

Insights and Reflections: ELT Trainee Teachers' Experiences in Practicum

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Abstract

English language teachers' practicum as a part of teacher education is one the learning strategies that helps the teachers to be professional. The main objective of the study was to explore the reflections and insights of the practicum for the trainee teachers in their teaching career. This study used a qualitative research design to explore how trainee teachers perceived their practicum, a required component of their degree program, and to learn how to teach. Four trainee teachers, purposefully chosen from four distinct Tribhuvan University campuses, participated in semi-structured interviews for data collection. The interviews were then transcribed, categorized, and analyzed using thematic terms. The study explored that the practicum encouraged the growth of trainee teachers and equipped them for the actual work and they saw it as a crucial instrument for learning to teach. The study also demonstrated that the practicum program was successful in fostering theory-practice connections, competency and confidence building, and socialization. The study also revealed that the trainee teachers' stressful experiences, inadequate resources, assessment-centered experiences, and a lack of support from supervisors and the school and college administration were the challenges to be addressed.

Keywords: competency, trainee teacher, practicum, supervision.

Introduction

In teacher preparation programs across the globe, various approaches to teacher education have arisen to meet the goal of producing successful teachers. The introduction of practicum, the most well regarded element of teacher education, is one such strategy. However, there have been concerns expressed about the worth of professional development gained from teaching practicum. Tang (2003) claims that poorly structured practicum activities could lead to teacher frustration which further results even for teacher resignation. Therefore, the teaching practicum is regarded as one of the most important strategies of teacher preparation. Thus, in order to guarantee that teacher training institutions generate highly qualified teachers, well-designed teaching practicum is required (Zeichner, 2010;Sabar, 2004). This indicates that practicum for a teacher is inevitable.

Teacher educators throughout the world have been wondering for a long time how to best prepare trainees to become good classroom practitioners, even if the goal of teacher education is to generate active practical teachers. In this context, Funk and Hoffman (1982) state that practicum is one of the key components of the teacher education program that is now acknowledged as being extremely important and often called teaching practice (cited in Farrell, 2001). Major Nepalese universities have made it a compulsory for pre-service education. Even though everyone views it as being straightforward, there are a lot of issues that make it difficult right now. Yaman (2010) notes that teaching is a challenging task because it requires commitment and development from the practicum and professional life, regardless of who actualizes it. Hulling (1997) maintains that field-based activities provide a natural context for teacher candidates to watch and work with actual kids, teachers, and curriculum. It is obvious that educators have a significant impact on how both individuals and entire generations will develop (Farrell, 2001). Teachers need a variety of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and relevant educational experience to help them meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and work in this new environment. This is because the knowledge-based economy is demanding more intellectual property, and teachers need to be able to play their part in this changing and challenging world. It is anticipated that universities will train educators who are completely suitable for the demands and circumstances of today's classrooms. Therefore, in order to prevent any unpleasant experiences and to raise awareness of the school environment, teachers in this profession must put up greater effort.

Any teacher education program has traditionally been considered incomplete without the teaching practicum. Its goal is to prepare trainee teachers for the classroom by giving them practical teaching and learning experiences. It also gives them the chance to observe in a classroom. Pre-service teachers can make the connection between their education programs, lessons and their practical experiences in classrooms by participating in practicum programs, as noted by O'Dea and Peralta (2011). Under the supervision of a supervisor, trainee teachers are expected to plan, teach, reflect, and take action during the practicum. During this time, the supervisor has a significant impact on the trainee teachers' development because they are supposed to offer inspiration, support, and advice. Pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching in a professional setting are shaped by both their training and the professional milieu in which they are employed (Cuenca, 2011, p.118). In this setting, a critical concern that frequently comes to mind is: Has the practicum program been as meaningful in Nepalese context as it should have been? Has the supervisor acted as an example for the pre-service teachers, demonstrating effective teaching techniques? What unique possibilities and difficulties have aspiring educators encountered in their actual field? These kinds of inquiries made us feel to explore the perceptions of trainee teachers' perceptions of their practicum.

