TESOL QUARTERLY, Vol. 22, No. 1, March 1988

The Practicum in TESOL

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This article reports the results of a questionnaire survey of how the teaching practicum is conducted in U.S. graduate TESOL programs. Information was sought on the objectives of the practicum, the kinds of training experiences and activities employed, and how the practicum is implemented. The results are discussed with reference to key issues in the field of practice teaching in TESOL.

The *Directory of Professional Preparation Programs in TESOL in the United States* (Frank-McNeil, 1986) lists 120 institutions that have programs leading to a master's degree. These programs typically offer a wide range of courses serving a diverse student population. Some lead to certification so that graduates may teach in public schools; other programs have a particular specialization, such as bilingual education, adult education, or teaching English overseas. Most attempt to achieve their goals through offering a balanced curriculum emphasizing both theory and practice. However, theory sometimes wins out over practice.

In a survey of American MA TESOL graduates working in Japan (Richards & Hino, 1983), the most frequently studied courses in MA TESOL programs were phonology, transformational grammar, structural linguistics, second language acquisition, first language acquisition, and contrastive analysis. In the same survey respondents reported that the courses they found to be most useful in view of the professional demands made on them as practicing language teachers were practice teaching, classroom management, second language acquisition, materials writing and adaptation, method analysis, and phonology.

In most MA TESOL programs, the practice teaching course, or practicum, is the major opportunity for the student teacher to acquire the practical skills and knowledge needed to function as an effective language teacher. Yet there is little research or literature in

the field of ESOL concerning the nature of the teaching practicum.[1] Our goal was to identify the objectives of the teaching practicum, the different possibilities for designing and implementing a practicum course, and the kinds of training experiences and activities employed in American MA TESOL programs and their effectiveness. This article addresses these questions by reporting on a survey of practicum courses in MA TESOL programs and by examining key issues in the field of practice teaching.

The data reported here were obtained from a questionnaire that was mailed to the 120 programs in the United States listed in Frank-McNeil (1986) as having courses leading to a master's degree. It should be noted that not all of these programs lead to a degree in ESL or TESOL; 60 of these institutions provide a degree that is not in ESL or any of its equivalent acronyms, not in applied linguistics, and not even an education degree specifically in some form of ESL. They claim only concentrations, specializations, or endorsements in ESL, as subordinate to, for example, elementary education or linguistics.

The questionnaire was addressed to the supervisor or instructor in charge of the teaching practicum course in such programs and contained questions concerning the goals, organization, and content of the practicum. A total of 78 responses were received, a response rate of 65%. Of these, 19 were null responses, from programs without a practicum. For each major section of the survey—objectives of the practicum course, the context or setting for the practicum, logistics of the practicum, the curriculum, and supervised classroom teaching—this article first presents the results of the survey, followed by a discussion of the issues raised. Recommendations for the objectives, setting, logistics, curriculum, and supervision of the practicum are then presented.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PRACTICUM COURSE

The Survey

Respondents were asked to rank 8 objectives for a practicum course in order of importance. The results were as follows:

1 To provide practical experience in classroom teaching
2 To apply instruction from theory courses
3 To provide opportunities to observe master teachers
4.5 To give feedback on teaching techniques
4.5 To develop increased awareness of personal teaching style
6 To develop lesson-planning skills
7 To develop ability to select/adapt materials
8 To become familiar with specific methods (e.g., the Silent Way)

Respondents were also asked to identify the most important skills that students were expected to learn from the practicum. No consistent pattern of answers emerged from this open-ended question. A wide variety of skills were mentioned, such as classroom management, ability to individualize lessons, time management skills, lesson planning, awareness of teaching style, and ability to interact with students. In studies of practicums in the field of general teacher education, a similar diversity and vagueness of purposes have been reported (Beyer, 1984; Erdman, 1983; Ginsburg & Newman, 1985; Goodman, 1983, 1985; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Zeichner & Teitelbaum, 1982).

