

A Qualitative Case Study of EFL Student Teachers' Teaching Practice during Practicum

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Abstract

This study explores the teaching practice of English as Foreign Language (EFL) student teachers during a practicum course. It examines the student teachers' pedagogical practices, received supervisory support, and their reflective practice experience when they were first placed at local public schools to practice teaching English. The qualitative research design using a multiple case study approach was adopted. The data were collected through documents, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with four purposively selected EFL tertiary student teachers and their supervisors during their teaching practice in Yemen. A computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, Atlas ti, was used to organize and manage the analysis process. The findings reveal some pedagogical practice issues particularly in three areas: lesson planning, teaching strategies and classroom management. The results show that the student teachers' insufficient pedagogical knowledge negatively influenced their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, the findings of study unveil a limited supervisory support and guidance received by the student teachers which consequently decreased their opportunities to interact with supervisors and get feedback on their teaching practices. Additionally, the findings indicated that the student teachers attempted to experience reflective practice through following some steps to increase self-awareness of their pedagogical practices and enhance their professional development. Thus, it can be concluded that the EFL professional teaching practice should entail the integration of three elements: pedagogical knowledge, supervisory support and reflective practice. Some practical and pedagogical implications for better teaching practice are drawn and directed to the EFL teacher education programme administrators and developers. The study also offers some suggestions which might benefit ESL/EFL researchers.

Keywords: pedagogical practices, practicum, reflection, supervision

Introduction

Teaching practicum is a duration when student teachers go to schools to teach and gain experience during their training under the guidance and supervision of practicing teachers (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). It is an important standard in professional teaching courses and central to all education programs (Murphy, 2003). Teaching practicum is a necessary part of any teacher preparation program and is considered an essential learning experience for beginning teachers (Canh, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Richards & Crookes, 1988). Darling-Hammond (2000) regard preparation stage crucial and it is more likely to create a difference in the student teachers' practice and "fully prepared and certified teachers are generally better rated and more successful with students than teachers without this preparation" (p. 167).

It is clear that the intended purpose of teaching practicum is to provide student teachers with opportunities "to acquire practical skills and knowledge needed

to function as an effective language teacher” (Richards & Crookes, 1988, p. 9). Moody (2009) asserted three professional standards for graduating teachers. The first is the professional knowledge which includes standards such as knowledge of current learning theories and effective pedagogical approaches. The second is the professional practice which deals with issues such as lesson planning, using “a range of teaching approaches to cater for different learning needs. The third is professional engagement which includes ‘a strong emphasis on regular reflection and self-evaluation” (p. 157). However, there are some challenges faced that hinder that achievement. Russell-Chapin et al. (2016) consider the programme itself as one of the most challenging course for student teachers. The difficulty is not only in the student teachers’ ability to transition theory into practice, but in the fear faced, and the risks they take. In the same line, Gay (2010) argues that there is a big gap between English as a second language teacher preparation programmes and intensive English programmes. Gay added that much focus is paid to the theoretical side than on practice in the EFL teacher preparation programs. Another difficulty, as deduced by Farrell (2006), is that they may not be aware of the influence of their experience on their teaching during practicum. During practicum, student teachers are given the chance to experiment their knowledge and skills in an authentic setting (Goh & Matthews, 2011). They can also practice real reflection of their academic learning to practice planned activities inside a school for the purpose of improving their professional performance which carries out their profession competently in the future. They should be encouraged to use new methods and need to contend with their own ideas associated with becoming a teacher (Goh & Matthews, 2011).

Literature Review

Literature stresses the importance of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and its role in transforming the subject matter into a more comprehensible and accessible forms (Shulman 1989, Richards, 2001, Munby et al. 2001). Shulman (1986), who first used the term, describes PCK as "the particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspects of content most germane to its teachability" (p. 9). In a similar vein, Richards (2001) defines PCK as "the core set of theories, concepts and practices regarding the second language learning and teaching which form the content of second language teacher education" (p. 76). The concept of PCK “was originally construed as a form of content knowledge composed of subject matter transformed for the purpose of teaching” (Munby et al., 2001, p. 881). It refers, therefore, the integration of understanding the subject matter concepts and strategies for teaching certain content in a way to enable learners to construct their knowledge effectively in a given context (Cochran et al., 1993). In other words, teachers should find different ways to demonstrate and explain knowledge to make it teachable and understandable by students. PCK refers to knowledge that allows the content of subject matter to be taught. Previous studies have looked at how the student teachers’ content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and skills are contextualized (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Choy, (2012) reported that student teachers perceived significantly increased knowledge and skills in some areas; “accommodation of diversity and classroom management, and they also perceived significant increase while they practice teaching during the first year in the skill of planning lessons” (p. 594). Further, Choy et al. (2013) examined the perceptions of the teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills during their initial stage

