

Problems of Female Preservice Kuwaiti English Language Teachers During the Practicum Course

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of pre-service teachers' difficulties and the obstacles they face during their practicum is supremely important to designing and implementing a successful field experience. Based on this, the current study explored and discussed the most frequent problems that Kuwaiti English language pre-service teachers face during their practicum course. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the challenges and obstacles that female pre-service Kuwaiti English language teachers ($n = 45$) may experience throughout their practicum period. To achieve the intended outcomes, the study used a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female pre-service English language teachers at the college of Basic Education in Kuwait. The College of Basic Education plays a key role in providing qualified female teachers to the Ministry of Education through a training program that prepares potential English instructors to fulfil the career requirements of English instructors. According to the findings of the research, different issues have been aroused by the participants as they have complained about some aspects of the practicum course, including preparing lesson plans and workload, relationship with colleagues in the department, classroom management (especially dealing with students who have special cases), and academic supervisors. Interpretations of the results and recommendations are discussed in relation to the context of the study.

1. Introduction

Kuwait's Ministry of Education has collaborated with the Ministry of Higher Education and institutions during the last decade to develop and update English learning programs in schools. One of the initiative's objectives is to supply qualified female English language teachers to the Ministry of Education, especially in primary school classrooms. Kuwait's College of Basic Education plays a key role in providing qualified female teachers to the sector through a training program that prepares potential English instructors to fulfil the career requirements of English instructors.

Education benefits people's lives in a variety of ways. Educators are undeniably important in the educational process and are one of the most important instruments for achieving success. DeMonte (2013) stated that we read or hear about brilliant teachers who have motivated and enriched their students' lives every day. According to Al-Mutawa (2020), students' progression is largely determined by their academic performance at the end of the first period and partially at the end of the third period, suggesting that skill enhancement has developed to a certain degree by induction. Therefore, educational institutions should place a premium concern on teachers' capabilities and how they are trained. The challenge is how we can guarantee that all instructors are well trained for the essential tasks they do. According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), training students to become effective teachers and supplying opportunities to empower teachers are also essential components of effective training. Efforts to improve teacher education are an ongoing process. According to Scholz (2014), untrained teachers would not prepare their students for a

permanently evolving environment. Lately, the theme of teaching practicum in teacher education programs has received increased interest due to its importance regarding training pre-service teachers (Aquino, 2014).

1.1 Significance of Study

Educator preparation, school and classroom environments, teachers' spirits, and socio-economic, political, and cultural issues are all factors that may affect Kuwait's EFL education standards. Unfortunately, because of Kuwait's political, academic, and administrative challenges, there seems to be little research on the effectiveness of English teacher education in general and the teaching practicum course in particular. In fact, there is little available information about the challenges that Kuwaiti EFL pre-service teachers are often found to face during the practicum course, which may be attributed to the ineffective aspects of practicum practices implemented in schools. As the researchers have field experiences, they could identify weaknesses in the EFL pre-service teachers during the practicum course; the EFL pre-service teachers also regularly expressed the challenges, difficulties, and critical issues they faced in real classrooms regarding the subject areas and the teaching practicum skills. Ultimately, the scarcity of detailed knowledge about EFL pre-service teacher education underscores this study's importance.

One possible way to eliminate the problems of pre-service teachers would be to improve the quality of practicum components of teacher education programs. Thus, this study sought to examine this subject from the perspective of Kuwaiti EFL pre-service teachers. The researchers focused on whether EFL pre-service teachers believe they are trained for their potential positions. If not, what difficulties could be causing them to feel this way? The outcomes may impact the curriculum and instruction of Kuwaiti institutions in charge of EFL teacher education. Furthermore, the findings of this study will provide a comprehensive image of EFL teachers' preparation and the plan implemented in training in the hopes that detection of the challenges may shed light on the aspects of practicum that need improvement, thereby assisting politicians, school administrators, and EFL teacher educators in implementing significant changes as a result of the findings.