Discussion

The objectives stated for a practicum course reflect how the nature of teaching is viewed as well as how teacher development is thought to occur. Thus, they reflect the approach or philosophy implicit in the program. Teaching may be viewed as an art, as a craft, as a technology, or as a science, and each of these viewpoints makes different assumptions about the role of the teacher educator and the student teacher as well as about how teacher development occurs. A program directed toward the acquisition of specific skills or competencies, for example, may have different objectives from one that seeks to develop certain qualities in teachers (Richards, 1987).

These differences in program philosophy are reflected in differences in terminology: A program may be described in terms of *teacher training*, or *teacher preparation*, on the one hand, or in terms of *teacher development*, or *teacher education*, on the other. Despite its current prominence, this dichotomy is not recent but dates back at least to Dewey's influence on education at the turn of the century (Haberman, 1983). Larsen-Freeman (1983) suggests that

[1] The situation is little better in mainstream education. Zeichner (1980) states that

> research on field-based experiences . . . generally has failed to provide us with very reliable information about what does or does not occur during informal training. Fuller and Bown's (1975) assessment of what is needed in teacher education research in general seems equally applicable to our current state of knowledge about field-based experiences. . . . "The appropriate question at this state of knowledge is not 'are we right?' but only 'what is out there?'" (p. 47)

See Alatis, Strevens, and Stern (1983) and Gebhard, Gaitan, and Oprandy (1987) for the current ESL perspective.

teacher training involves a situation-oriented approach, characterized by finite objectives, in which trainees master a particular model of teaching. *Teacher education,* on the other hand, involves an individual-oriented approach with a focus on developing decision-making and hypothesis-generating skills. The emphasis is on the process rather than on a specific method or model of teaching. The absence of a uniform set of objectives for the practicum course may reflect philosophical differences of this kind.

THE CONTEXT OR SETTING FOR THE PRACTICUM

The Survey

Respondents were asked to identify where the student teaching experiences occur. The most frequent settings were (a) in an ESL program on campus (46%), (b) in a high school or elementary school (36%), (c) in a community college or adult program (29%), and (d) in a private ESL program off campus (21%). (Since more than one answer was possible, these percentages do not total 100.)

Discussion

Teaching experiences can be characterized as either campus based or "field based." Campus-based experiences, such as working in a university English language institute program for foreign students, offer a very different kind of experience from the situation a teacher might encounter in a public school or teaching English abroad. Campus-based experiences may consequently differ so radically from ESL or bilingual programs in elementary and high schools or from private language schools abroad that they do not offer realistic teaching experiences. On the other hand, campus-based programs may be endowed with good facilities, well-trained staff, and superior support systems, providing the student teacher with experiences superior to those available off campus.

LOGISTICS OF THE PRACTICUM

The Survey

For most programs (85%) represented in the survey, the practicum course was compulsory, and in about half of these (48%), there were no grounds for exemption. In the remainder, students were usually exempted only on the grounds of previous teaching experience, but the length and required conditions varied considerably among programs. Conditions mentioned included whether or not previous teaching was supervised, whether or not ESL instruction was involved, and what sort of documentation was required.

Most respondents referred to the length of their practicum in credit hours. For these, the average number of credits carried by the practicum was 3.3. The mode was 3 credits. In terms of the academic year this suggests that most practicums take place over the course of a single semester.

In most of the sample (89%), students took the practicum near or at the end of their degree program. The majority of respondents (79%) indicated that the practicum had prerequisites. If the practicum was intended to be taken at the beginning of the program, prerequisites usually consisted of one to three introductory courses (usually including one methods course). If the practicum was to be taken at the end, formal or informal prerequisites could consist of up to nine courses.

Discussion

The stringent requirements for exemption from the practicum perhaps reflect the increasing professionalization of the field of TESOL. Merely having taught before is no longer accepted as a guarantee that adequate teaching skills have been developed. Practice does not necessarily make perfect: What is needed is good practice.

