

Problems Faced by Pre-Service Teachers' During Teaching Practice

Charanjit Kaur Swaran Singh*

English Language and Literature Department
Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

Tarsame Singh Masa Singh

English Language Unit, Language Department
Institute of Teacher Education, Tuanku Bainun Campus, Penang, Malaysia

Ong Eng Tek

Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

Mohd Zulkarnain bin Mohd Kasim

English Language and Literature Department
Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

Abstract

Pre-service teacher's entry into the teaching profession may seem to appear very exciting at the beginning as they will use this platform to showcase and share the knowledge they have obtained to transfer theories into practice to educate the learners in the school context. Ironically, all this excitement would be transformed into anxiety due to the problems and conflicts they faced during their practicum. The main objective of this study is to investigate pre-service teachers' problems faced during their teaching practice. A qualitative case study research design was employed in this study. Four pre-service ESL teachers volunteered to participate in the study. All the four pre-service teachers were interviewed. The pre-service teachers were observed twice to look into their pedagogical practices employed in the classroom. Findings revealed that pre-service teachers struggle to continue the lesson from the planning stage right to the implementation and final stage. The pre-service teachers were unable to adhere to the mentor teachers' instruction to implement activities for differentiated learning meant for the weak, average and upper intermediate learners. Lack of understanding and knowledge in applying the pedagogical strategies for teaching purposes was the main problem uncovered.

Keywords: Teaching practice; Problems; Conflicts.



CC BY: [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1. Introduction

A revolution is taking place in how people learn. This revolution is spreading fast and affecting our current education system, future teachers, potential workplaces and also the learners. For this reason, we need to produce future teachers who are able to collaborate in the learning and exploration process and also able to blend abilities to capitalize on strengths and to compensate weaknesses. In Malaysia, student teachers debut into the teaching practice require them to observe and practice teaching in actual classrooms. Student teacher's entry into the teaching profession may seem to appear very exciting at the beginning as they will use this platform to showcase and share the knowledge they have obtained to transfer theory into practice to educate the learners in the school context. Ironically, all this excitement would be transformed into anxiety due to the problems and conflicts they faced during their practicum. Based on the problems encountered by the pre-service teachers, it was deemed necessary to provide some form of guidance to enable the pre-service teachers to be reflective, thus to develop appropriate classroom pedagogical practices.

The teaching practice, which is a practical platform of a teacher education programme is regarded as one of the most crucial components of a teacher education programme. The word practicum refers to the pre-service's entrance into the teaching vocation. Very often, pre-service teachers always look forward to venture into the practicum as it provides the opportunity for them to showcase knowledge gathered at the university level and apply it during the practicum session so that they can implement the knowledge obtained, and transform theory into practice applicable to the teaching context, and also to identify the needs and wants of their students. These pre-service teachers are placed in a 'real setting' of the vocation for the first time; the teaching practice is their first entrance into the teaching practice and this could be a truly challenging experience for some of them. Therefore, these pre-service teachers will learn from their mistakes and improve their teaching which if not given attention, may result in their ineffectiveness in their teaching.

According to [Marais and Meier \(2004\)](#), the teaching practice is an important and priceless period of a teacher education programme as it enables student teachers to master teaching skills, develop professionalism and socialise into the professional norms and moral codes of the teaching practitioner. Additionally, it offers opportunities to bridge the gap between classroom and university, besides providing student teachers with a deeper understanding of

*Corresponding Author

the expectations of school, society and the teaching fraternity. Teaching practice in this study refers to the sixteen-week placement in school whereby student teachers undergo their practical teaching in the assigned schools. During this period, they have to carry out the responsibilities and duties of an actual school teacher and try to practise what they have learnt during their teacher education programme.

Pre-service teachers face numerous problems and challenges at the beginning of their profession and one of them is facing insufficiencies in their own content knowledge, skills and attributes as teachers. With lack of support from other teachers, these experiences will erode the confidence of beginning as well as pre-service teachers over time. From the classroom observations made by the researchers, it was found that these student teachers faced difficulties handling and mastering the demands of teaching including development of the teaching and learning materials, class control, designing and developing lesson plans, using appropriate teaching and learning strategies, discussing matters regarding teaching and learning with their mentor teachers, extra school administration work and many more. Based on the problems encountered by the student teachers, it was deemed necessary to provide some form of guidance to enable them to perform and carry out successful teaching. The purpose of the study was to investigate the problems the pre-service teachers face during their teaching practicum. The study is guided by one research question:

1. What are the issues or problems faced by the pre-service teachers during their teaching practice?

2. Literature Review

Pre-service teachers must understand and master the pedagogical strategies that would assist them in creating more successful teaching and learning. Good pre-service teachers must master sound pedagogical strategies and knowledge in order for them to deliver the knowledge to the students in a positive learning environment.

