EFL Teacher Trainees' Experiences in their Practicum

Abstract: Teacher education programs are designed to develop professionals who are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century classrooms and workplace. The purpose of this study was to examine the trainee teachers’ experiences of practicum, a part of their educational program, as a tool of learning to teach by using qualitative research method. Data were collected through semi-structured interview from four purposively selected trainee teachers selected from four different campuses affiliated to Tribhuvan University and the collected data were transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that the participants perceived practicum as an important tool of learning to teach because it promoted the development of teaching experience and prepared them for the real world of work. The analysis further revealed that theory-practice connection, competency and confidence development and socialization as a successful experience of the practicum program and inadequate resources, assessment centered experience, inadequate support from supervisors and school and college administration as the stressful experiences of trainee teachers’ practicum.

Keywords: competency, trainee teacher, practicum, supervision.

INTRODUCTION

Different approaches to teacher education have emerged to achieve the goal of training effective teachers in teacher preparation program around the world. One of such approach is the introduction of practicum which is the most highly valued component in teacher education. However, questions concerning the value of professional learning from teaching practicum have been raised. In this context, Tang (2003) views that if teachers’ practicum activities are poorly organized, it might cause many teachers frustrate and give up their job. Thus, teaching practicum is also considered as one of the most critical components of teacher preparation with the greatest impact on teacher quality. Therefore, well designed teaching practicum is needed to ensure that teacher training institutions produce high quality teachers (Zeichner, 2010; Sabar, 2004).

Although, the purpose of teacher education is to produce effective practicing teachers, the question of how trainees can best be prepared to become effective classroom practitioners has been on the minds of teacher educators worldwide for many years. Practicum is a crucial aspect of teacher education. In this regard, Funk and Hoffman, (1982) stated that teaching practice has come to be recognized as one of the most important aspects of the teacher education program (as cited in Farrell, 2001). It has been an academic requirement in pre-service education in major universities of Nepal. Though everyone looks at it in a simple way, it has been very challenging at present due to numerous problems. Likewise, Armutcu. And Yaman (2010) mention that whenever it happens or whoever actualizes it, teaching carries a challenge in itself as a professional life and practicum demands commitment and development.

Despite having many challenges and difficulties for implementation, we are compelled to practice practicum due to its significance. Hulling (1997) stated that field-based experiences offer teacher candidates a place to observe and work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings (as cited in Farrell, 2001). Teachers clearly play an important role in shaping the future of individuals as well as of entire generations. In order to play their role in this changing and challenging world, where knowledge based economic is craving more intellectual property, teachers should be provided with a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and relevant educational experience that enable them to cope up with the challenge of 21st century and work in this new context. The universities are expected to prepare teachers who are fully appropriate to the needs and realities of today’s classroom. Therefore, this profession needs more efforts from the teacher in order to avoid any frustrating experience and to create awareness of school environment.
Statement of the problem

The teaching practicum has long been regarded as an integral component of any teacher education program. It provides trainee teachers the opportunity to be in the classroom, and its purpose is to prepare them through hands-on teaching and learning situations to develop their experience in the classroom. O’Dea and Peralta (2011) pointed out that practicum programs allow pre-service teachers to connect what was learned in their education program to real-life experiences in schools. During the practicum, trainee teachers are expected to plan, teach, reflect, and act through the guidance of a supervisor. The supervisor greatly affects the progress of the trainee teachers during this time, as they are expected to provide support, guidance, and inspiration. The professional environment in which pre-service teachers are placed, combined with how they learn to teach, shapes their understanding of teaching in the professional setting (Cuenca, 2011, p. 118).

A serious question that often strikes me in this context is that whether practicum program been meaningful as it should have been in Nepalese context? Has the supervisor served as a role model, modeling teaching abilities for the pre-service teachers? What different opportunities and challenges have trainee teachers faced in their real field? Such questions to my mind made me realize that investigating trainee teachers’ experiences of practicum is important to improve its situation in the future.

Purpose of this Paper

The main purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of trainee teachers in their practicum. It also examines challenges and opportunities for improving teaching practicum from trainee teachers’ perspectives.

Research Questions

1. How do the EFL teacher trainees share their experiences of practicum?
2. How do they perceive the opportunities or challenges of their practicum?

Review of Related literature

A wide body of literature suggests that practicum is an initial period of exploring understandings of theory and practice. Lonergran and Anderson (1988) assert that practicum is a form of experiential learning that could be described as field-based learning, work-based learning, learning by doing or learning from action. In addition, it is also an opportunity to actively participate and observe the workings of a school culture and setting. There is no doubt that teachers play a significant role to the success of any ongoing educational reform and agents for positive societal change. Muhammad (2006) claims that well prepared and well qualified teachers are not only agents of positive societal change but also have a multiplying effect while executing his/her regular duties and teachers of the highest quality will lead to education of the highest quality. Similarly, Wilson (2006) states “Teaching practicum is integral to trainee teachers’ professional development, and shapes their beliefs and thinking about teaching. Trainee teachers consistently describe teaching practicum as the most valuable element of teacher education”. Ralph, Walker and Wimmer (2008) pointed out that the practicum is a place where pre-service professionals are mentored by their academic faculty and professionals in the workplace. It is at this workplace that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to take part in observations and interactions to make meaning of what they have learned in their college coursework and to discover new knowledge.