of their teaching practice. They recorded potential changes in the teachers' perceptions within the beginning three years of their teaching practice. They found that the pedagogical knowledge and skills of the student teachers "continued to develop and increase significantly in the first three years after they completed their education program" (pp. 76-77).

Another important element in the student teachers' teaching practice journey is supervisory support. Many scholars asserted the importance of supervisory support in assisting student teachers to translate what they have learned in their theory classes into practice for the purpose of improving their professional performance (Farrell, 2007; Richards & Crookes, 1988; Wallace, 1991). Wallace (1991) stressed the vital role of the practicum supervision in teacher preparation programmes. The supervisor's role is not only to become a subject matter expert and to focus only on pedagogical strategies for teaching a particular discipline, but also to be a leading subject matter for student teachers. Wallace added that the student teachers and cooperating teachers need to participate in content-area seminars, and the student teachers need to attend departmental meetings and in-service activities at school. It is better for them to work with a number of experienced teachers and have access to all teachers in the department rather than being isolated with only one teacher.

For a successful English teaching practicum programme, there must be cooperation among all members who are concerned with it. The university/college/institute has a fundamental role in preparing student teachers to deal with the classroom needs and realities and to know teaching methods and the subject matter (Tuli, 2009). Besides, there should be relationships between the supervisors and the cooperating teachers which are the success of the teaching practice experience (Richards & Crookes, 1988). Establishing such relationships will "afford guidance to the cooperating teachers as they serve as models for the student teachers" (Canh, 2014, p. 219).

A third importance element during the student teachers' teaching practice is reflection. Researchers (e.g., Al-issa & Al-bulushi, 2010; Akbari, 2007; Killen, 2007; Taole, 2012) have shown the significance of reflective teaching in student teachers' practice. For example, Akbari (2007) indicates that through reflective teaching, student teachers can recall their gained knowledge and, based on different practised situations, could make informed choices. Another significance, as illustrated by Killen (2007), is that reflection helps student teachers to be contributors to educational knowledge in which they can "develop insight that will help them and their colleagues to better understand teaching and learning" (p. 2). Similarly, Taole (2012) points out that the student teachers can contribute to the body of knowledge as they reflect on their teaching practice, assist one another through collaboration among them, and enable them to participate in their own teaching development.

Basically, student teachers should be trained how to effectively reflect on their teaching practice (Wong et al., 2015; Yaacob et al., 2014). Thus, they can then integrate their performance with decision-making, understand and adapt to change in unexpected circumstances (Killen, 2007). However, if they fail to reflect upon their practices, they will not teach effectively since they do not relate on what they have already known and learned to their practical experiences (Braun & Crumpler, 2004). The findings of these studies have common conclusion that pedagogical knowledge, supervisory support and reflection would help the teachers in general and the student

teachers in particular to develop their teaching practice. However, these studies do not sufficiently inform the interest of this study.

In the context of the present study, almost hundreds of Yemeni EFL student teachers annually graduate from Faculties of Education to be teachers at primary/secondary schools. However, studies reported that in-service teachers lack the competence in the use of teaching methods and techniques (Zuheer, 2013), and experience theory-practice challenges during their classroom practices (Al-Musalami, 2011; Bataineh, Bataineh, & Thabet, 2011). Although these studies admitted and provided evidence of some of the Yemeni EFL teachers' weaknesses and recommended improvement in the strategies to develop their teaching performance, no study has investigated the initial preparation of those teachers. Teaching practicum is a very important component in any teacher education programme (Farrell, 2007; Farrell, 2008; Canh, 2014) and is a substantial stage in reconstructing the teaching identity of student teachers (Gebhard, 2009). As a crucial part of the teacher education programme, it is the student teachers' opportunity to gain practical experience and implement theory through the guidance of experienced supervisors. In addition, it offers an opportunity to develop student teachers' capabilities as well as teaching strategies and bridge the gap between theory and practice (Endeley, 2014). Therefore, this study looks for a deep investigation of the EFL student teachers' teaching practice during practicum.