With regard to the length of the practicum, given the overall time constraints of an MA program, it is perhaps not surprising to find a great deal of agreement about practicum duration. The only notable exceptions to the one-semester generalization were programs in which it was possible to have a 6-credit, two-semester practicum, one semester at the beginning of the program and one at the end.

As the results indicate, practicum placement was split, though a rationale for placement did not emerge. It seems likely that if students generally have little teaching experience, the practicum would be placed early in the program, and if students are mainly experienced, the practicum would be placed at the end (though a case for the converse can also be made).

THE CURRICULUM

The Survey

Two questions sought information on the kinds of experiences and activities provided during the practicum. These questions

specified a number of alternatives, but provision was made for respondents to write in any activities not mentioned. In response to a question on the content of the practicum, the following activities were cited (ranked by frequency of mention across all programs):

1.5 Observation of experienced teachers
1.5 Regular classroom teaching (supervised)
3 Individual conferences with supervisor/master teacher
4 Regular classroom teaching (unsupervised)
5.5 Observation of peers
5.5 Seminars
7.5 Viewing of videotapes of participant trainees' teaching
7.5 Microteaching of peers
9.5 Microteaching of ESL students
9.5 Workshops
11 Viewing of sample lessons

Respondents were also asked to indicate which of the activities they listed they had spent the most time on. The following ranking was obtained:

1 Regular classroom teaching (supervised)
2 Regular classroom teaching (unsupervised)
3 Observation of experienced teachers
4.5 Individual conferences with supervisor/master teacher
4.5 Seminars
6.5 Viewing of videotapes of participants' teaching
6.5 Microteaching of ESL students
8.5 Viewing of videotapes of example teaching
8.5 Observation of peers
10.5 Workshops
10.5 Viewing of sample lessons

In addition, respondents reported on facilities utilized in practicums. In terms of availability the following facilities were cited: video-recording facilities, audio-recording facilities, trained audiovisual staff, and observation rooms. The majority of respondents, however, reported that available facilities were rarely used. (These were absolute majorities, except in the case of videotape use, for which respondents were split: rarely used was selected by 46%, sometimes used by 27%, and often used by 27%.)

Discussion

The experiences provided for the novice teacher during a practicum can be classified according to whether they are *direct*, or first-hand, or whether they are *indirect*, or second-/third-hand (Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986). Direct experiences involve the student teacher either in real teaching experiences in a real classroom or in teaching in a contrived situation, such as teaching peers or teaching a class specially constituted to serve as a vehicle for practice teaching. Indirect experiences involve watching someone else teach. The observation may be either of a real class or of a specially constituted class. Activities cited in the survey indicate the practicum typically includes a mix of both direct and indirect teaching experiences.

Direct teaching experiences cited in the survey included supervised and unsupervised classroom teaching as well as microteaching. Indirect experiences included observation of experienced teachers and peers. Unsupervised teaching, microteaching, and observation are discussed in this section. Since a separate question in the survey addressed the issue of supervision, this topic is discussed in the next section.

Direct experiences. Although the practicum in many programs involved only supervised teaching experiences, in some programs students completed a portion of their degree program on campus and then completed their practicum requirement in the field. For example, a student might work as a full-time ESL teacher in an ESL program abroad, enabling him or her to complete part of the degree requirement while in full-time employment. The student would then be immersed in the full-time job of being a teacher with only occasional (if any) contact with the program in the form of a site visit by a faculty member.

The use of unsupervised regular classroom teaching as a component of teacher preparation reflects a long-held view that many skills of teaching can only be acquired through actual classroom teaching (Conant, 1963; Merril, 1967). Skills that might be developed in this way include handling the routines of the classroom, developing student-teacher rapport, and learning classroom management strategies. In addition, the student is expected to put theory into practice through confronting the practical realities of the classroom and the school. It may be assumed that the learning processes involved are largely self-directed. At its best, such an experience is coupled with or follows training in self-awareness of teaching. Support is also provided to

assist the student teacher in this process, through the use of assessment schedules or reports (see Dewey, 1904).