2. Review of the Literature

Many researchers have insisted that field experience is a vital part of pre-service teachers' education because, for pre-service teachers, it is the first transition to the real field of teaching. For instance, Manzar-Abbas and Lu (2013) explained that pre-service teachers value the practicum period because it works as an interface between their studentship and their prospective profession and strongly influences their ideas about teachers' roles. Furthermore, Baecher's (2012) study of new ESL teachers' perceptions of their pre-service training emphasizes the importance of course content in preparing instructors. The majority of participants considered their training curriculum to be theoretical and impractical. They said that, once they started teaching in actual classrooms, they confronted many problems they did not know how to handle. Much of the dilemma, according to Baecher, was due to the repetitive and ineffective course content introduced in such programs. She suggested that the curriculum be designed to meet the needs of both students and the educational system. The gap between ESL teacher training programs and genuine learners' demands may result in untrained instructors who are unable to handle classrooms or the current educational system. Sofi-Karim (2015) claimed that poor performance in English among Kurdish K–12 students could be attributed to incompetent English teachers. According to Sofi-Karim's findings, EFL instructors are underqualified because they have not completed sufficient assessments on teaching methods and have not trained in practical classroom settings. He claimed that a failed pre-service teaching practice is indeed a reason for the inability of high school students to speak proper English.

2.1 Nature and Quality of Field Experience and Teachers' Sense of Preparedness

Kee (2012) stated that practical training, also known as a practicum or teaching practice, is one of the pillars of teacher education programs; if handled effectively, it will lead to well-trained teachers. According to Ingersol et al. (2007), "the problem of poor-quality teachers can be attributed to insufficient and limited pre-employment training" (p. ##). According to their study, the consistency and period of the teaching practice as part of teachers' preparation have a powerful beneficial relationship with their sense of readiness. Kee (2012) concluded that teachers who attended annual teaching practices felt more eligible to educate than others not enrolled in such a training program. According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), student teachers who attend a training program early while studying demonstrate improved performance as full-time teachers. The authors concluded that a shortage of realistic instruction is a major issue in teacher education that leads to undertrained instructors because "field-based work has often been isolated from the course content, poorly structured, and training times fail to represent standards for successful teaching" (p. 454). They further asserted that a one-year practical training with teacher educators' encouragement and visible observation and collaborating educators would adequately prepare teachers.

Sofi-Karim (2015) produced similar findings. He argued that one of the key reasons for teachers' unpreparedness is insufficient and unattainable teacher training in the learning environment. In addition, the practical training period is too short, is inadequately organized, and is not yet fully exploited by faculty administrators and cooperating teachers. According to Malouf et al. (2014), potential Kuwaiti instructors do not participate in direct teaching experiences unless they come into programs late. Comprehending

the aims and elements of the practicum necessitates familiarity with the philosophical experiences of different teacher training systems. Some initiatives view the work placement as an opportunity to develop student teachers' unique talents and skills while preparing them for real-world classrooms. These programs take a more instructional approach to teacher education to implement and develop the special skills of new teachers.

On the other hand, some programs view the practicum technique from a learning angle, in which novice teachers may use the framework to bring the idea into practice, make mistakes, ask questions, examine, and improve their teaching skills and abilities. The end goal of such programs is to improve teachers' learning awareness and help them become life-long learners (Darling Hammond & Bransford, 2005). As a result, the work placement and its priorities are heavily influenced by the larger philosophy of teacher preparation systems compared to teacher preparation targets (Richards & Crookes, 1988). In Kurdistan, the basic philosophy of teaching practice, which emphasizes training over teaching, influences practicum (Sofi-Karim, 2015; Vernez et al., 2014). To improve student teachers' comprehension in the practicum, constructive post-observation discussions and collaboration involving student teachers, supervisors, and coordinating teachers are crucial.

According to Freeman (1991), the practicum program will foster supportive interactions between instructor educators and student instructors, assisting learners by providing perspectives and feedback to help them improve their teaching. The instructor educator's role is to help students become successful teachers. However, this is not possible until student teachers are well supervised and directed in the teaching process.

2.2 Practicum in Language Teacher Education

The majority of language teacher education programs worldwide include a practical training component. Work placement is a period of supervised work that allows teachers to apply the theories they have learned into practice and familiarize themselves with the real-world classroom environment. (Canh, 2014). Two groups of people usually supervise and guide this process: institute faculty or practicum supervisors who frequently attend classrooms, supervise students and teachers who work in field schools, and direct student teachers' daily activities (Crookes, 2003).