This study primarily aims to explore the insights and reflections of the trainee teachers in their practicum. It also explored the potential problems that are to be addressed for better teaching practicum from the viewpoint of the trainee teachers. To meet the

purpose, the study set out the questions how English trainee teachers of the university reflect of their practicum and What opportunities or challenges they see in their practicum.

Review of Related Literature

Literature indicates that the practicum is the first stage of investigating theories and practices. A practicum is a type of experiential learning that can be characterized as learning by doing, learning from action, field-based learning, or work-based learning (Lonergran & Anderson, 1988). It's also a chance to actively engage and take how a school's environment and culture function. Without a doubt, educators are key players in the success of any current educational reform as well as change agents in the community. Muhammad (2006) argues that good teachers produce the best education because they are not only catalysts for positive social change but also have a multiplicative effect while carrying out their daily responsibilities (cited in Fekede & Gemechis, 2009). Similarly, Wilson (2006) asserts that the teaching practicum plays a crucial role in the professional development of aspiring teachers, influencing their attitudes and ideas toward education. The most beneficial component of teacher education, according to aspiring teachers, is the teaching practicum. As noted by Ralph et al. (2008), the practicum serves as a setting for pre-service professionals to receive mentorship from both academic teachers and working professionals. Pre-service teachers can participate in observations and interactions at this workplace in order to gain new knowledge and to interpret what they have learnt in their undergraduate education.

However, the degree to which teacher candidates engage with tutors and other educators varies based on the presence of supportive systems like mentorship programs in schools, school-to-college partnerships, and frequent visits to schools by overseeing tutors from schools for teachers (Sivan & Chan, 2009). Additionally, it has been said that trainee teachers are not much affected by the rare visits of supervisors from teacher preparation schools. Teacher educators worldwide have been considering how to best prepare trainees to become effective classroom practitioners for a long time, even if the goal of teacher education is to generate excellent practical teachers (George et al.,2000). A worldwide economy and the highly competitive marketplace place, the evolving nature of the workforce and modern technology, changes in the demographics of students, and the expanding corpus of research on how individuals learn and what constitutes effective teaching have all forced teacher education to reevaluate the foundational ideas and practices of teacher preparation. These challenges face the teaching profession today.

Experiential learning theory

Kolb's 1984 experiential learning theory emphasizes the value of students actively participating in their education by applying what they have learned to create meaning and applying that understanding to new situations. According to Johnson (2015), ELT is based on the notion that education is a process that involves both learning and

relearning, and as such, it is flexible. This kind of learning is referred to as "human adaptation," according to Kolb (1984), in which the learner is receptive to new ideas and experiences, considers them, generates ideas that transform them into established theories, and then utilizes those theories to make judgments. In a similar vein, Hedin and Carroll (2010) only assert that learning happens when something is done with an experience; simply existing in the experience is insufficient for learning. According to Kolb (1984), adaptation is just being a complete human being thinking, feeling, acting, and reflecting. A learning identity emerges as a result of adaptation. The students must first trust their experiences and acknowledge that they are teaching moments before they can begin to form a learning identity. The practicum offers pre-service professionals an opportunity to gain experiences in a work environment. We chose this theory thinking that it helps us to link the perceptions of teachers of their practicum to their real classroom.

Method of the study

In order to extract meaning from reality for this study, we used a qualitative research design. The study was based on four fourth semester M.Ed.English students from four distinct campuses in three different districts of Lumbini Zone, who participated in a 45-days' teaching practice activity during the academic year 2081. Of the four campuses, two were Tribhuvan University affiliated campuses and the other two were constituent campuses. The participants for the study were chosen purposively. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, which are the most popular kind of interviews in qualitative social research. It is especially helpful for determining respondents' ideas, perceptions, sentiments, and past accounts of events; It is especially helpful for determining respondents' ideas, perceptions, sentiments, and past accounts of events, (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996as cited in Phillips, 2004).