Some question an overdependence on unsupervised classroom teaching, pointing out that such experiences provide few opportunities for diagnosis or evaluation of teacher performance and that the behavior of student teachers cannot be described except in terms of their own recollections. As Smith (1972) observed, an experience of this kind

> rests on the gratuitous assumption that first hand experience and student teaching *are* [italics added] training. At best, student teaching is a reality from which the trainee learns by trial and error and a minimum of feedback. The situations that arise in his teaching are fleeting in tenure and can be discussed only in retrospect. He cannot 'work through' the situations again to correct his behavior because classroom work moves rapidly from situation to situation and no situation can be reinstated for the practice of technique. (p. 232)

Hence, there is a need for data on how such practical experience can best be organized. As Haberman (1983) notes,

> there has been and remains no greater need than to systematically gather data to support or refute this contention that certain kinds of practice teaching lead to technicians and other forms of student teaching lead to students of teaching. (p. 104)

Alternatives to unsupervised field experiences include supervised field experiences and more focused training experiences, such as microteaching—a procedure that captures the essence of the training approach. From the perspective of training, teaching is approached in terms of specific skills and strategies that can be acquired through direct training. According to Joyce (1980), the major components of training are as follows:

1. presentation of theory
2. modelling or demonstration of skills or models
3. practice in simulated and classroom settings
4. structured feedback
5. open-ended feedback
6. coaching for application. (p. 34)

Similar to the training approach is the clinical approach (Nutter, 1986), in which student teachers

> systematically observe, simulate, and actually perform the activities of teachers in a controlled environment, under close supervision, and with feedback on their performance and opportunity to relearn, *in conjunction with* their studies of theory and research in pedagogy and foundation disciplines. (p. 59)

Examples of clinical activities cited by Nutter are simulations, controlled practice activities such as microteaching and peer teaching, and case studies such as video presentations. Microteaching is one such activity reported in the present survey. (Although the ranking of microteaching appears to be relatively low, this is partly attributable to the fact that the responses are divided across two categories—microteaching of ESL students and microteaching of peers.)

Microteaching was originally based on the idea that teaching is a complex set of behaviors that can be broken down into different skills that can be isolated and practiced individually. Usually, the teacher trainee teaches a short minilesson, either to real students or peers, which is video-recorded and later discussed in individual or group tutorials (Cripwell & Geddes, 1979; Cruickshank, 1985). Microteaching is used as a complement to other training activities in a teacher preparation program. A number of different schools of microteaching have evolved, varying according to the use of peers or real students as pupils and the kind of feedback provided (Brown, 1975; Garvey, 1978). Microteaching is said to provide for more focused practice than real teaching. However, critics argue that it is often an artificial activity, removed from the reality of the regular classroom.

Politzer (1969) was the first to apply microteaching to the preparation of foreign language teachers. At the time of its first applications in language teacher education, audiolingualism was the favored language teaching method. It was hence relatively easy to identify skills that were appropriate for practice through microteaching, for example, drilling, correcting errors, presenting a new grammatical structure, or teaching an aspect of pronunciation. Model teacher behaviors could thus be identified and practiced. Although audiolingualism has since been replaced as the dominant methodology in ESOL and the need for this kind of skill training is no longer widely acknowledged, there are still aspects of classroom methodology that can be practiced in a microteaching format, such as setting up group activities, conducting a role play, or using different kinds of classroom tasks, for example, information gap activities, pair work, and so forth. (For positive reports of the relevance of microteaching in British programs, see Cripwell & Geddes, 1979; Phillips, 1975; Stoddard, 1981; see also El-Naggar & Heasley, 1987, for a study of the use of microteaching in an EFL teacher training program.)