Payant and Murphy's (2012) study is one of the few examining collaborating teachers' roles and responsibilities in ESL practicum from their point of view. The authors discovered that collaborating teachers are unaware of their mentorship responsibilities in the research. They did not train to be cooperating teachers and had no instructions to implement. Moreover, the study's findings showed that collaborating teachers and faculty administrators had no significant communication between them, leading to a low practical training relationship. As part of the practicum in Singapore, Farrell (2008) investigated the perspectives of 60 student teachers on the roles and responsibilities of collaborating teachers. The bulk of the participants, according to Farrell, were concerned about the cooperative teachers' lack of collaboration and feedback, as well as the fact that they were not trained to be cooperating teachers. In his analysis of EFL in Kurdistan, Sofi-Karim (2015) observed similar findings and concluded that the lack of collaboration between collaborating teachers and faculty members harmed the EFL teacher training practicum. They were not consulted or advised about their responsibilities.

On the other hand, several researchers have documented huge criticisms of the practicum period in many teacher education programs. As stated by Depreli (2014), "since the 1990s, teacher education programs have been a focus of criticisms, particularly with regard to how they balance theory and practice" (p. 60). Several studies (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Goff-Kfour, 2013; Liaw, 2012; Wang & Clarke, 2014) have revealed that many teacher education programs are relatively ineffective in preparing pre-service teachers for classroom teaching. Such findings suggest that these programs might require improvement and that pre-service teachers should be more thoroughly assessed during the practicum period.

Fradd and Lee (1997) investigated how graduates thought their teacher education programs prepared them for the challenges they encountered in the classroom. The findings indicated that the students requested more field knowledge and teaching practice. In a different study, Baecher (2012) examined the perspectives of graduates of a master's program in TESOL in the United States regarding their pre-service training. Around 82.3% of the respondents indicated that their TESOL program adequately prepared them, while 17.7% claimed they were not adequately trained. According to Baecher, in order to develop their training programs, ESL teacher preparation programs should respect the opinions of their alumni. She also argued that to prepare ESL learners well, these courses should collaborate with educational institutions such as schools and universities that are more knowledgeable of ESL institutes and learners' current concerns. In Bangkok, Scholz (2014) interviewed 100 EFL teachers to determine the extent to which they felt ready to teach. Teachers who appeared to be well-trained had typically attended subject-specific courses, received coaching, and had at least one year of classroom experience. Scholz's practical expertise corroborates Gandara et al.'s (year) conclusions that student teachers preferred more integrated and meaningful practice experiences. According to the results of the two studies, prospective ESL/EFL teachers should devote considerable time to working in real classrooms and obtain more constructive feedback from team members and collaborative teachers to become good instructors.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers used a semi-structured interview method to collect data, allowing in-depth and detailed personal views to be elicited. According to Cohen et al. (2007), the use of a semi-structured form of the interview has many advantages in qualitative educational research, including ensuring flexibility, allowing the interviewer to probe for more detailed information, enabling the interviewer to clear up any misunderstandings, and testing the limits of the interviewee's knowledge. The data were analyzed and coded using exploratory content analysis. First, data were transcribed and codified. Next, a constant comparison method of all data was performed by reading and rereading within and across the data (Lalik & Potts, 2001). This step helped analyze the data logically and sequentially in terms of formulating the codes, organizing the categories and themes, creating thematic charts, weaving the data, and finally presenting interpretive comments in the form of a persuasive argument. In total, 45 female EFL pre-service teachers, ranging from 22 to 27 years old, participated in the study. The participants were randomly selected, regardless of their age or location. The participants were somewhat homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, mother tongue (Arabic), language capacity, and academic performance.

4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the pre-service teachers' views and concerns about their practical experiences. The participants highlighted several themes, such as preparing lesson plans and workload, building relationships with colleagues in the department, managing the classroom, and dealing with the academic supervisor.

