



Pre-Service Student Teacher Practices in the Teaching of English as a Second Language: Experiences, Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Teaching Practice (TP) was an integral component of teacher preparation that served as an important link between theory and practice and that entailed the inculcation of professional practice and conduct. However, research studies about teaching practice highlighted that pre-service teachers on TP faced a wide range of challenges that militated against effective pedagogy. The use of a foreign language as the language of Education usually one of the major challenges encountered by both teachers and learners. Student teachers who are users of English as a Second Language (ESL) and who are tasked with the responsibility of teaching English to second language learners therefore faced a double barrelled challenge of the low proficiency level and the limited proficiency of the learners. This study used the qualitative research design, utilizing document analysis and focus group discussions to investigate the practices of; and challenges encountered by B. Ed. pre-service teachers in teaching ESL during Teaching Practice. The study intended to establish the extent to which pre-service teachers employed their pedagogic, content knowledge and competences to effectively manage classroom pedagogy. The study argued that, during college based tuition; student teachers received, internalised and mastered some measure of teacher knowledge and competences which should enable them to teach effectively. The study further purported that; reflections and articulations from pre-service teachers' experiences and critiques from their supervisors, provided enough feedback to reveal student-teacher strengths or weaknesses and to provide solutions for programme improvement. The results of the study led to the conclusion that there were several challenges faced in teaching English during TP and that some of the challenges could be mitigated by the adoption of critical pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Pre-Service teacher education in Zimbabwe evolved over the years, to enhance student teacher quality through strengthening their classroom management capacity. One of the components of training receiving close attention was teaching practice. It provided an opportunity to beginning teachers to become socialized into the teaching profession (Furlong et al 1988). Marais and Meier (2004) added that Teaching Practice (TP) was an integral component of teacher training that entailed the inculcation of professional practice and conduct.

Teaching practice was a crucial time when practicing teachers got the opportunity to develop their professional competences in preparation for full time practice. Student teacher performance during TP provided the basis of predicting the future success of a teacher training programme. David and Hall (2003) added that TP was a socializing experience into the teaching profession that involved rigorous professional negotiation that led to the development of confidence and subsequently learning satisfaction. The TP period was also when teacher educators got the opportunity to gauge and evaluate the efficacy of their training programmes for continual modifications.

Reflections on student teaching experiences were important in the understanding of the effectiveness of teaching practice to improve practice and programme effectiveness. This study reported on the practices of and challenges faced by novice teachers on TP as a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) endeavour. SoTL was understood in Martin, Benjamin, Prosser, and Trigwell's (1999) view that it was three related activities: engagement with the existing knowledge on teaching and learning, self-reflection on teaching and learning in one's discipline, and public sharing of ideas about teaching and learning within the discipline. The study recognized that in the teaching of ESL there were several specific aspects of language pedagogy such as classroom policies, types of knowledge and competences that student teachers needed to master in order to teach effectively. The study further argued that lack of those aspects on the part of the student teacher would usually militate against quality ESL instruction. In the context of SoTL therefore, the study provided deep insights into ESL teaching and B. Ed. pre-service pedagogies in Zimbabwe to inform college based pedagogies and TP practices through student teacher accounts and college tutor analysis of student practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study examined the practices of; and challenges faced by B. Ed. pre-service primary school teachers in implementing the ESL curriculum during TP.

The qualitative research design was employed in this study utilizing document analysis and focus group

discussions. Twenty four pre-service students who had just finished their TP stint were the main participants of the study while a review of tutor critiques of student teacher pedagogical practices formed the document analysis component of the methodology of the study.

Tutor supervision critiques of students' practices were crucial documents that informed students, host schools and most importantly, the institution that developed teachers about the strengths, challenges and possible ways forward in mitigating challenges and consolidating strengths.

The critiques were usually incisive accounts based on both observed classroom teaching and the entire student teacher practice including professional records and co-curricular activities. It took the form of topic by topic analysis across subjects and practice by practice against benchmark performance indicators, established during the first two years of the theoretical component of their training. Thirty six supervision critiques for English lessons were considered and analysed in two stages first being categorized according to topics taught – that is, composition, language structures, oral work, comprehension or reading and then the supervisor's comments being critically examined especially by attending to the import of explicit comments for both explicit and implicit meaning. Linguistic meaning and assumptions were of particular interest to the researcher to determine the quality of ESL instruction. It was believed that, supervisors' comments about pre-service teachers' classroom practices in their varied and unique school environments saved to highlight the general trend and insights into the practices and the challenges encountered during TP as well as the opportunity to inform college based pedagogies. For the student accounts, three focus group discussions were arranged to deliberate on the challenges encountered in the teaching ESL during TP.