However, the extent to which trainee teachers interact with tutors and teachers vary depending on the existence of supportive structures such as school – college partnerships, school-based mentors and regular visits to schools by supervising tutors from teacher education institutions (Sivan & Chan, 2009). It has also been argued that visits by supervisors from teacher education institutions tend to be infrequent and therefore have minimum impact on trainee teachers. Although the purpose of teacher education is to produce effective practicing teachers the question of how trainees can best be prepared to become effective classroom practitioners has been on the minds of teacher educators worldwide for many years (George, Worrell, Rampersad, & Rampaul, 2000). The teaching profession is currently facing several challenges; the global economy and competitive market place, the changing nature of job and advanced technology, changes in demographic nature of students and the growing bodies of knowledge about how people learn and what makes for effective teaching have caused teacher education to re-examine the basic principles and methodologies of teacher preparation.

Experiential learning Theory

Experiential learning theory as developed by Kolb in 1984 stresses the importance of learners taking an active role in their learning by using experience to bring about meaning and using that understanding for future experiences. Johnson (2015) maintains that ELT is grounded in the idea that learning is a process of learning and relearning and is therefore subject to change over time. Kolb (1984) states “this type of learning as human adaptation, where the learner is open to new experiences, reflects on those ideas and experiences, then creates ideas to incorporate them into known theories, and finally uses those theories to make decisions.” Similarly, Hedin and Carroll (2010) simply maintain that being in the experience is not sufficient for learning, but doing something with the experience begins the learning process (p. 112). Kolb (1984) focuses on adaptation and it is simply thinking, feeling,
acting, and reflecting, being the total human being. Adaptation leads to the development of a learning identity. In developing a learning identity, the learner must first trust the experiences gone through and recognize that they are opportunities to learn. The practicum provides an environment for experiences to happen for pre-service professionals in a workplace setting.

**Methodology**

For the purpose of this study, I followed qualitative research design to derive meaning from the reality. The participants of the study were four M.Ed. second year students who were involved in teaching practice activity (for about 45 days) in the academic year 2075 from four different campuses of three different districts of Lumbini Zone. Among four campuses, two were constituent campuses and two were affiliated campuses of Tribhuvan University. Participants for the study were selected purposively. Semi-structured interview which is the most common type of interview in qualitative social research was used to collect data. Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) states that it is particularly useful for ascertaining respondents’ thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and retrospective accounts of events (as cited in Phillips, 2004). For present study, the data collected via interview were transcribed, coded and divided into categories, as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1985) in an attempt to discover common themes. Through repeated readings of the transcript, I was able to find themes and patterns. I then began to develop categories which involve putting conceptually similar happenings or events under the same group.

**Analysis and Findings**

Analysis of the data and finding out the result is a rigorous activity in that the researcher should deeply be involved in the interpreting process. For the present study, data were analyzed on the basis of different themes like successful experiences and stressful experiences.

**Successful Experience**

Practicum is an activity at which trainee teachers are expected to integrate educational theory and knowledge with the practical realities of the classroom. It provides the student teachers an opportunity to develop their teaching skills and knowledge in classroom setting. From the insightful responses of the trainee teachers about the positive aspect of their practicum experiences three sub themes were derived as suggested by Tuli (2009): Theory-Practice connection, competence and confidence development and socialization.

**Theory – Practice Connection**

Theory-practice connection is one of the positive aspects of my research participants. Tuli (2009) states that as pre-service teachers progress through their degree, they are expected to link a university based coursework /theory/to school based practice through practicum. In response to my question regarding theory-practice connection, almost all participants explained that they got an opportunity to apply different theories into practice through practicum. Participant A said “it provides us the opportunity to practice the theories of ELT learnt in the classroom particularly the theories of ELT methods into the real practice which helps us to develop pedagogical skills and ultimately supports to be professional. This participant focused on applying content knowledge to develop pedagogical and professional skills. This view can be revealed in the idea of Tuli and File (2010) as they view a high quality practicum program integrates theoretical knowledge and professional practice across the three domains of a teacher education program; ‘content’ knowledge gained through a liberal education, professional knowledge, pedagogical skills and insights.