In an effort to identify recurring themes, the interview data for this study were transcribed, classified, and categorized in accordance with Guba and Lincoln's (1985) recommendations. I was able to identify themes and patterns in the transcript by reading it several times. I then started creating categories, which entail grouping together conceptually related incidents or events.

Analysis and Findings

Finding the answer through data analysis and interpretation requires a lot of work on the part of the researcher, who must be deeply immersed in the process. Data were examined for the current study using a variety of topics, such as stressful and successful events.

Successful Experience

During their practicum, aspiring teachers are supposed to apply their theoretical understanding of education to the real-world challenges of teaching. It gives the student instructors a chance to hone their classroom management techniques and expertise. Three subthemes, as proposed by Tuli (2009), were identified from the perceptive answers of the student teachers regarding the favorable aspects of their

practicum experiences: Relationship between theory and practice, growth of competence and confidence, and socialization.

Theory Practice Connection

The link between theory and practice is one of the advantages of my study subjects. According to Tuli (2009), pre-service teachers are expected to connect theory and coursework from universities to school-based practice through practicum as they advance in their degree programs. When we asked about the relationship between theory and practice, practically every participant said that their practicum gave them the chance to put various theories into practice. Participant A responded *it gives us the chance to apply the ELT theories that we have learned in the classroom It also helps in the development of our pedagogical skills and, in the end, supports us in being professionals.* This participant concentrated on using subject-matter expertise to enhance professional and educational abilities. This viewpoint is reflected in Tuli and File's (2010) concept, which holds that a superior practicum program combines professional practice and theoretical knowledge from all three areas of a teacher education program: professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, and insights, as well as content knowledge obtained from a liberal education.

In a similar vein, participant B explained the meaning behind her response, saying *Practicum gave me a platform to apply my theoretical knowledge of teaching pedagogy, classroom management, using teaching aids, evaluation techniques, and presentation skills, and so on to real practice.* This participant concentrated on making connections between theory and practice related to methodology, classroom management, and assessment through practicum. Participant C gave a similar explanation, saying, with practicum, *I have the chance to verify my theoretical knowledge in an actual classroom atmosphere. The respondents feel that the practicum program connects the theory they have acquired with real-world experience to practice, as the description above makes evident.* According to Brown (2008) and Ligadu (2009), the illustrated responses support earlier research that found practicum aid pre-service teachers in applying theory to real-world situations (as cited in Tuli, 2014). It is obvious from the description that the practicum program bridges the gap between university theory and on-the-job training.

Competency and Confidence Development

The results from the in-depth interview also showed that the other two favorable chances were in the areas of personal competency development and confidence building. In this regard Participant A said *I got an opportunity to be involved in academic activities and knew about school norms behaviors, dressing style, etc. In the beginning of my practicum I was anxious and tense, but my practicum helped me become more confident.* The participant's point of view is evident when we observe aspiring teachers become competent and confident. In line with this, an additional source clarified that practicum empowered the trainee teachers to eradicate fear. *Supervisors and instructors at the school were able to hear about my experience. I*

was also able to discuss my opinions openly with friends, instructors, supervisors, and senior citizens. This participant's perspective was especially concerned with the process of gaining confidence as opposed to competence. *Practicum minimized my hesitations and I have become more confident now than I was before. Practice teaching as my implicit memorized knowledge has been made explicit through practical applications and now I have been completely different in my competence level.* This participant stated a different perspective, who also articulated the ideas quite well. This participant's concept is comparable to that of Brouwer and Korthagen (2005), who assert that practicum gives pre-service teachers the chance to enhance their individual teaching competency in addition to bridging the theoretical and practice gaps in teacher education.

