



THE EFFICACY OF SIMULATED TEACHING IN PREPARING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR PRACTICUM

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ABSTRACT

Teacher training programme has been recognised for its importance in training and preparing pre-service teachers for practicum and teaching profession. Interest in the field is noticeable with a number of studies conducted on teacher training areas. To ensure that appropriate training is given for the pre-service teachers prior to their actual classroom teaching, there is a need to look into the extent the pedagogical and content knowledge are delivered and acquired. Pre-service teachers in local public universities have gone through difficult times adjusting to real school environment during practicum period even though they have attended and completed their fair share of mock teaching in simulated teaching classroom. In Malaysia, research on simulated teaching as part of teacher training is still limited and the focus is normally given on the area of assessments and curriculum. Hence, it is the aim of this study to identify issues faced by the pre-service teachers during the practicum. For the purpose of this study, six pre-service teachers were selected as participants from a local public university through purposive sampling; the participants have to have gone through both simulated teaching and teaching practicum. Data were gathered through one-on-one narrative interviews and focus group interviews and analysed with thematic and content analysis. The findings reveal that simulated teaching is effective because of the feedback gathered and it can be further improved by increasing its frequency, integrating more role plays, and including a comprehensive Q&A session after the teaching.

Keywords: Micro-teaching, simulated teaching, teacher training programme, teaching practicum, pre-service teachers, education

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language teacher training programme offers courses related to pedagogical and content knowledge. The application of the said courses is then executed during school observation programme (SOP), in which pre-service teachers are exposed to the actual classroom situation and are asked to observe experienced teachers teaching, and teaching practicum. According to Bell (2007, p. 14), the term “micro-teaching” is defined as the “playground” for the pre-service teachers or the education courses students ‘teaching’ a lesson to their colleagues to get experience on how to execute and deliver lesson plans. Simulated teaching is somewhat similar to micro-teaching (Lehn, Ohlsson, & Nason, 1993) except for micro-teaching has shorter duration because it aims to focus on developing and strengthening one skill at a time. Simulated teaching [with micro-teaching being a part of it] is offered as part of language teacher training programme to help the pre-service teachers bridge the theories with application. The aforementioned course is helpful in building their confidence in teaching, particularly in an actual classroom situation, after teaching a series of mini lessons to their colleagues who act as the simulated students. According to Ismail (2011), micro-teaching has been widely used in the field of education to enhance pre-service teachers’ instructional experiences and develop effective teaching strategies.

The research on language teacher training and the efficacy of simulated teaching is still limited in Malaysia and the focus is normally given on assessments and curriculum at school. Due to the aforementioned situation, it is the aim of this study to investigate the pre-service teachers’ simulated teaching experience and its relevance to practicum teaching. The objectives of this study are: (1) To identify issues regarding teaching practicum and the preparation course for practicum, and (2) To find out ways to improve the quality of the aforementioned preparation course. Data were gathered through six sessions of narrative individual interview and a session of a focus group interview using semi-structured interview questions. They were interviewed on ways in which simulated teaching has prepared them for practicum and suggestions to improve simulated teaching to ensure better, more positive experience during practicum among the pre-service teachers.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teacher Training

“Good teaching”, according to Liou (2001, p. 198), is defined as “a collection of skilful pedagogical techniques and previous transmission of subject matter knowledge which included linguistic and pedagogy”; courses ingrained in teacher training should be given extra attention in order to produce more competent teachers who are proficient in both pedagogical approaches and linguistic knowledge. In order to ensure the language teacher training is effective, the content must reflect to the definition of “good teaching” as per stated earlier.

Teacher training comprises of counselling and feedback session from teacher trainers and peers, organization of class time, use of instructional and teaching aids, and developing strategies for different learners (Angrist & Lavy, 2001). There are also sessions on pedagogical courses in which pre-service teachers experience micro-teaching or simulated teaching which focuses on lesson planning and mock teaching which integrates content knowledge (i.e.

grammar, phonology and language skills like listening and speaking) and knowledge of classroom strategies and management (Chien, 2014; Copland, 2010).