Indirect experiences. In the practicum, indirect experiences can involve observation of the master teacher, observation of sample

lessons, and observation of peers. The following activities were cited in the survey, ranked by frequency of use:

1 Observation of experienced teachers
2 Viewing of videotapes of sample lessons
3.5 Observation of peers
3.5 Viewing of videotapes of peers

It is not surprising that observation should absorb such a large section of time in practicums, since it constitutes the most basic component of any form of training that can be used to learn a complex skill. It is a basic element of the oldest model of teacher training—learning through apprenticeship. What needs to be explored is how effective it is and whether its effectiveness justifies its large share of the practicum. In the present context, a distinction can be made between long-term observation of a cooperating teacher and the observation of individual examples of teaching. The latter may be live sample lessons taught by either the cooperating teacher or supervisor or, alternatively, videotaped lessons, possibly professionally developed.

Although the survey did not probe exactly how observation takes place, it has been noted elsewhere that

> although student teachers have always observed prior to taking over a class, they typically observe as they grade papers, help pupils with seatwork, and perform other clerical tasks for supervising teachers, or, they sit quietly and "look" without training in the skills of observation. (Mills, 1980, p. 5)

The need for a more focused approach to observation has therefore been stressed. This position is taken by Mills, who advocates training student teachers in clinical observation (as opposed to Nutter's clinical approach).

Mills (1980) defines *clinical observation* as the "structured, intense, systematic viewing and recording of significant information about classroom environments and events" (p. 5). She points out that the student teacher needs to acquire information concerning a classroom's schedule of activities, character of instruction, organization, management, norms, and rituals. Not all the information that could be provided to the student teacher is provided, and there may be mismatches between the expectations engendered by other parts of the training program and the reality of the ESL classroom. Developing an observation system that provides for a detailed breakdown of classroom experience at successively finer levels of analysis under these headings allows supervisors of student teachers to

> (a) identify and question discrepancies between things learned on campus and events in the classroom; (b) use observational data as a basis for improving communication; (c) clarify any misconceptions student teachers might have about what they observed; and (d) supply information that is conspicuously absent from student teachers' observational data. (Mills, 1980, p. 6)

The allocation of more time to the observation of live examples of teaching than to the viewing of videotaped examples of teaching noted in the survey is supported in a recent investigation into the effectiveness of demonstration lessons (in a mainstream, K-12 education program). Putnam (1985) compared a variety of demonstration formats, including both live and videotaped lessons, and found that live demonstrations of connected lessons were perceived to be most beneficial.

SUPERVISED CLASSROOM TEACHING

Of all practicum experiences, supervised classroom teaching ranked highest for time allocation in TESOL practicum programs. This experience normally involves practice teaching in a regular classroom under the direction of a cooperating teacher and under the overall supervision of the supervisor of the practicum course. Since the survey suggests that the practicum is largely dependent on supervised practice teaching, the choice of cooperating teacher and the kind of supervision provided are clearly key factors in determining the success of the practicum course. Several questions in the survey addressed the choice of the master teacher and the kind of supervision provided.

The Survey

The results indicated that the selection of cooperating teachers was done on a case-by-case basis. Although no clear pattern emerged, factors cited included the proximity of the participating school to the campus, the familiarity of the cooperating teacher to the course supervisor, the fact that the cooperating teacher graduated from the same university program, nomination of the cooperating teacher by students in the program, personal contact with the cooperating teacher, and reputation of the cooperating teacher. At best, cooperating teachers were selected because of their known skills as teachers; at worst, by availability.

The survey indicated that in about half the programs surveyed, responsibility for the practice teaching experience was shared by

the master teacher and the supervisor, whereas in other programs the supervisor assumed the main responsibility for the practice teaching.

Feedback on student performance during practice teaching originated most often from the supervisor. Students rarely gave each other feedback on their practice teaching. The forms of feedback in order of frequency of use were as follows:

1 Conferences with supervisor/cooperating teacher
2 Observation of videotapes of a lesson
3 Peer feedback
4.5 Written reports
4.5 Use of audiotapes of a lesson

Most respondents (87%) reported the use of a checklist or observation form as a standardized procedure for giving written feedback.