Similarly, participant B revealed the similar meaning as she replied “practicum provided a kind of platform into which I have been able to put my theoretical knowledge of teaching pedagogy, managing classroom, using teaching aids, evaluation techniques presentation skills and so on into real practice. This participant focused on connecting methodological, classroom management and evaluation theories put into practice through practicum. Likewise, another respondent also explained in the same way as he said, “through practicum I have got the opportunity to test my theoretical knowledge in real school setting. As clearly indicated in the description above, the respondents believe that the practicum program links the theory they have learned with practical experience to practice. Brown (2008) and Ligadu, (2009) state the illustrative responses substantiate previous research which stated as practicum helps pre-service teachers to see theory in practice (as cited in Tuli, 2014). Form the description it can be inferred that the practicum program mediates the theory provided by the university with the school practical experience.

**Competency and Confidence Development**

Confidence development and personal competency gained are the other two positive opportunities revealed from the data reported from in-depth interview. In response to the query regarding their professional and personal experience they got from practicum one participant reported, “Through practicum I got an opportunity to be involved in different academic activities and came to know about school norm, behaviors, dressing style etc. I used to be nervous and had high anxiety during the earlier days but practicum built confidence. This view proclaimed by the participant is in fact obvious as we can see trainee teachers acquiring competency and develop confidence.
Correspondingly, another informant explained “Practicum empowered the trainee teachers to eliminate fear. I was able to share the experience with school teachers and supervisors. I was also able to collaborate my ideas frankly with the friends, seniors, and supervisor or teachers. This view of the participant particularly focused on the process of building confidence rather than competency. Similarly another participant articulated the ideas quite clearly when he said “practicum minimized my hesitation and I have become more confident now than I was before practice teaching as my implicit memorized knowledge has been explicit through practical applications and now I have been completely different in my competence level.” This idea of the participant is similar to what Brouwer and Korthagen, (2005) claim that practicum does not only bridge the gap between theory and practice in learning but it provides the opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop their personal teaching competence.

The above given descriptions clearly affirm with what the Jeffery (2008) states as student teaching experience increases teachers’ confidence in their abilities and their desire to remain in the profession. From the above explanation I found that the practicum program really develops the competence and confidence as it helps them to familiarize curriculum with better understanding and they come to know the real changing roles of teachers in the real field.

Socialization

Socialization simply refers to the act of adapting behavior to the norms, culture or society. It is the process by which an individual becomes a participating member of the society of teachers. While answering my question about the role of practicum in the behavior of trainee teachers, all participants emphasized on the positive role of practicum in socialization. Participant A respondent “Practicum enabled me to share my beliefs, systems, culture as we developed a culture of working in pair or groups. Practicum offered us to create a community of learning”. This idea of the participant is in harmony with what Bliss and Reck (1991) define teacher socialization as is explained in the above quote the student teachers were socialized into many aspects of the teaching profession both inside and outside the classroom during the practicum.

Similarly another participant B replied in a similar way when he said “we got an opportunity to develop friendship with school teachers, friends from other colleges, and even with some students as well. We also got an opportunity to practice group culture, school rules and regulations that particularly helped us to expand social horizons. This finding confirmed what Zeichner and Grant (1981) have argued that the practicum in individual school influences the socialization process of pre-service teachers which include forming relationships, learning how to teach and all the demands associated with teaching, such as coping with school rules inside and outside the classroom and learning how to interact with school authorities and colleagues.

Stressful Experiences

In the course of my interview, the interviewees indicated some problems or challenges which I have categorized into four different sub-themes as suggested by Tuli (2009); lack of resources, assessment centered, inadequate support and disciplinary problem.

Lack of resources

To be more effective in promoting prospective teachers’ inquiry into teaching and learning, the concerned authorities manage adequate resources such as materials, lesson plan book, manuals, text books, referential books, audio- video records, projectors, etc. One of my participant’s response regarding my question about the availability of resources was “I felt lacking in the resources as neither the school nor the university managed textbooks, teachers’ manuals, or any other supporting materials. The headmaster of the school told us to manage everything ourselves. He even didn’t permit to use the tape-recorder. It was so expensive for us.”

This participant highlighted the problem of economic burden that the trainee teachers are facing during practicum. The university seems to be reluctant to address such problems. A very similar view was expressed by another participant as he said we paid practicum charge to the university and the school where we were sent for practicum also expected some kind of economic support from us on the one hand and on the other hand we had to manage all resources for practicum ourselves.