Aside from that, teacher training should prepare the pre-service teachers for the actual situation of the profession. They need to be exposed on planning effective lessons, improvising lessons to ensure the objectives are met, and analyse the lessons after they are executed. Hiebert et al. (2007) highlighted the importance of pre-service teachers having the ability to evaluate and critically analyse what they want to set for their students in the actual classroom situation. Evaluation and analysis should include the probability of the set goals achieved, factors leading to lesson being a failure or a success and how the lesson can be improved.

According to Ngui (1982), micro-teaching, apart from complementing practicum, helps pre-service teachers to integrate educational theory with practice. In order for higher educational institutions to produce pedagogically and linguistically competent teachers, teacher training programme, according to Bruinsma and Jansen (2010), should be of high quality as it helps pre-service teachers to decide to stay in the profession or consider other options apart from teaching.

2.2 The Need for Simulated Teaching

Previous studies have proven that simulated teaching is helpful in preparing the pre-service teachers for their teaching practicum and for reflective practice. Pre-service teachers gain and develop professional knowledge on being a teacher through micro-teaching, observation, simulation or simulated teaching, and role-play (as cited Chien, 2014). For instance, they learn to reflect and observe by themselves on the pedagogical approaches chosen and applied during micro-teaching and simulated teaching sessions. Chien (2014) supports that participants of simulated teaching learn to reflect on their practice, sharpen their pedagogical and content knowledge –which comprise of classroom management, use of instructional aids, and activity designs. Ralph (2014) in his study on the effectiveness of micro-teaching found that micro-teaching is helpful in providing them the channel to bridge theories in teaching with application, aside from exposing them to feeling comfortable with teaching. According to Lehn, Ohlsson, and Nason (1993) simulated teaching is helpful for the pre-service teachers to reflect on how they teach, undo their actions, observe how their actions can affect students in the classroom, and try out new teaching skills and see if they can be applied later with the real students in a classroom during teaching practicum.

Micro-teaching and simulated teaching are also said to be helpful in preparing pre-service teachers for practicum because of the feedback given by peers and teacher trainers after each session of mini-lessons. Receiving and giving feedback help the pre-service teachers to discover their strengths and weaknesses in executing favourable teaching approaches and their linguistic competence (Ralph, 2014). The aforementioned statement is further supported by Ismail (2011) in which he said that receiving and giving feedbacks help pre-service teachers to assist themselves in altering and developing realistic and effective teaching practices to be executed during practicum, apart from helping them to develop professionalism or the image of “teacher’s presence”. The previous studies cited in this section has proven that micro-teaching is effective in preparing pre-service teachers for practicum because of the provision of space for them to getting comfortable with teaching, aside from sharpening their pedagogical and content knowledge. Feedback as part of micro-teaching is also mentioned to be helpful in boosting the pre-service teachers’ confidence in teaching.

2.3 Teaching Practicum: its Purpose and Requirements

Teaching practicum is designed to be part of the teacher training programme as a platform for the pre-service teachers to do a trial run of the theories they have applied in micro-teaching and simulated teaching. Teaching practicum is an essential component for the preparation of the beginner teachers (Yunus et al., 2010). Seppala and Alamaki (2003), believe that teaching practicum is great because it exposes the pre-service teachers to the everyday life of school students; they can use their knowledge and experiences from the teacher training to grow into more capable teachers. Teaching practicum is when the pre-service teachers can see whether the classroom management, for instance, or their instructional aids can be applied in the real classroom situation. Fazio, Melville, and Bartley (2010) further weigh in the issue and claim that teaching practicum has helped increase their awareness in implementing any teaching style and method in classroom; teaching practicum has exposed them to the challenges they are going to face in their own future classroom.

Teaching practicum is an important part of the whole teacher training programme because it is used by the pre-service teachers to evaluate their performance in teaching, apart from assessing if the skills learned during simulated teaching are transferrable in an actual classroom situation during teaching practicum. Yunus et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of teaching practicum towards the pre-service teachers' decision of whether to stay in the teaching profession or opt for another profession. The requirement for teaching practicum to be deemed as successful include positive treatment from administration and good relationship with school staffs and mentor teachers. Aside from that, teaching practicum is also required to include self-reflection as part of its evaluation and assessment. According to Wright (2010), reflection is important for the pre-service teachers to improve on their teaching skills. It is paramount for the pre-service teachers to constantly examine their lesson plans and how they can be improved despite how difficult it is to do so. Without this honest self-reflection, it is going to be tough for these pre-service teachers to grow into more capable teachers.