Research carried out by Laffey (2004) and Clair (2008) shows that not only pre-service but also those in-service teachers were not well-prepared in term of resources and skills of integrating technology in teaching and learning. Tomlinson (2001) defined differentiated instruction as a measured and mindful technique of preparing and teaching to address student differences. It is known as an approach vital to teaching the content as a means of looking at the different learning needs of students, with the hope of utilizing the potential of each learner (Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2010). This approach emphasizes the strategies the teacher uses to implement assessment of each student for their willingness, attentiveness, and learning inclination so that teaching and learning can be adjusted in one of three ways namely by content, process, or product. Generally, (Darling-Hammond, 2006); (Farrell, 2008) as cited in Ochieng'Ong'ondo and Borg (2011) agreed that the teaching practice also known as practicum is one of the most important aspects in the student teacher's education. Therefore, to ensure that the teaching practice brings out the maximum benefit to produce more quality future teachers, supervision of student teachers plays an undeniable significant role. Stock-ward and Javorek (2003) stated that supervision is an important component of the work of most student affairs professionals. (Winston and Creamer, 1997) defined supervision as a helping process designed to promote organizational goals, enhance personal and professional development as they work. In fact, supervision can be the ultimate answer to producing more quality future teachers. Somehow, (Winston and Creamer, 1997); Stock-ward and Javorek (2003); (Barham and Winston, 2006); as cited in Petroc (2012) identified that supervision has warranted limited attention in the literature of the profession.

3. Methodology

Four pre-service teachers participated in this case study. The pre-service teachers were in their semester seven from the Bachelor in Education with honours Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program. The pre-service teachers were placed in two different schools for their teaching practice in Shah Alam, Selangor. The participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study to further facilitate data collection procedure. All the four pre-service teachers were observed twice over a six-month period. Each teacher was observed five times over a period of eight lessons. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with all the participants to gather detailed elaborations and clarifications of the problems they faced during their teaching practice. The interview also aimed at gathering data on the issues or problems they faced during their teaching practice experience. The interviews were recorded and the data were transcribed for thematic analysis. The researcher checked and studied the pre-service teachers' lesson plans submitted to analyse how they design the learning objectives for differentiated instruction as instructed by their mentor teachers.

4. Findings

Findings revealed that all the four pre-service teachers were unable to implement the differentiated learning objectives and activities for their students as instructed by their mentor teachers. The differentiated learning strategy was meant to assist the weaker students to get more activities in remedial form. As for the average and upper intermediate students, the pre-service teachers were required to design more challenging activities to enhance students' comprehension of the topics learnt. The mentor teachers discussed with the supervisor and informed about the pre-service teachers' inability to design for the differentiated activities. The pre-service teachers were required to write new learning objectives specifically for the differentiated learning but they were so confused on how to write the learning objectives. The pre-service teachers were interviewed and asked the reasons behind their inability to design the activities for the differentiated instruction; the pre-service teachers revealed that they were confused and unsure on how to design the activities tailoring instruction to meet their individual student needs in the classroom. The pre-service teachers divulged that they were unable to differentiate the content, process, products and the

assessment in order to make the activities more flexible. They also felt anxiety as they were unable to execute the activities successfully for the differentiated learning objectives. This issue was seen as a problem from the perspectives of the pre-service teachers. They shared that they were not exposed to designing activities for differentiated learning objectives during their undergraduate program. They also mentioned that being shy inhibited them from asking their mentor teacher more questions. The pre-service teachers faced this problem due to their incompetence to diverge from the traditional way of writing the specific objectives.

All the pre-service teachers have been trained to write ‘...students should be able to answer four out of seven questions correctly.’ Writing the objective in this way reveals that by implication, the teacher’s expectation of the students is just below average.