The descriptions provided above unequivocally support Jeffery's (2008) claim that student teaching experiences boost instructors' self-assurance and motivation to stick with the field. According to the descriptions above, the practicum program actually helps students become more competent and self-assured that since it familiarizes them with the curriculum and helps them comprehend how teachers' roles actually change in the real world.

Socialization

The process of modifying behavior to fit social norms, cultural norms, or societal norms is known as socialization. It is the procedure via which a person joins the society of teachers as a participating member. All the participants stressed the beneficial effects of practicum on socializing while responding to my questions regarding the practicum's influence on trainee teachers' behavior. Participant A responded: *As we established a culture of working in pairs or groups, practicum allowed me to share my beliefs, systems, and culture. We were able to establish a learning community through practicum.* The participant's idea aligns with the definition of teacher socialization provided by Bliss and Reck (1991). As the aforementioned quote explains, student instructors were socialized into various facets of the teaching profession throughout their practicum, both within and outside of the classroom.

Participant C also responded in a similar manner. *We got a chance to develop connection with educators, friends from other universities, and even with a few pupils as well.* Additionally, we had the chance to practice group dynamics and school policies, which really broadened our social views. This result supported the claims made by Zeichner and Grant (1981) that pre-service teachers' socialization-which includes building relationships, learning how to teach, and adjusting to all the demands of teaching, like following rules within as well as outside the classroom and learning how to communicate with administrators and other teachers-is influenced by their practicum in a particular school.

Stressful Experiences

During the interview, the participants shared some issues or difficulties that I have divided into four distinct sub-themes, following Tuli's (2009) suggestion: insufficient resources, assessment-focused, insufficient assistance, and disciplinary issues.

Lack of resources

The relevant authorities manage sufficient resources, such as materials, syllabus books, manuals, text books, reference books, audio-video records, projectors, etc., to be more successful in encouraging aspiring teachers' inquiry into learning and instruction. In answer to our inquiry concerning the resources' accessibility, participant D said:

Since neither the university nor the school maintained textbooks, instructor manuals, or any other supporting materials, I felt as though I was short on resources. The school's headmaster gave us the order to handle everything on our own. Even the usage of the tape recorder was forbidden by him. It cost us a lot of money.

This participant brought attention to the issue of financial strain that practicum training instructors experience. It appears that the university is hesitant to deal with these issues. Participant C voiced a very similar opinion when he said: *We had to handle the practicum resources on our own, but we also paid the practicum fee to the university. The institution where we were assigned for our practicum also anticipated financial support from us.* These accounts reveal that one of the most trying experiences for aspiring teachers has been a lack of resources. As Tuli (2009) states that it is evident to supply of a sufficient fund was a problem that deserves considerations to provide true opportunities for new teachers to be exposed to a variety of work demands and complexities that they are going to encounter in real world of work.

Assessment Centered

Trainee teachers have discovered that, despite the program's stated goal of equipping them with the knowledge, abilities, and characteristics necessary to teach in schools, practicum has served more as a tool for assessment than for support. Regarding this, Participant B said, *the supervisor used practicum for evaluation even though it was intended to help us apply our knowledge in real-world settings. Throughout the course of 45 practice sessions, he only came to our class twice and assigned grades rather than offering us helpful criticism.* From the participant's point of view, it is obvious that the practicum continues to provide a variety of problems, including the assessments of students' competency that Haigh and Tuck (2000) noted. It was thought that supervisors would help aspiring teachers recognize their areas of strengths and weaknesses, mentor them to become qualified professionals, and give them a sense of accomplishment.

The participants, on the other hand, stated that they felt they were merely evaluated and not given the necessary support. According to a different participant, I expected a lot more assistance from the teacher, supervisor, and administration, but all of them

focused on observing and reporting about my class, and the supervisor only came in twice, watched the class, filled out forms, and left with minimal feedback. We can infer from the participants' comments that trainee instructors appear to be concerned about advice or criticism from mentors and supervisors during their practicum. In this particular context, Macdonald (1993) noted discrepancies in the manner in which student teachers were assessed by their peers, differing standards for student teachers' performance and compliance among educators, and pronounced variances in the caliber of supervisors' feedback to student teachers. These discrepancies have turned into a cause of stress for student instructors.