4.1 Preparing lesson plans and workload

The majority of the participants, 38 out of 45, complained about how exhausting preparing for one lesson was, let alone sometimes two or more every day. For instance, one of the participants explained: *"I have to think every day of different activities, and they must be creative ones; that is a very challenging task, it puts me under lots of pressure"*. Another participant commented: *"I spent 6 hours preparing a lesson plan for one class. It was hard to think and express our thoughts correctly. It is also confusing to decide whether the objectives of the class are correct. It was also hard to find out if the procedure matches the objectives or not."* Obviously, EFL pre-service teachers find preparing a lesson plan a time-consuming task. One reason for this could be that they were not well trained to prepare a lesson plan in college. In fact, when the researchers further investigated this problem, most of the participants complained about the mismatch between what they had been trained for in the college and what they had to do in a real classroom. One participant affirmed: *"The lesson plan that I wrote in college was nothing like the lesson plan that I make in school!"* This issue clearly shows the need for a strong connection between the Ministry of Education and the College of Basic Education—namely, the College of Basic Education staff members need to be up to date with the Ministry of Education's changes and developments of their plans regarding teaching and lesson plans.

Furthermore, 90% of the participants complained about the extra workload, which added a lot to the pressure they face every day. Most complaints were about giving them administration work, which was an extra load. One participant commented: *"They should allow me to focus more on the teaching process itself and not to be distracted by anything else!"* This means the teachers are overloaded and distracted by all of these tasks.

4.2 Relationship with colleagues in the department

Everything contributes to making the teaching process successful, whether it is the school building, the students, or the colleagues with whom the teacher interacts daily. All these elements play a huge role in the teaching experience as the teacher will spend most of his/her time on them. Ensuring that the teachers work in a comfortable environment will give them the energy to bring out the best. Another issue repeatedly mentioned by the participants was unfriendly relationships with the staff members in the department. More than half (65%) of the participants complained about their colleagues being uncooperative and dealing with them harshly. One of the participants explained that *"our department head is a very strict person. She doesn't accept errors easily. Although she was a source of knowledge for me, she was a reason for my stress. She is helpful and always appreciated my work, but the problem was that she pushed me to do stuff that I was not responsible for doing. She shouts a lot, asks for a lot"*. Another participant said that she committed a mistake and the reaction of the head of the department was very exaggerated: *"I hated her in that day ... I mean she can come and talk to me alone instead of humiliating me in front of the other teachers!"* This issue clearly shows that the pre-service teachers are used by some heads of department to get extra work from the current teachers. In fact, some participants mentioned that they were intentionally given the worst classes (with a large number of students) by the head of the department. One way to overcome this issue is to ensure clear coordination between the Ministry of Education and those specific schools with pre-service teachers. Dealing with them with care and being harsh will push them away from this career.

Meanwhile, 19 out of 45 participants suffered from the downgrading they had from their colleagues in the department. One participant stated that *"although my colleagues were friendly and nice, I couldn't blend in with them, and they were not allowing me to do so as I come from a different culture and background. As a result, things got a little bit hard for me initially, and the feeling of not belonging affected my enthusiasm in teaching."* Another participant explained the type of relationship between her and the

staff members in the English department as a competition: *"The department's environment shouldn't be this way. I feel like there is a competition between teachers, which is unhealthy and not a good one. Teachers compete over silly things, like who can shut the other one up better or who can get a copy of the other one's lesson plan easily. The noise that happens in the teachers' room and the shouting over a daily conversation that does not relate to education make any new teacher think twice before working in schools."* Obviously, such negative feelings during the practicum period will lead to a negative attitude towards teaching as a future career. Therefore, it is necessary to create a positive and encouraging environment for such trainers and cooperate with them as much as possible.

4.3 Classroom management

The data analysis revealed that classroom management and control were significant for most participants. More than 80% of participants reported how they finished with incomplete lessons, a loss of temper, a lack of focus, and sometimes losing control and shouting at disruptive students. The following extract is informative: *"My students didn't want to listen to my instructions. I had to stop the lesson many times to shout and punish them. Because of this, I lost my concentration, and time was up before I finished what I prepared!"* There seem to be many causes for such classroom management issues, including students' indifference and demotivation and their perception of the pre-service teachers' classroom role.

The study participants frequently complained about how difficult it is to teach and deal with students who were uninterested, unmotivated, and unwilling to learn. In addition, they mentioned that managing allocated lesson time was a very challenging task. EFL pre-service teachers seem to face difficulties with accurately approximating how much time each activity or task will take. Therefore, there is a clear need for thorough training and practice to master time management. This finding agrees with Collin's (1990) conclusion that time management requires a skilful teacher's well-prepared and organized lesson plans, and it would still be considered a demanding task for schoolteachers.