From these descriptions we come to know that lack of resources has been one of the stressful experiences faced by trainee teachers as Tuli (2009) says, “it is evident that the provision of adequate fund was an area that deserves attention to provide authentic opportunities for student teachers to be exposed to the full range of work demands and complexity that they will encounter in real world of work”

Assessment Centered

Although practicum program aims to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes of trainee teachers to prepare them to teach effectively in the school systems, trainee teachers have realized that practicum has been more for assessment rather than for assistance. In this regard, one of the respondents replied “Though practicum was meant for us to put our theoretical knowledge into practice, the supervisor took it completely for assessment. He only visited our class twice during 45 days’ practice and noted grading points rather than giving us constructive feedback. From this view of the participant it is understood that practicum
has been limited for assessment. This finding justifies what Haigh and Tuck (2000) stated as the assessments of students’ competence during practicum remain problematic and a number of issues remain continuous. It was believed that supervisors were supposed to facilitate the trainee teachers to identify their weaknesses and strengths, guide them to be competent professionals and enable them feel successful.

However, the participants expressed the contrary view that they were only assessed but not properly assisted. This view is obvious in the words of my another participant

I expected much more help from subject teacher, supervisor and campus administration but all of them were oriented to observe and report about my class and supervisor only visited two times, observed the class, filled some forms and left with little feedback.

From these remarks of the participants, we can imagine that trainee teachers seem to be worried about input or feedback from the supervisors and mentors in practicum. In this context, Macdonald (1993) identified inconsistencies in the way student teachers were evaluated by teachers, varying expectations of student teachers’ performance and conformity between teachers and marked variation in the quality of feedback given to student teachers by supervisors and it has become a source of stress for student teachers.

**Inadequate Support**

Under this dimension, the trainee teachers are expected to get encouragement and support from the supervisors and concerned school or campus administration and teachers and give constructive feedback on their teaching. Support for student teachers is an essential component of the practicum program. However, report from the respondents indicated that their respective supervisors fail to do so as one the trainee teachers said

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

This explanation of the participant in the above quotes indicated that the support supervisors provided is not as trainee teachers expected and certainly it was inadequate. Regarding the support trainee teachers got during their practicum, another respondent replied “school where we were sent for practicum provided support offering us classes but it was not enough. The school couldn’t support us in managing resources. The supervisor was also very busy and only could help us little.” From these views of the participants, we can confirm what Clary (1991) argued as increased supervision helps in determining if field experience generates the desired results and what Goodman (1985) believes the quality of field experience improves when supervisors are more involved. What is more interesting to mention here is the idea of another participant who responded the question related to the kind of support they got during practicum in his words:

We were new to the situation and school. The school didn’t give us much support except providing us classes. We struggled a lot in collecting resources. The supervisor also didn’t visit us in time. We were so much confused how to start classes, manage classrooms, and behave students. Some students showed us disruptive behavior in the beginning and so on. Our performance could be better if we had got adequate support from respective authorities.

This description clearly shows the significance of scaffolding or support to increase the performance as Vygotisky (1978) implied that when a trainee teacher is in the zone of proximal development for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance will give the student enough of a "boost" to achieve the task. In the same way Jeffery (2008) stated that more frequent feedback from university supervisors is related to greater student teacher confidence and desire to remain in the teaching profession.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study clearly indicate that teacher educators who are responsible for producing competent English language teachers need to give their respective attention to improve the quality of the practicum. There is a great social pressure in the 21st century to improve and produce effective teachers who are able to cope up the changes and challenges of the 21st century schools/classrooms and the practicum has played a great role in this concern. The study clearly indicated that participants understood the term practicum well. The participants commented on the positive and negative aspect of the practicum program which they experienced during their stay at school site. With regard to the positive aspect, theory practice connection, competency and confidence development, and socialization were found to be the most successful experience gained through practicum. Problem of proper supervision, lack of resources, assessment centred etc are the stressful experiences perceived by the participant. The effectiveness of this program is highly linked to the quality of the practicum program. Therefore, it is imperative that the concerned bodies must ensure the quality of the practicum program so that the students can find it educative and supportive.

**Implication for Practice**

The findings of this study are believed to have some practical implications. The first implication is what Schulz, (2005) asserts assessment mechanism will be moved away from outcomes based technical
summative assessment against predetermined specific criteria towards assessment for learning. Therefore, we need to shift our focus from evaluating to educating. The second implication is that the school teachers are also the key to the success of the practicum. Therefore, they should be made to understand the practicum and its educative value through different ways such as workshops, short-term training so that school teachers can assist student teachers to assume teaching role. Unless there is strong partnership with the school the university’s effort to produce well qualified and well prepared teachers are likely to be eroded. The third implication is that the need to closely follow up the practicum. University Dean’s office should ensure that the student teachers have meaningful and satisfying experience. For this practicum, department of the campus need to support and monitor closely the whole program through different means such as provision of supervisors who better understand the practicum and show strong commitment for the success of the program, and develop closer ties with the school teachers, supervisors, students-teachers and work more collaboratively with stakeholders. The office should also evaluate the program to maintain the strength and eliminate the weaknesses through close supervision. The final implication is that resources for practicum should be managed properly. For this university campus and other financial bodies should work collaboratively for the success of the program.

REFERENCES
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