Research Objectives

This study aims to study the EFL student teachers' teaching practice during practicum. It is intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the way that EFL student teachers transform their pedagogical knowledge into pedagogical practices in during practicum.
2. To examine the supervisory support in assisting the EFL student teachers practice teaching during practicum.
3. To investigate the EFL student teachers' reflective experiences during practicum.

The following questions are sought to be answered:

1. How do the Yemeni EFL student teachers transform their pedagogical knowledge into pedagogical practices during practicum?
2. How does the supervisory support assist the Yemeni EFL student teachers to practice teaching during practicum?
3. What are the Yemeni EFL student teachers' reflective experiences during practicum

Methodology

1. Study design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a multiple case study approach. Within this qualitative approach, the case study design was used to provide an in-depth description of a group of the EFL student teachers' teaching practices during the practicum. A case study is more suitable when the researchers focus on a programme, event, or activity involving individuals and "they may be more interested in describing activities of the group instead of identifying shared patterns of behavior exhibited by the group" (Creswell, 2005, p. 439). It is also beneficial especially in the

first stages as it presents a thorough description of the experience of the participants to identify categories and themes to describe the case and introduce contemporary issues for future studies (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). Therefore, a qualitative case study design is suitable to be employed in this study because it comes up with a rich description and explanation of the EFL teaching practicum.

More specifically, the present study focuses on the teaching practices of four EFL student teachers, so the multiple case study design or, as named by Stake (1995), ‘the collective case’ is used here in which “the analytical benefits from involving more cases are substantial and produce an even stronger effect than in a single case” (Yin, 2009, pp. 53-54). Hence, the multiple cases enabled the researcher to make a comparison between the cases to provide an insight into an issue and to see processes and outcomes across all cases and enabled a deeper understanding through more powerful descriptions and explanation (Creswell, 2012).

2. Selection of the participants

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants of the study because it helps the researcher to intentionally select the individuals and sites, and best understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). For the purpose of this study, four student teachers as multiple cases were selected to participate in this study which might be a preferred method over a single participant as a case (Yin, 2009). Additionally, it was not sensible to choose more cases because the researcher might need longer time to spend on exploring the depths of each individual case (Creswell, 2012) which was not suitable at the time of the study.

In particular, this study explored the teaching practices of the four individuals to obtain a deep understanding of their pedagogical practices, provide a rich description of the received supervisory support and discover their initial attempts in reflective practice experience. Therefore, only four student teachers and their supervisors were the selected participants in the study. Every student teacher was guided by four supervisors. Two of them were university supervisors. The other two supervisors were the cooperating teacher and the school headmaster.

3. Data collection techniques

To achieve the objectives of this qualitative case study, three data collection techniques were utilized to generate information, namely document collection, classroom observations, and interviews. These are the primary three methods of gathering data in a qualitative case study (Leavy, 2014) to enhance the data credibility (Yin, 2009). The study sought data triangulation by involving three data collection techniques, i.e. documents, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews of four participants and their supervisors at four sites. The following table presents an overview of research questions along with data collection techniques used to answer them.

Table 1*An Overview of Research Questions along with Data Collection Techniques*

Research questions	Data Collection Techniques
1. How do the Yemeni EFL student teachers transform their pedagogical knowledge into pedagogical practices during practicum?	1) Document 2) Classroom observation 3) Interviews
2. How does the supervisory support assist the Yemeni EFL student teachers to practice teaching during practicum?	Interviews: a) supervisors b) student teachers
3. What are the Yemeni EFL student teachers' reflective experiences during practicum?	Interviews: a) student teachers b) supervisors

4. Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is the classification and interpretation of data applied to discover issues in the field to arrive at "statements by comparing various materials or various texts or several cases" (Flick, 2013, p. 5). Data analysis, as in any qualitative research, should occur simultaneously with the data collection (Baxter & Jack, 2008) in which data are reduced but without losing their meanings. Mackey and Gass (2015) claim that cyclical data is employed by qualitative researchers when analyzing qualitative data. Therefore, for the purpose of data analysis of this study, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases thematic analysis was chosen: 1) familiarizing with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. These phases were used as a guide to provide a straightforward step-by-step way to conducting the thematic analysis. The following table shows the six phases thematic analysis