4.4 Dealing with the academic supervisor

A great number of respondents considered their supervisors to be ineffective. They expressed dissatisfaction with their supervisors' infrequent meetings, the shallowness of the strategy implementation, the superiors' conduct, and the unnecessarily negative evaluations they received. During the practice phase, most participants confirmed they received no assistance from their superiors. Eighty percent of EFL teachers considered their supervisors' role to be unhelpful. The remaining 20% stated that their supervisors' contributions were helpful and productive. Ninety percent of participants claimed their supervisors only met them once a week during their practical experience, which was insufficient for them. One respondent said that *"my supervisor just came to the school once and didn't give me any positive input"*. Another individual commented that *"it was a waste of time on my part"*. According to one of the participants, *"during the last 14 days of my teaching practices, my supervisor just managed to see me once. I'm not sure she'll be able to evaluate my instruction after just one lesson properly! I spent a huge amount of effort and was really nervous. I expected her to visit me two or three times to illustrate my effective instructional abilities."* The respondents said they were under great pressure because they discovered they only had one chance to demonstrate their abilities. They only had one opportunity to prove their skills, and the time constraints were extremely irritating. One participant claimed: *"it was one of the most challenging times of my life. I was terrified, and I couldn't concentrate my thoughts"*. Another participant claimed that their depression interfered with their ability to learn: *"I was under a great deal of pressure."* Another replied, *"this stress hurts my performance. If I wasn't so anxious, I would be able to do more"*. Some of the participants expressed scepticism about the supervisors' behaviour. 17 of the 45 respondents confessed to seeing superiors acting disrespectfully during the study. One respondent shared the following situation: *"When I first started teaching in the classroom, I felt like a true teacher. It was simply exciting. I was thoroughly prepared to surprise my supervisor when she came to see me with my unique teaching techniques. Surprisingly, she objected and advised me to stick to the standard format! After that day, I've been hesitant to try any novel strategies."* Another EFL pre-service teacher shared her frustration with her supervisor's careless behaviours: *"I'm sorry to remark, but my supervisor was unkind."* She further clarified, *"I was anxious and uncomfortable in class because I did not feel at ease. I remember making a grammatical error that she corrected in front of the class; it was insulting."* When they first began participating in actual classrooms, the respondents stated that they required their supervisors to respect their contributions and acknowledge them as real teachers, not students. In fact, most participants confirmed that their supervisors' harsh comments had a negative effect on their educational performance.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

In sum, it is undeniable that the EFL pre-service teachers' practicum period was useful, although there were ups and downs in some aspects of the course. One of the participants summarized the whole experience as follows: *"This course was one period of my lifetime that I would never forget. It was a rich experience full of events, adventures, people from different backgrounds, social thoughts, and more than enough situations. I have never learned this number of information and skills during my whole life. Four years of studying at the College of Basic Education were beneficial. However, the practicum course is worth more than four years of learning. I had no idea that I would face all of this pressure and knowledge."*

The majority of the problems participants identified were generally similar to those reported previously by other researchers in the literature review. Although the challenges vary in nature and existence, the results of the current study seem to be in line with those of Çelik (2008), Sariçoban (2010), Yunus et al. (2010), Manzar-Abbas and Lu (2013), and Wang and Clarke (2014), who highlighted the critical challenges faced by pre-service teachers.

Building on the reported issues, the researchers recommend a more successful practicum experience for pre-service students. Academic supervisors need training on how to mentor. The Ministry of Education emphasizes formal mentoring, but supervisors do so with relatively little understanding of what mentoring entails when supervisors are selected. Pre-service students need to hear positive emotional feedback from their academic supervisors to boost their self-confidence, especially at the beginning of the practicum. Creating such a supportive and friendly environment is extremely important. In addition, pre-service teachers need to have proper guidance on planning lessons.

Furthermore, English departments and their staff need to understand how crucial it is to create a positive relationship with pre-service teachers and cooperate with them. This can be done with the assistance of school administrations, which need to stress the importance. Obviously, EFL pre-service teachers need further development in teaching experiences and skills related to classrooms and school settings. The results also signify the importance of promoting cooperation and strong connections between the Ministry of Education and the College of Basic Education. Furthermore, meetings, workshops, and small discussion sessions need to be conducted among school personnel, supervisors, university instructors, and pre-service teachers to explore critical issues and anticipate possible solutions.

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