Discussion

The concept of teaching practice reflects an apprenticeship view of the process of teacher education. The novice teacher is "apprenticed" to a "master teacher" and is expected to learn some of the master teacher's skills through observing, working with, and, in many cases, getting feedback from the master teacher. The standard pattern of organization is one in which the ESL department or program enlists the cooperation of schools or teachers who agree to offer classrooms for teaching practice. The practice teaching typically begins with observation of the cooperating teacher, with the student gradually taking over responsibility for teaching part of a lesson, under the supervision of the cooperating teacher. Supervision by the coordinator of the practicum course may take the form of occasional or regular visits by the supervisor, reports to the supervisor from the cooperating teacher or the student, peer feedback, or conferences with the supervisor.

The kinds of experiences students encounter in their practice teaching are to some extent dependent on chance, since master teachers may make different kinds of demands on student teachers. As a consequence, a substantial portion of the content of the practicum is probably beyond the control of the practicum supervisor, since there is often little or no control over the interaction between the master teacher and the trainee. As Cruickshank and Armaline (1986) put it:

> One field-based teacher educator might . . . ask the [student] to spend considerable time observing, then practicing according to a local standard. Another . . . might demand the student define his or her role as a teacher, act on it, and consider its consequences and outcomes. (p. 37)

The success of the practice teaching experience depends therefore on the kinds of liaison and communication established between supervisor and master teacher. The responsibilities of the cooperating teacher and the purpose of visits from the supervisor need to be clearly established. At the same time, student teachers need to be made aware of what is expected of them. Zimpher, deVoss, and Nott (1980), in one of the few studies of the relationship between supervision and teacher trainees, attest to the crucial role of the supervisor:

> First, at least four of the findings suggest that if the university supervisor were not directly involved in the student teaching experience, there would have been no direction set for requirements, evaluation, or assessment of the student teacher's experience in the school site. Second, informational communication between participants appeared to be enhanced because of the presence of the university supervisor. Students and teachers (and the principal) appeared unable to deal with each other very directly and needed an interlocutor's assistance—in this case the university supervisor. Third, even though the university supervisor in our study appeared to be frustrated by a lack of direct influence on the teaching style of the student teachers, the supervisor seemed to be the only one making any critical contributions to the student teachers' progress. (p. 14)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the last 20 years, the practicum has come to be acknowledged as an important part of the ESL teacher's professional preparation in many TESOL programs. However, this survey of practicum courses revealed a wide variety of options for designing and implementing the practicum. Central issues that emerged concern objectives for the practicum course, settings used, logistics, the curriculum, and supervision. Comments and recommendations for each of these areas are offered for consideration by practicum supervisors and ESL faculty.

Objectives

The objectives for the practicum currently reflect the uncertain status of classroom teaching and practical experience in TESOL

CONCLUSION

Our goal in this article has been to determine current practices and to identify key issues and problems in the practicum in order to establish priorities for needed research. This survey has confirmed that a variety of different approaches are currently in use in implementing the practicum requirement in ESOL teacher preparation programs and that the importance of the experience provided in a practicum is increasingly recognized. However, we still possess little information on the effectiveness of current practicum practices. As Stern (1983) remarked,

> there is little research, systematic experimentation, or attested knowledge which would demonstrate that these different procedures [in teacher preparation] actually contribute to the learning experiences of prospective language teachers. (pp. 353-354)

The field of TESOL is not alone in having neglected this aspect of teacher preparation, since the same observations have been made in mainstream education. In the latter case, however, the reasons for neglect have been identified (Haberman, 1983), and an agenda for research and evaluation has been initiated (Katz & Raths, 1985; Ornstein, 1985). It is now time for professionals in ESOL teacher education to apply the same concerns for knowledge and effectiveness that we have with regard to second language teaching to the training and education of second language teachers. ■

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 21st Annual TESOL Convention in Miami Beach, April 1987.

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