Teaching practicum varies according to universities in terms of activities, course outline, and duration; however, it basically gives similar experiences to pre-service teachers in terms of activities that can be done in the classroom and their respective duration, and teaching practice under the supervision of a more experienced colleague, which is known as the mentor teacher (Fazio et al., 2010). To add, pre-service teachers' bad impression on their performance during teaching practicum, according to Harris and Sass (2011), could be as a result of extreme standardisation in pedagogical approaches. For instance, the pre-service teachers are not thoroughly exposed managing a classroom with students of mixed abilities, or how to discipline a classroom. Hence, it is required for the pre-service teachers to be exposed to various pedagogical approaches during simulated teaching so they can perform better during teaching practicum.

2.4 Criticisms on Micro-teaching and Simulated Teaching

Though micro-teaching and simulated teaching are claimed to be a great tool to help pre-service teachers apply all the theories previously learned and prepare them for teaching practicum, there are a few criticisms on the efficacy of micro-teaching and simulated teaching in preparing the pre-service teachers for teaching practicum and for the profession of teaching later.

Micro-teaching and simulated teaching are claimed to be ineffective because they do not provide a close-to-real classroom environment; the simulated students are their peers and the

problems faced in simulated classrooms are not as tough and complicated as in real classroom situation. Santagata, Zannoni, and Stigler (2007) mentioned the importance of having pre-service teachers exposed to the complexity of the reality they will have to face later –like issues with students, administration, fellow teachers, and the current education system. Bell (2007) further criticized the efficacy of simulated teaching and pointed out that some of the participants in the study refer to micro-teaching and simulated teaching as “fake teaching” as the behaviours and interaction adopted in the session were unusual and unnatural since it is difficult for the pre-service teachers to assume the position of a teacher and assume the lecturer or the teacher trainer as one of the students.

In addition to that, even though feedback given in the sessions of micro-teaching and simulated teaching are cited to be helpful in the previous section, Bell (2007) claimed the feedback from lecturer or teacher trainer given during the simulated teaching session creates distraction and disrupts the pre-service teachers’ flow in teaching and this leads them to having less confidence in what they are doing. Apart from that, simulated teaching and micro-teaching are doubted to be helpful in preparing pre-service teachers for practicum because the said teachers are more focused on getting good grades rather than perceiving them as a way to prepare themselves for teaching practicum and later, the teaching profession. Micro-teaching is “not intended to mirror reality... There is little use in forcing the idea that micro-teaching to peers is equivalent to instructing students... it is an educational activity being undertaken for a required course credit” (Bell, 2007, p. 37). What Bell claimed is also supported by Hiebert et al. (2007) that argued about the unrealistic expectations put on pre-service teachers to be expert in teaching after the short duration of time allocated for teacher training programme.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

It is the aim of this study to identify issues faced by the pre-service teachers during teaching practicum. Among the objectives of the study are: (1) to identify issues regarding teaching practicum and the preparation course for practicum, and (2) to recommend ways to improve the quality of the aforementioned preparation course. The participants of the study were asked about their experiences during teaching practicum and simulated teaching. They were asked to give recommendations on how simulated teaching can be improved to ensure the course is more effective in the future as one of the subjects in teacher training programme.

The research design for the study is a qualitative study in which the data are collected using two types of interviews. The study was carried out in the duration of about 5 months, which is from December 2015 until June 2016. For the first stage of the data collection, the six participants of the study were interviewed individually. The interview is a narrative interview and a set of semi-structured questions was used. Narrative interview is defined as an interview in which the participants are asked to answer the questions in a longer, coherent account on the subject matter of the study, which is the efficacy of simulated teaching in preparing them for teaching practicum. Semi-structured questions were adopted for the study to ensure the answers given are of specific and personal views, and to avoid from influencing their thoughts on the subject matter.