Table 2*Phases of Thematic Analysis*

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing with data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

Table 2 (Continued)

Phase	Description of the process
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming Themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Adopted from Braun and Clarke's (2006)

The findings of this study are firstly presented within case analysis by describing each individual case, then another analysis is carried out which is the cross-case analysis by which the four cases are compared to arrive at the research insights of the EFL student teachers' teaching practice during practicum. In the first stage; within-case analysis three categories, i.e. pedagogical practices, supervisory support, and the reflective practice experience are developed from the data analysis and their emerged themes and sub-themes. The second stage which is the cross-case analysis builds a more sophisticated description, develops abstraction among cases and more powerful explanation on the EFL teaching practicum in Yemen.

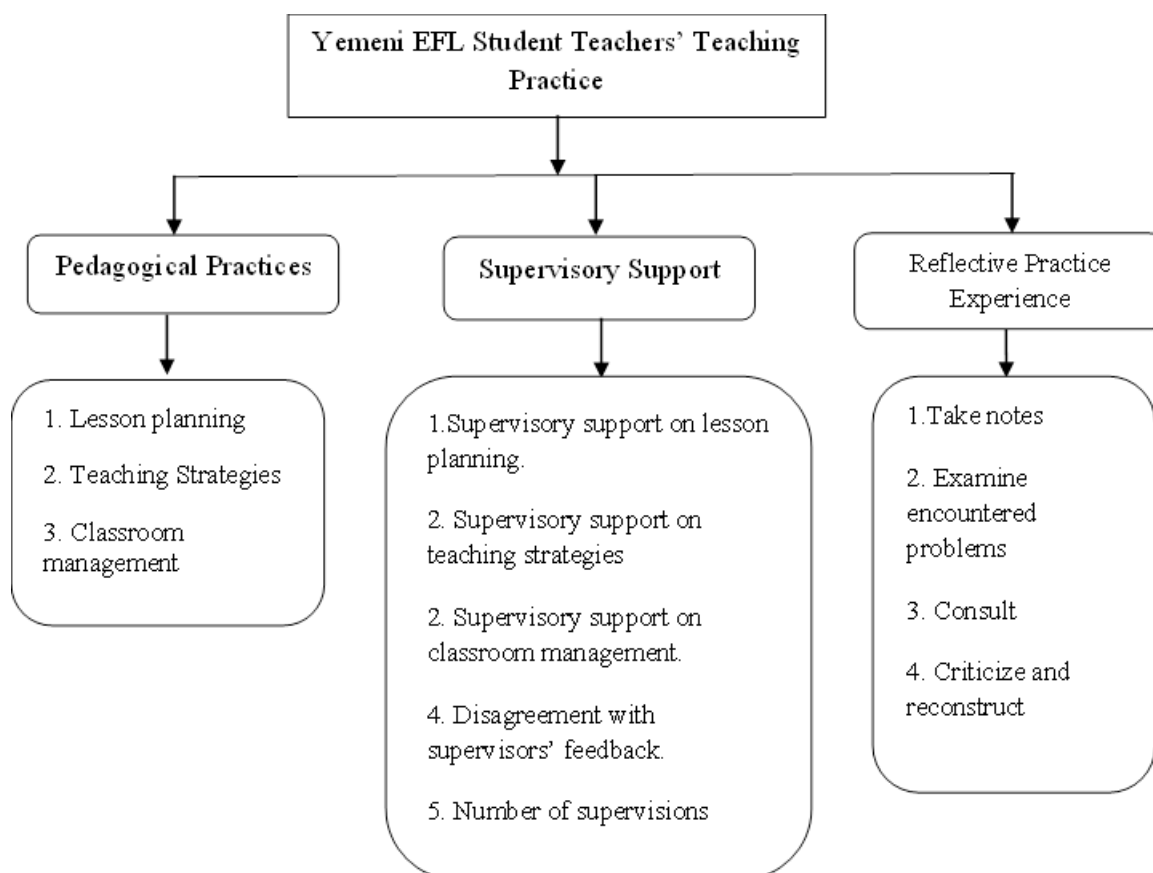
In this study, an electronic coding using a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) program, Atlas ti 0.7 programme was implemented to organize and manage the process of coding. Saldana (2015) argues that using such programmes becomes vital and essential when the study includes multiple participant interviews or extended fieldwork. Atlas ti 0.7 programme allowed the researcher to systematically analyze the data in order to interpret the phenomenon hidden in the unstructured data. It facilitated analyzing qualitative data and multiple types of research data collected through multiple methods (Friese, 2012).