The trick in this type of objective is that when the teachers set the target high: ‘... students should be able to answer nine out of ten questions’. However, if students manage to answer only 8 questions right, the teacher has not achieved the objective(s) as specified; does it mean that the lesson is a failure? Another pitfall made by trainee teachers is the use of abstract verbs in formulating the objectives such as “...students will be able to understand...” and “...enhance their knowledge.” The question now is how to measure understanding and knowledge? For both situations, writing the objective in general like this: ‘Students demonstrate their understanding of the lesson content by their ability to perform the tasks assigned by the teacher throughout the lesson.’ is more suitable. The pre-service teachers can always write down the differentiated learning objectives to be used in a lesson and check whether these objectives are written to ensure the verbs are active and measurable. Then the pre-service teachers can always seek and consult their mentor teachers to get confirmation on the differentiated learning objectives which they have designed. An example of differentiated learning objectives should be like in the following example:

Differentiating learning Objectives:

All mustAll should
Most shouldAll could
Some mightSome should stretch to

Example 1

All must generate a map about countries at different levels of development.

Most should generate a map about countries at different levels of development and raise the questions about what it shows.

Some might generate a map about countries at different levels of development and create a logical sequence of questions about what it shows. The findings of this study concur with other studies as many teachers vacillate to

Assimilate differentiation into the classroom for several reasons. These comprise: shortage of administrative support (Hertberg-Davis and Brighton, 2006); distress by the fact of lowering student test score by moving away from the prescribed curriculum (VanTassel-Baska, 2006); pre-service teachers’ inability to face and handle students with behavioural problems (Hertberg-Davis and Brighton, 2006; Knopper and Fertig, 2005; Westberg *et al.*, 1993). Pre-service teachers can overcome this problem and make differentiation work best when they are more motivated and the school administrators including the principals and the mentor teachers provide the facilitating environment to ensure implementation of differentiation practices in the classroom. Effective differentiated instruction takes place if the school administration sets a positive learning environment, high-quality curriculum, assessment to inform teacher decision making and allow flexible classroom management (Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2010).

The Planning Stage

These pre-service teachers shared that they have difficulties and weaknesses in the planning stage (as shown in the pre-service teachers’ lesson plans) for example in describing the objectives and the activities amalgamated into the lesson. As for the specific objectives, it was found that the pre-service teachers could not describe the specific objectives of the lesson succinctly. They fail to acknowledge the importance of the words required to develop the objectives.

To begin with, to come up with the beginning of the specific objectives by writing ‘By the end of the lesson ...’ is not recommended because this provides the impression that assessment is summative, and that all assessment throughout the lesson is collected at the end of the lesson. To improve the way of writing this idea is to write the opening line like this: ‘As the lesson develops ...’ to exemplify that assessment is on-going (formative) throughout the lesson.

The pre-service teachers often neglected the Critical and Creative Thinking Skills (CCTS) in the lesson plans because of their inability to incorporate activities that would elevate students’ thinking. It is very important for the pre-service teachers to design activities by keeping the CCTS objectives closely in mind so that they can use the activities to allow students to share their views and ideas and facilitate student creativity. From the classroom observation, the activities prepared by the pre-service teachers were not carried out. They conducted the lesson using the set induction effectively but the lesson development using the other activities was not implemented. The pre-service teachers were interviewed and asked the reasons for their inability to carry out the lesson. They explained that they lacked the pedagogical strategies to implement the activities planned. They realized that they did not execute the activities as planned in the original lesson plan. The pre-service teachers did not explain well on the content delivered and this revealed their lack of pedagogical content knowledge. The activities designed in a lesson plan are meant to achieve the objectives set for the lesson. The pre-service teachers must be aware that the activities incorporated into the lesson should be practical, real and close to the students’ real world, and also related to students’ ability. The activities designed should be developmental (i.e., from simpler to more challenging ones), to ensure that even weak students would be able to do the easier tasks, which would help to instill in them some degree of confidence.