The second stage of data collection is a focus group interview in which all of the six participants sat together and were asked questions on the subject matter. The focus group interview also uses a set of semi-structured questions but it is a different set from the individual, narrative interview. The questions were tailored according to their responses analysed from the narrative interview. The researcher was only there as the mediator and observer. Questions

were asked at random and anyone responded to the questions asked and to each other's responses on the subject matter.

The purpose of having a one-to-one interview with each of the participant is to collect the data based on their personal experiences during teaching practicum. If the participants are interviewed together, they might be embarrassed to share their journey throughout the practicum, or feel intimidated by other participants. Focus group interview was done after the narrative, one-to-one interview because the researcher wanted to see whether all of the participants shared the same experience during practicum. Aside from that, focus group interview was proven to be helpful for some of the participants to recall some of the experiences they had gone through during both simulated teaching and teaching practicum, the ones that they forgot to mention during the one-to-one interview. During the focus group interview, it was observed that the participants unanimously agreed that simulated teaching was helpful to prepare them for practicum and they came to that realization after discussing among each other about the subject matter. In other words, the participants saw simulated teaching and its efficacy from other people's perspectives and that changed the way they see it as part of the teacher training programme.

The data were collected at the Faculty of Education of a local public university. The participants were selected through purposive sampling in which they need to fulfill the prerequisite requirements for the study: (1) they have gone through teaching practicum, and (2) they have gone through simulated teaching courses prior to teaching practicum. All of the participants are female and they were the final year students of Bachelor of Education (TESL) with age ranging between 22 and 25 years old when the data was collected.

After the data were collected, they were transcribed and categorized according to patterns using thematical analysis. The transcriptions were read several times to identify recurring themes and coding was used to classify the extracts of the interviews based on the themes identified. Examples of the themes identified are: (1) content of simulated teaching, (2) procedure of simulated teaching, (3) criticisms on simulated teaching, (4) teaching practicum, just to name a few. Content analysis was also used to match the findings with the previous researches cited for this study and to identify whether the findings are similar or they contradict each other. Content analysis was also used to match the findings of the study with the research objectives.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data collected and analysed, simulated teaching and micro-teaching are claimed by the participants to have their drawbacks and advantages, and there are ways both of the courses can be improved to produce more capable and of good quality teachers.

Based on the study, the participants unanimously agreed that even though classroom management and discipline was not explicitly taught in both simulated teaching and micro-teaching, they were given guidelines by their supervisors and mentor teachers on how to manage classroom and discipline their students during teaching practicum. The said guidelines include creating a scary first impression, setting ground rules, limitations, and boundaries, and learning how to be stern and strict with the students. Since the component, though deemed as important by previous research as cited, was not explicitly introduced during the numerous sessions of simulated teaching and micro-teaching, the participants suggested that in order to

ensure the courses are more effective, skills related to managing classroom and disciplining students should be taught more explicitly through role plays.

“I think we can set some ground rules.”

Teacher 1 | Classroom management | Focus group interview

*“Yes and get to know them. If they’re this type of students and they like to be friendly to you and they can respect you by doing that, by you getting friendly with them, then do it. But **there should be a limit**, not too friendly or too distant. If they are the type who doesn’t want to get close to you, **just limit your interaction, your friendliness. Don’t get too close. You have to see who your students are.**”*

Teacher 3 | Classroom management | Focus group interview

According to Chien (2014) and Angrist and Lavy (2001), one of the main components of simulated teaching and micro-teaching is classroom management and discipline

The participants said that feedback given by peers and teacher trainers, not only during simulated teaching but also during teaching practicum, were helpful throughout the journey in improving their teaching methodology. They learned about their strengths and weaknesses, apart from having a medium to do a trial-run for their lesson plans before presenting to their students. This contradicts with Bell’s (2007) criticism on feedback in which she claimed that feedback given during sessions of simulated teaching are irrelevant because they are disruptive; pre-service teachers’ confidence in teaching is tampered because of the disruption.