Information gathered from the discussions was recorded verbatim by the researcher and data was then read and re-read followed by creating more specific units or themes (Willig 2001), especially along the lines of areas of most challenges; where they felt comfortable; where they could be innovative and succeed; came up stuck because they simply had no resources to cope, etc. The data from group discussions were continuously visited and compared with notes taken from supervision critiques and from the lecturers' views in order to create the opportunity for a deeper understanding of emerging challenges and opportunities.

B. Ed. (Primary) Pre-service Training in Zimbabwe

Extensive effort in teacher training programmes was necessary to improve student teacher quality and to strengthen pre-service teacher education. Undergraduate pre-service teacher training at Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo was introduced in the early 2000s to improve the quality of primary school teachers and pedagogical

practice consistent with the call by the Government to shift emphasis from access and quantity to quality and sustainability. Chung, (1999) said that improvement in the education systems developed in tandem with the level of sophistication of culture, especially the ability to stretch the human mind according to its demands. Pre-service teacher education therefore needed to continually provide evidence that procedures were accountable, effective and value added. The effectiveness of pre-service teacher training programmes could always be gauged during Teaching Practice (TP). Marais and Meier (2004), pointed out that teaching practice was an integral component of teacher preparation and training. Teaching practice was a crucial moment when practicing teachers got the opportunity to develop on-the-job professional competence and to experience the transition from students to full teachers. David and Hall (2003), added that TP was a socializing experience into the teaching profession. It was an opportunity for pre-service teachers to experiment and test their knowledge and skills in an authentic teaching environment in tandem with own understanding of educational philosophies and theories. Such rigorous negotiation that took place during TP led to higher confidence in improving college based pedagogies and a higher sense of teacher efficacy (Oh et al, 2005). The very nature of pre-service teachers learning on teaching practice was a daunting task due to involving contextualized classroom dynamics, the immediate and the broad expectations harboured by the learners and the society. The report served as a reflective process to put together evidenced challenges that could be used to improve both student teacher practice and training programmes. Notably however, Pomerantz and Pierce (2004), said that the acts of rethinking and re-examining the challenges of TP allowed the knitting of new knowledge and reconstruction of existing knowledge through various cancellation processes of solving problems during TP. Chung (2002) added that the dialogue that pre-service teachers and their supervisors engaged in during TP facilitated knowledge building and encouraged collaborative reflection on individual teaching practice.

ESL and the Zimbabwe School Curriculum

English continued to establish itself as a global lingua franca in many countries of the world including Zimbabwe where it is used as an official language and as the Language In Education (LIE). It occupies a high and privileged status in the school curriculum as in all formal contexts. The major goal of teaching English is to make learners acquire high language proficiency that enables them to operate effectively in both academic and social situations. However, ESL instruction and the use of a second foreign language as the LIE present a host of challenges to both teachers and learners especially because they both do not possess the prerequisite proficiency. Research into ESL instruction and its use as a language of education has been demonstrated to be linked to educational exclusion and low educational

outcomes among ESL speakers. Notably, there was high failure rate of 20.19% in English at O-level in Zimbabwe in 2012(www.3-mob-com). Research also highlighted that as a subject, English was a complex embedded discipline and a language that many non-native speakers are not fully conversant with. To that end, the use of English, a language not spoken by students more often, presented cognitive and pedagogical challenges as it restricted the interactive and communicative learning process necessary for meaningful learning. The language relegated the learner to the periphery. Similar sentiments were echoed by Scheerens (2000) and Vespoor (2003), who said that the policy of using English appeared to have a major impact on the discursive patterns found in many of the classrooms.