5. Conclusion

This study has identified significant insights particularly exposing the pre-service teachers to differentiated instruction, ways to integrate effective pedagogical content knowledge and also implementing the lesson planned for teaching and learning. Noticeably, the pre-service teachers share the conflicts and problems they faced during their teaching practice at the beginning of their practicum experience. The findings revealed to inform the teacher education program to revise and restructure the content to address the pre-service problems faced during their teaching practice. Teacher education programmes need to include three specific aspects of differentiation, namely, content, process, and product differentiation in preparing the pre-service teachers prior to placing them in the real teaching and learning context. The pre-service teachers should be trained and exposed to different pedagogical strategies during their undergraduate program so that they are well-equipped for their teaching practice. These teachers need to be taught how to group students accordingly based on their needs, how to develop learning activities and materials for their learners according to ability, plan well for their teaching, create lessons that demand peer interaction, allow students to participate more in group work, explore more teaching content such as library searches, YouTube or video clips, and use more technology for encouraging students to explore the content delivered in the classroom. Furthermore, mentor teachers must inform the teacher education programme on the current needs of the schools so that the pre-service teachers can be trained prior to their teaching practice.

The teacher education programme can come up with certain guidelines on differentiated instruction and effective pedagogical tools or strategies which the pre-service teachers can refer to during their teaching practice. The guidelines developed will be useful for the pre-service teachers to enable them to be more focused. Based on the classroom observations and the interviews conducted with the pre-service teachers, one can conclude that the majority of pre-service teachers were unable to demonstrate good understanding of the concept of differentiated instruction particularly when asked to design the differentiated teaching and learning activities. The pre-service teachers also require some knowledge and strategies in strengthening the content on differentiated instruction to manage the classroom and learner diversity. Pre-service teachers must be able to design the activities to modify or adapt the content differentiation to better suit learner needs. In addition, pre-service teachers need more exposure and training in differentiated teaching and learning activities. They need guidance on developing effective pedagogical skills which they can use to create activities for differentiated teaching and learning. Given these findings, teacher education programme institutions can expose the future pre-service teachers to differentiated teaching through classroom teaching and modelling. To accomplish this objective, teacher education institutions may need to review the present curriculum to create one that would inspire countless contribution and involvement among teacher educators in discovering differentiated teaching strategies for teaching at this level.

We acknowledge with great appreciation the kind gesture of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education for providing us the Niche Research Grant Scheme (Coded: NRGs/KPT 2014-0001-107-82-2). Equally, we would like to express our gratitude to all the participating pre-service teachers for their willingness to be observed and to share their classroom practices.

References

- Barham and Winston (2006). Supervision of new professionals in student affairs: Assessing and addressing needs. *The College Student Affairs Journal*, 26(1): 64-89.
- Darling-Hammond (2006). Assessing teacher education: The usefulness of multiple measures for assessing program outcomes. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(2): 120-38.
- Farrell (2008). Reflective practice in the professional development of teachers of adult English language learners. *CAELA Network Brief*: 1-4.
- Hertberg-Davis, H. L. and Brighton, C. M. (2006). Support and sabotage, Principals' influence on middle school teachers' responses to differentiation. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 17(2): 90-102.
- Knopper, D. and Fertig, C. (2005). Differentiation for gifted children, It's all about trust. *Illinois Association for Gifted Children Journal*, 6(1): 6-8.
- Laffey, J. (2004). Appropriation, mastery, and resistance to technology in early childhood preservice teacher education. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 36(4): 361-82.
- Marais, P. and Meier, C. (2004). Hear our voices: student teacher's experience during practical teaching. *Africa Education Review*, 1(2): 220-33.
- Ochieng'Ong'ondo, C. and Borg, S. (2011). We teach plastic lessons to please them' The influence of supervision on the practice of English language student teachers in Kenya. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(4): 509-28.
- Petroc, J. A. (2012). Supervision in student affairs: A study of synergistic supervision, new professionals, and attrition. Available: https://www.ohio.edu/education/centers-andpartnerships/upload/CHEWP_4_2013_JP.pdf
- Plair, S. (2008). Revamping professional development for technology integration and fluency. *The Clearing House*, 82(2): 70-74.
- Stock-ward, S. R. and Javorek, M. E. (2003). Applying theory to practice: Supervision in student affairs. Available: <http://www.tandafoline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1949-6605.1257>
- Tomlinson, C. A. and Imbeau, M. B. (2010). *Leading and managing a differentiated classroom*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (2006). A content analysis of evaluation findings across 20 gifted programs: A clarion call for enhanced gifted program development. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 50(3): 199-215.

- Westberg, K. L., Archambault, F. X., Dobyms, S. M. and Salvin, T. J. (1993). The classroom practices observation study. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 16(2): 120–46.
- Winston and Creamer (1997). *Improving staffing practices in student affairs*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.