For carrying out coding, 13 rich text format and pdf files for each of the four cases were imported to the *Atlas ti* program. Then the researcher started reading and scrutinizing each file carefully to identify codes. ‘Descriptive coding’ (Saldana, 2013) was used as it provided an inventory of topics to categorize, and it was useful when used on a wide variety of data (Miles, et al. 2014). Generating new codes was the first step, and this was done by reading and highlighting text segments (quotations) and labelling them. The process of coding passed through two rounds. The first round started with coding the data of each of the four cases. In this phase, the generated codes in the previous phase were analyzed further. This was done by grouping, categorizing and clustering these codes based on the reflected commonalities (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Saldana (2015) argues that a “theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 14). However,

it is different from a code in that it could be a phrase or sentence and describes more indirect and implied processes. Therefore, similar codes and relevant coded excerpts were combined to form overarching themes. This was done by grouping these codes into families in which each family represented a category. Three main categories were initially created: pedagogical practices, supervisory support and reflective practice. Each one included some themes and/or sub-themes. the initial themes which emerged in the previous phase were further refined. These themes with their codes and the gathered quotations were checked to form coherent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The result was the emergence of three predetermined themes for the first category, pedagogical practice. They are: lesson planning, teaching strategies and classroom management in which each theme includes a set of sub-themes. The other two categories included only various themes that represent numerous relevant issues. The developed themes in the previous phase were refined and defined by refining the specifics of each theme and generating clear definitions and names for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Identifying each theme made it easier to capture related aspects. Thus, the researcher referred to the gathered data excerpts for each theme and organized them into a coherent and detailed analysis. The following figure shows a visual representation of the thematic map:

Figure 1

Thematic Map: Emerging themes



Findings and Discussion

1. The student teachers' pedagogical practices

The findings of the study revealed three issues in the EFL student teachers' pedagogical practices. These findings provided information to better understand the EFL student teachers' pedagogical practices in terms of lesson planning, teaching strategies and classroom management. They revealed that the student teachers' accumulated knowledge of planning lesson was mostly similar. Therefore, they were alike in many steps and procedures of the planning process. Similarly, all the student teachers included the 'teaching aids/materials' section in their plans and listed varied materials and resources such as visual reading and listening materials but they did not demonstrate how they are planning to use them throughout the delivery of the lesson. With regard to the student teachers' pedagogical practices of lesson planning, similar results were found in a study by Al-Khawaldeh (2006) who investigated the EFL teachers' lesson plan in Amman Second Directorate of Education. She indicated that stating instructional objectives and evaluation methods were among the problems that faced them when planning for their lessons, and they included insufficient and unclear methods of assessing students. The stated evaluation methods also were not also aligned with the lesson objectives. Similarly, Li and Zou (2017) recognized the difficulty of EFL trainees to directly copy the working procedures of a perfect lesson plan, and they needed to notice, experiment with and explore ways to focus on areas where experts put their most emphasis on in the lesson planning process.

The findings of the present study also revealed that the unavailability of proper teaching aids and the absence of technological devices were among the challenges of the student teachers' pedagogical practices.

However, they tried to develop and employ alternative visual aids associated with teaching performance. This finding is in line with those findings of Mudra (2018) who asserted that the lack of appropriate teaching aids was a serious problem for many of EFL pre-service teachers in rural schools in Indonesia which might affect the students' comprehension of the lesson. It is also congruent with Mudra's (2018) results which indicated that some EFL pre-service teachers chose to prepare their teaching aids as a result of the unavailability of proper teaching aids in their schools.