Probyn's (2001) studies of practices of teachers teaching through the medium of English in township schools South Africa, suggested that teachers and learners experienced a lot of stress in teaching and learning through a language in which they were not able to communicate freely. This had a negative impact on student learning including lack of self-confidence, dissatisfaction and alienation. In South Africa alone, it was estimated that some three quarters of ESL learners failed school, Heugh (2000). Ong et al (2004) added that many aspects of teaching practice by primary student teachers highlighted a very disturbing trend where almost 55% of pre-service teachers found that their teaching did not give them the opportunity to engage in theory and practice because they were overwhelmed by the classroom realities. Students on TP therefore, faced a three-pronged challenge of being second language users of ESL with the attendant limited proficiency and teachers of ESL learners who grappled worse with acquiring basic linguistic ability, let alone academic proficiency and student teachers probably not receiving effective pedagogies. At the TP stage of their training, student teachers only had a degree of linguistic and professional competence to use to mediate classroom pedagogy and English language teaching. In many cases however, both remained a real challenge especially given the mismatch between their competences and the learners' needs for support. Inevitably, student teachers realized, as did their tutor son supervision, they were not linguistically and pedagogically equipped to deal with the situation and resorted to 'classroom survival skills'; some of which had been well documented. Chick (1996); Hornberger and Chick (2001) describe what they called "safe talk" in South African classrooms. Safe talk was a well practiced or rehearsed pattern of procedure – a type of chorusing and patterned classroom talk which allowed participation without risk of loss of face for the teacher and the learner and maintained an appearance of doing the lesson. Abd-Kadir, (2007) described what he termed ritualized techniques in the classroom. Ngwaru (2010 p 109) authenticated ritualized techniques in Zimbabwean primary school classrooms by identifying the following routines: Brief previous lesson recap; dysfunctional group work; fragmented group reporting back and written work based on textbook exercises. Bunyi (1997; 2005),

discussed code switching in Kenyan classrooms showing how teachers switched between English and Kiswahili to explain texts, elaborate a point and provide for pupils who had limited knowledge and control over the language of instruction to access the curriculum. Rubagumya (1990; 1993), discussed the benefits of mother tongue literacy in Tanzanian classrooms where when English was used, students remained silent and grave and teacher talk dominated the lesson. McDonough (1981), lamented that lessons given by ESL trainee teachers revealed differences between what eventually happened, what was planned and what the teacher recalled from the lesson. In this study, curriculum implementation was regarded as the interaction between the learner and the learning content; with the teacher as the most fundamental agent facilitating that interaction (Ndawi and Maravanyika 2011). This study interrogated student teacher practices to arrive at evidenced insights on challenges and opportunities that can inform pedagogical strategies going forward.

Communicative Activities and Strategies

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) suggested that more learning took place when students were engaged in relevant communicative and interactive tasks within a dynamic learning environment rather than in traditional teacher-led classes (Moss & Ross- Feldman, 2003). In support of that, Krashen (1985), added that effective language instruction hinged upon exposure to comprehensible linguistic input, the kind of exposure that usually provided opportunities for interaction and communication. In respect of that, student teachers therefore needed to devise and select communicative content and classroom activities, based on learners' needs and interests that were suitably challenging and that could promote language development (Florez & Burt, 2001). Communicative activities included any activities that encouraged and required a learner to speak with and listen to other learners, as well as with people in the environment. In addition, communicative activities in the classroom needed to have real purposes such as; finding information, talking about self and learning about the different things. What that meant was that the nature of interactive language instruction therefore needed to involve the teacher and learners engaging in activities that created conditions which fostered language use and led to further language development. The teacher as the initiator of interaction was supposed to minimally control the classroom discourse and allowed learners to freely take control of their own discourse. Research suggested that language acquisition was aided when learners took control of the discourse topics and the discourse (Brown, 2001; Ellis, 1999).

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy was an approach that attempted to help students question and challenge the domination, beliefs and practices that dominate. It was reminiscent of Freire

(1995; 2006), who endorsed students' ability to think. Freire's views on critical pedagogy were also consistent with the acquisition of a sound grounding in relevant content, pedagogical and other language specific aspects on the part of the teacher. That deep knowledge then, would make teachers be able to; understand the learners' needs, diagnose learners' problems and to select suitable learning tasks and use authentic materials.