Inadequate Support

This dimension calls on the supervisors, concerned faculty and administration, and school or campus management to support and encourage the trainee instructors and provide constructive criticism on their instruction. Helping student teachers is a crucial part of the practicum experience. But according to the respondents' reports, each of their supervisors falls short in this regard. In this context Participant D mentioned:

Supervisor visited us only two days during 45 days' long practicum. He spent more time criticizing the work. He was in a hurry and didn't give us adequate feedback but only reminded about the requirements to fulfil for evaluation criteria. He visited the school administration and ran away.

According to this explanation in the lines above, trainee teachers did not receive the help supervisors had anticipated, and it was definitely insufficient. Participant B said *The school where we sent for practicum provided support offering us classes but it was not enough. The supervisor was also really busy and was unable to assist us very much.* This opinion supports the claims made by Clary (1991) that more supervision aids in deciding whether field experience yields the intended outcomes and by Goodman (1985) that more supervisor's involvement enhances the caliber of field experience. More intriguing to discuss here is the response from a different participant to the question about the type of help they received during practicum, which was, in his words, *we were new to the situation and school.* What the school gave us was minimal. We had a lot of difficulty gathering supplies. Also, the supervisor failed to pay us a visit on schedule. We had no idea how to start lessons, run them, or deal with misbehaving kids. As Vygotsky (1978) suggested, when a new educator is in the zone of proximal growth for a given task, giving the right kind of help will give the student sufficient of a "boost" to achieve the task. This description amply illustrates the significance of building or support to increase performance. In a similar vein, Jeffrey (2008) found a correlation between increased student teacher confidence and a willingness to stay in the teaching profession and regular feedback from university supervisors.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study make it abundantly evident that teacher educators must devote their whole attention to raising the practicum's quality if they want to produce qualified English language teachers. The practicum has been very helpful in

addressing the growing social pressure in the twenty-first century to develop and produce competent teachers who can handle the changes and difficulties that come with working in classrooms and schools. This study showed that participants had a solid understanding of the term practicum. The participants shared their thoughts on the pros and cons of the practicum program that they encountered while visiting the institution. Regarding the positive element, the most fruitful experiences obtained through practicum were judged to be socializing, competency and confidence development, and theoretical practice link. The participants report that inadequate supervision, lack of resources, assessment-centered practices, and other issues are stressful. The role of practicum program has a direct impact on this program's efficacy. Therefore, in order to find the practicum program more effective and to be both educational and supporting, it is essential that the relevant agencies guarantee its quality.

It is thought that the conclusions have some implications. First, the evaluation process should shift from outcomes-based technical summative assessment as stated in Schulz (2005). As a result, we must change our emphasis from assessing to instructing. The second implication is that the success of practicum also depends on the school teachers. Therefore, in order to support student teachers in assuming teaching roles, they should be made to comprehend the practicum and its educational value through various means, such as seminars and short-term training. The efforts of the university to generate highly competent and well-prepared teachers are likely to be undermined in the absence of a solid cooperation with the school. The third point is that the practicum needs to be closely monitored. The university Dean office should make sure that student teachers have fulfilled worthwhile experiences. The campus department must provide support and close supervision for the practicum by employing supervisors who are well-versed in the program and who demonstrate a strong commitment to its success. Additionally, the department must forge closer relationships with school teachers, supervisors, and student teachers, as well as collaborate more with stakeholders. In order to preserve the program's strengths and eradicate its flaws through strict oversight, the office should also assess it. Finally, effective resource management is necessary for practicum. For the initiative to be successful, the university campus and other funding sources should cooperate to make the practicum more successful in the future.

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