With regard to the student teachers' pedagogical practices of classroom management, the findings of the study show that the student-teacher participants admitted the difficulty of managing classrooms at the beginning of teaching practice. The findings also reveal that the student-teacher participants faced a number of problematic situations such as crowded classes, noises inside the class, dealing with naughty students, sleeping, talking without permission, students' carelessness and disobedience, and lack of participation. Thus, they attempted to apply different strategies to enhance the students' involvement and establish productive learning environments. These findings confirm the results of some previous studies (e.g. Habibi et al., 2018; Quintero & Ramirez, 2011; Yazdanmehr & Akbari, 2015) that reported similar challenges and coping strategies applied by EFL student teachers in different teaching and learning contexts.

2. Student teachers' received supervisory support

Added to that, the findings have revealed some issues related to the EFL student teachers' received limited support and guidance from the panel supervisors. There was a limited number of supervisory visits to observe and provide student-teacher

participants with feedback on their teaching practices. Most of the supervisors, especially the university supervisors and the school headmaster visited their supervisees only once during the whole duration of teaching practice at schools which was not satisfactory for the student teachers to receive necessary feedback on their practices. Besides, there were fewer opportunities for the student-teacher participants to interact with their supervisors. That was because of their full engagement of teaching and study. They had full-time teaching for four days at schools and had to go to the university to study and attend classes for one day. As a result, there was no real improvement in their pedagogical practices.

These findings are aligned with a number of previous studies (e.g., Cahn, 2014; Chien, 2013) that limited interaction influences the student teachers' teaching experience, leads to limited engagement of teaching style and hinders a deep learning to take place. Thus, one significant way to enhance the student teachers' pedagogical practices is to provide them with supervisory productive learning conversations through which they can develop their teaching experience.

1. Student teachers' reflective practice experience

The findings reveal that the participants were able to independently reflect on their teaching practices by following some steps. They started to identify the problems and their teaching dilemmas that hinder their professional experience. They tended to keep brief notes to record these problems, describe them and identify the causes behind their occurrence to be further examined. In the second step, they aimed to find solutions for these problems. Thus, they applied different strategies to find solutions, reform these situations and solve the encountered problems. These findings are congruent with the results of previous studies (e.g. Al-issa & Al-bulushi, 2010; Taole, 2012) that self-reflection is a good strategy to enhance beginning teachers' reflective practices, and allied to Yang (2009) who argued that the student teachers tended to be more descriptive than critical while reflecting on their teaching practice. This also indicated that they need more time to explore, examine the different choices they made about their teaching practice and reflect on their theories.

Implications

The study reveals the importance of the integration of three components: pedagogical knowledge, reflective and supervisory support to lead to successful teaching practice. It suggests some important practical implications for EFL teacher education programmes:

First, there is a dire need to consider the sources of their pedagogical knowledge. As the curriculum courses are considered the primary source for their pedagogical knowledge, it is important for the EFL teacher education programme administrators and developers to reform the programme curriculum and include more pedagogical knowledge related courses to enhance the student teachers' pedagogical knowledge.

Second, with regard to the student teachers' experience as the second source of their pedagogical knowledge, they need to be provided with more opportunities during preparation to visit and observe EFL classrooms in real school settings where they might practice teaching later during practicum. These observations would start to take place earlier on the study plan to assist them to better assimilate the transformation between the pedagogical knowledge and the pedagogical practices in schools.

Third, there is a need to put more emphasis on developing the supervisory skills among the practicum supervisors. This is because the availability of effective guidance and support is one essential condition for student teachers to learn and benefit from teaching practice in schools. As such, a great demand is placed on the professionalism of supervisors to encourage and support student teachers to learn from their practical experiences (Crasborn et al., 2008). They should be assigned in practicum based on their areas of expertise instead of their availability.

Fourth, the present study implies the importance of reflective practice experience to enhance the student teachers' pedagogical practices. Thus, it is important for EFL teacher education administrators and developers to promote reflective practice by engaging student teachers in reflective practice sessions during their preparation at the university. It could be employed in some courses through including some strategies such as reflective journals, diaries and portfolios to promote the student teachers' reflective thinking. These would provide them with essential background knowledge of reflective practice and eventually, they could tap into for future pedagogical practices.

Finally, for the supervisors, they should be involved in specific training courses to enable them how to properly scaffold student teachers to reach a higher level of reflection. Additionally, it is essential to include reflective practice during student teachers' teaching practice, and it should be considered from the final evaluation of their teaching practicum course.

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