Analysing ESL Pedagogies Through Students' Accounts and Tutor Supervision Critiques

The report discussed here were from B. Ed. pre-service student teachers who finished their TP stint where they implemented the ESL curriculum. B. Ed. Primary pre-service teacher development programme is the mainstay of one University in Zimbabwe that was established to spearhead the development of the primary education sector in the country. Overall, the B. Ed. programme aims to train teachers who are critical enough to master the skills, knowledge and dispositions that underpin the curriculum and who can go on to become resource teachers across the country. During TP, student teachers are expected to translate theoretical knowledge into pedagogical practice. Schon (1983) says that in the profession of teaching, the theoretical facets are imbedded in and inseparable from practice and Kablan, (2005), adds that TP offers the possibility of improving the various innovative ways in which new knowledge is constructed and refined for positive meaningful experience.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study investigated the practices, challenges and opportunities as recounted by Pre-service primary school teachers and college tutors about ESL pedagogies during teaching practice. The results of the study indicate that there were several challenges encountered by novice teachers in teaching ESL during TP. Results also showed that while it was possible to alleviate some of that challenges, it was equally difficult to deal with other challenges. The results reported below were presented and discussed according to data collection instruments used.

Tutor Critiques

Data from tutors' analysis of student teacher practices came from their critique scripts based on their TP classroom management practices. Emphasis was placed on the first set of comments relating to comments about what had transpired during the lesson. Results of the study showed that many of the English lessons taught were heavily flawed with weaknesses in a variety of areas of the pedagogical practice. Below are some of the different comments from tutor critique scripts on what transpired across different ESL lessons.

- The introduction had no link with concepts to be developed.
- Some objectives were not achievable.
- Children made gross errors and teacher accepted them as correct.
- The teacher asked difficult questions which children could not answer.
- No effort was made to help learners' master new concepts.
- The teacher moved back and forth and no teaching took place.
- The passage was not familiar and children remained quiet throughout the lesson.
- Teachers' explanations confused the children.
- Group work was difficult to manage and assess because it was not clear what the teacher wanted to do.
- Lesson activities were not varied and sometimes did not help to achieve the stated objectives
- There was a lot of unnecessary code switching from the target language to the mother language.
- Sometimes lesson steps were not followed resulting in losing the focus of the lesson.
- The teacher made a lot of grammatical errors which children also repeated.
- The teacher failed to correct children's mistakes.
- Both the teacher and the learner relied heavily on textbook information.

Use of the target language could not be maintained due to low proficiency level

Discussion

The results from supervisors' critique scripts are important and beneficiary to both teacher educators and pre-service students.

Challenges that pre-service teachers face help supervisors to re-think of possible ways to enrich and improve the effectiveness of teacher training programmes particularly the teaching practice component. The fact that pre-service gave introductions that were not linked to the concepts to be developed suggested lack of insight into the relationship between pre-service teacher knowledge and the real concepts that had to be delivered to the learners. Student teachers' failure to present lessons in a logical sequence is an indication of poor lesson planning which again reflects on weaknesses of teacher preparation programmes. Effective teaching is enhanced through well planned and systematic lessons.

That student-teachers accepted wrong answers from their learners and that they too made ungrammatical sentences during lesson delivery, suggest lack of adequate mastery of content and low proficiency levels that usually impede quality ESL instruction. It was noted from the supervisors' scripts that; 'teachers moved back and forth and no teaching took place,' it suggested lack of adequate content knowledge to impart to the learners and lack of organisational skills. This reflects back on the

inadequate training in pedagogic practices received by the student teachers.

Focus Group Discussions

Data collected from focus group discussions sought to find out the accounts of pre-service teachers about their classroom practices and challenges in teaching ESL during TP. Results of the study showed that many challenges were met and seminal among these was the limited proficiency of many learners and some teachers which eventually culminated in a wide range of other challenges. Results also show that although student teachers faced several challenges, they had a great opportunity to interact with experienced teachers, to exchange ideas and even to observe them teach. Below were some of the challenges generally reported in various focus groups discussions

- We lacked the experience in teaching and every day we discovered we did not know.
- Low proficiency levels of learners and of some us teachers compromised classroom discourse.
- Sometimes we did not know what teaching strategies to use for particular lessons. On many occasions we were not aware of what constitute subject matter in English other than what was in the book.
- Lack of confidence in teaching English in the presence of a supervisor was another great problem.

Listening and speaking skills were difficult to implement.

- Some learners' and mentors had negative attitudes towards us.
- We had difficulties in extracting the learning content from the English syllabus.
- Apart from the prescribed books, we did not have any other sources of information.
- Some mentors not very helpful.
- During essay writing, we did not know how to assist learners generate ideas.
- Children looked very much subdued so it was difficult to assess our own practices.
- Some of us did not get the syllabus from the school heads so we used topics from the book as the syllabus.
- If we got stuck during the lesson, we did not have the confidence to ask the mentor, explaining a concept in English was difficult so we sometimes resorted to code-switching.

