get panic easily, you know, when, for example some unexpected moments came up I didn't get very panic, "What should I do?" but I could adapt with the conditions. (Satria)

It is apparent that being controlled and calm when encountering such unexpected circumstances could help student teachers to overcome and perhaps, triumph over the challenges (Brown, 2001, p. 196). On a different note, this might show that Satria's teacher preparation program has helped him to formulate a strategy when occasions to be in charge in the classroom come (Pennington, 1990, p. 150).

Challenges related to communication breakdown

Establishing good communication amongst individuals in the field experience can prove to be a valuable asset. However there were times when pre-service teachers found it difficult to interact with school staff, which includes mentor teachers. Relating to this, two student teachers (Dwi and Dian) noted that their mentor teachers seemed to neglect their responsibilities in the practicum. Dwi, in particular, commented:

> I just felt that I wasn't guided at that time. She just gave freedom so much, huge freedom. (Dwi)

The aforementioned case indicates that Dwi's mentor teacher might not know the roles of a mentor teacher in field experience. Likewise, Dian implied that more feedback and guidance from her mentor teacher would be appreciated:

> She simply nodded… She infrequently gave comments on the content of the lesson. (Dian)

Both above-mentioned cases seem to point out that several mentor teachers possibly did not know their roles and responsibilities in the practicum. Furthermore, this may indicate that there was little, if any, formal communication established to inform mentor teachers as to their roles and responsibilities in the practicum (see Randall & Thornton, 2001, p. 13).

Another problem encountered by the pre-service teachers in the field experience was the torn attachment with school management staff. This issue was experienced by Satria, who took a dim view of school management staff's action. The student teacher recounted that he, along with other pre-service teachers in his placement school, were asked, "to do some tasks that we were really not supposed to do". Satria further commented that the staff might have violated a trust by leaking information to third party e.g. student teachers. This phenomenon underlies the issue of poor communication between teacher preparation programs and placement in schools that, in this case, resulted in school staff not knowing the description of their workloads in field experience. This case is also identified in Yang's study in which lack of communication established between both aforementioned institutions was the root of problems experienced by some student teachers (Yang, 2011, p. 99). Such poor communication could pose problems to professional expertise (Elmajdob, 2004, in Malderez, 2008, p. 261)

In regard to the issues mentioned above, pre-service teachers noted when such a problem appeared, they would turn to fellow student teachers for advice. This may highlight the accomplishment of preparation programs to build practical communication skills of pre-service teachers (see Tomas, Farrelly, & Haslam, 2008, p. 663). This case is further relevant with the findings from Gan's study, where setting up a discussion about the problems with peer student teachers could ease problems concerning interpersonal communication by (Gan, 2013, p. 100).

Conclusions

From the discussion above, it is indicated that pre-service teachers were

struggling with preparing a lesson, running a lesson, and interacting with placement school staff. Pre-service teachers reported that they found it hard to select and evaluate learning materials. Additionally, they encountered problems posed in classroom management in which student teachers perceived students' disruptive behavior e.g. unnecessary noises and unexpected circumstances as the major difficulties in running a lesson. Additionally the pre-service teachers noted that establishing a good rapport with a member of the school staff, including mentor teachers, was difficult.

It is worth noting that the challenges experienced related to the flaw of courses in the preparation program to fully gear up pre-service teachers before they enter the respective profession. Some problems persisting in this aspect were inability to adapt to learners' needs, inadequate English proficiency and lack of confidence in establishing rules. It is further identified that poor cohesiveness among learners was among the source of the challenges. In addition, significant difference of English competence of learners and blurry line of schools staff' members' roles and responsibilities, both of which are to do with placement schools' decision-makings, were another root for the problem.

Despite facing a number of problems in the practicum, the pre-service teachers, at times, put up efforts to overcome the challenges. Student teachers recounted that having a good relationship with fellow student teachers and mentor teachers was a valuable asset to overcome the challenges related to lesson planning. Pre-service teachers also acknowledged that building a good relationship with learners, using various activities in a lesson, and building individual qualities are the strategies they used to solve the problem related to classroom management. Moreover, student teachers sought for advice from peer student teachers when they experienced poor communication with members of the school staff.

Consequently some suggestions that can be drawn are as follows: (1) teacher preparation programs need to provide pre-service teachers with vast theoretical foundations on evaluating materials and practical experience in managing a class; (2) teacher preparation programs need to focus on improving English competence of student teachers and boosting self-confidence of student teachers; (3) teacher preparation programs are endorsed to build a good formal relationship with placement schools, in which the preparation programs should inform the latter institution as to the roles and responsibilities of school staff's members in the practicum.

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