DISCUSSION

These accounts clearly indicated opportunities for the reinforcement of college based pedagogies. That students lacked the experience in teaching and that every

day they discovered that they did not know, clearly indicated they were ill-equipped to manage a practical classroom situation. Classroom management as a key result area of a practicing teacher would need to be given extra focus in college based pedagogy. That pupils' low proficiency levels were exacerbated and compromised by student teachers pointing to the endemic SL teaching challenges in ESL contexts.

The fact that student teachers did not know what teaching strategies to use for particular lessons again pointed to the inadequacy of college based pedagogies to prepare students for actual teaching. The fact that student teachers were on many occasions, not aware of what constituted subject matter in English other than what was in the book, showed inadequate college preparation.

A lot more need to be done to furnish them with information. Lack of confidence in teaching English in the presence of a supervisor was another great problem. Once again, it suggested the need for more college-based peer-teaching practice. Students pointed out they had difficulties in extracting the learning content from the English syllabus.

This was clear evidence of inadequate preparation for independent practice out there in the school. The fact that student teachers did not know how to assist learners to generate ideas during composition writing is an indication that student teachers had inadequate training to handle specific aspects of language instruction. It was also reported that sometimes children looked very much subdued so it was difficult to assess own practices.

That could be a reflection of lack of understanding on the part of learners and an indication that no teaching had taken place. That both student teachers and learners relied heavily on text book suggest lack of resourcefulness where the teacher could utilise the situation by asking learners to bring some old reading materials such as newspapers and magazines for use during the lessons. Obanya (2002), lamented the idea of heavy reliance on text book by saying that curriculum materials had to be perceived in what they really were, not just text books because communicative skills were not acquired through text books but through a natural way.

That some student teachers did not get the syllabus from the school heads and ended up using topics from the book as the syllabus suggest lack of college-school collaboration around student activities during TP. That sometimes, pre-service teachers got stuck during the lesson and did not have the confidence to ask their mentors, are a clear indication that they had a feeling of inferior mastery of the profession. Student teachers found it very difficult to explain certain concepts and ideas in a manner that was comprehensible to learners resulting in excessive use of code switching. That is indicative of their own lack of proficiency which college based tuition should work hard to improve. In that vein, Cook said that, if teachers or learners were not fully conversant with the use of English, it was difficult to sustain their activities, hence meaningful and interactive classroom discourse was compromised and code-switching took centre stage.

CONCLUSION

There was no doubt that successful implementation of the ESL curriculum by pre-service teachers in Zimbabwe rested on sound grounding in teacher expertise-inculcation of appropriate classroom pedagogies, adequate mastery of content knowledge and effective strategies to execute the content. Supervisors had a critical task to the attempt to build a cumulative and useful body of knowledge about English language teaching and learning so that pre - service

teachers can then utilize that during TP. Teacher preparation at Great Zimbabwe University should therefore aim to train teachers who are able to; explore ways to mediate the content for their learners, select and identify appropriate communicative activities and strategies, create learning contexts where the use of the target language is maintained in order to improve proficiency for both teachers and learners. In doing so, they are guided by their content, pedagogical, linguistic knowledge as well as their knowledge of their learners and resources available. This is the point at which the complexity of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and professional competences become most apparent. Knowledge of the syllabus is also vital to pre-service teacher because the official curriculum specifies content, which is brought to life by teachers with varying knowledge, and resources working in particular school classrooms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above discussion, this study recommended that:

- The language curriculum needed to become more specific about the need for proficiency in the language of schooling for ESL learners to succeed academically.
- The University supervisors welcomed feedback from the practical field brought by pre-teachers under training in order to appreciate and bridge the big gap between theory and practice.
- Critical developmental pedagogies needed to be applied to ESL teaching.
- Effective methods of assessment on how well pre-service have internalized the theoretical and pedagogic knowledge for becoming effective teachers be put in place.
- Teacher education courses on content knowledge of ESL, vocabulary, grammar and the four language skills needed to improve to ensure adequate mastery of essential teaching skills.
- Teacher educators needed to provide training sessions focusing on English as a classroom

language and the pros and cons of using both L1 and L2 in the English only classrooms.

- There was an urgent need for comprehensive programmes that extends pre-service teachers' existing linguistic knowledge, recognise and build on their pedagogic expertise.
- Teacher preparation programmes to create courses that make student teachers creative and resourceful and that give them confidence in using English.

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