*“You ask for feedback and opinions from your friends during practicum as well, not just during simulated teaching. That’s what I did. Like...I didn’t know what to do so I asked my friends’ opinions and **they gave me suggestions**. Some of them went to my class and **observed me teaching**, then shared with me about the students. They also told us about our **strengths and weaknesses, what should and should not be done.**”*

Teacher 3 | Feedback | Focus group interview

“The feedback helped me a lot, like from my friends, they told me how they genuinely felt after I taught and they highlighted the things I missed out –I felt good getting feedbacks, even bad comments, I like them, because I could improve myself.”

Teacher 1 | Feedback | One-to-one interview

The contradiction between the findings of the study and the cited study is probably as a result of different execution of simulated teaching procedures. The feedback, according to the participants, was given after they have taught during simulated teaching while the participants in Bell’s study (2007) received their feedbacks when they were teaching during simulated teaching. Of course feedbacks given during the simulated lesson would be disruptive because it disrupts the flow of the lessons and tampers with the pre-service trains of thoughts.

All of the participants are aware of the fact that micro-teaching and simulated teaching are not there to “mirror the reality”, as cited from Bell (2007) but they still benefit from both of the courses because they provide them to practice teaching before they went for practicum. The participants of the study mentioned that simulated teaching and micro-teaching lack in giving them an in-depth idea on how teaching practicum is going to be –they were not exposed to the profession, dealing with the administration and other teachers professionally –and that

somehow tampers their motivation to stay in the teaching profession after they ended the 12-week teaching practicum at the respective schools.

“And then, the ICT Room is in the library. I booked the room but when I wanted to use it, the teacher in charge of the library used the room. I told her I’ve booked the room but she just told me to bring my students back to their class and teach them there.”

Teacher 4 | Teaching practicum | Focus group interview

“The resources are limited and some teachers decide to dominate them all and keep it all to them to be used.”

Teacher 3 | Teaching practicum | Focus group interview

Aside from having to deal with teachers, the pre-service teachers got motivated to teach after teaching practicum ended because of the bad experiences during teaching practicum. Lack of exposure about actual school situation demotivates the participants from joining the teaching profession. Santagata et al. (2007) highlighted the importance of exposing pre-service teachers to the realities of teaching before they go for teaching practicum.

The participants gave some recommendations and suggestion to increase the efficacy of simulated teaching and micro-teaching preparing pre-service teachers for teaching practicum, and later for teaching profession. In order to ensure simulated teaching and micro-teaching are more effective in preparing pre-service teachers for practicum, the participants suggested that more sessions of micro-teaching and simulated teaching should be done every semester throughout the four years of being a Bachelor of Education student. In addition to that, one of the participants of the study suggested that the duration of teaching practicum should be lengthened so pre-service teachers are able to adapt and accommodate to the new environment when they teach.

*“Or maybe the **duration of practicum can be lengthened** from 2 months to a semester [6 months] to create better teachers.”*

Teacher 4 | Suggestion | Focus group interview

Bruinsma and Jansen (2010) claimed that teacher training and all the courses ingrained in the said training are important to help the pre-service teachers to decide whether they want to stay in the profession or opt for other profession that is unrelated to teaching.

Having a pre-practicum before the real teaching practicum is also one of the recommendations suggested by one of the participants of the study. This idea was not accepted by all; one of the participants said this would be difficult to be executed since public schools have fixed syllabus and accommodating pre-service teachers at their schools would be time-consuming and difficult. Another participant added that it would be better if the administration of the faculty can discuss with any school [public or private] if they can have pre-service teachers coming to the school and be a teacher assistant. More role plays should be included in the sessions of simulated teaching so pre-service teachers are able to improvise quicker when teaching in the real classroom setting, according to Teacher 4.

“I agree with what was said earlier –give situations and have your simulated students acting them out. Your students are running out of your classroom, what should you do?”

Teacher 4 | Suggestion | Focus group interview

The role plays should not only be able to assist pre-service teachers in learning classroom management and discipline, they will also be able to create lessons to cater to students of mixed abilities. Bell (2007) described in her study that micro-teaching and simulated teaching should be considered as “technical redoing” in which the pre-service teachers learn to teach through demonstrations, rehearsals, and practice –which basically sums up how the role plays can be done in the said courses.

Another recommendation given by the participant is simulated teaching and micro-teaching sessions should include a comprehensive an in-depth Q&A session and the said session should focus on teaching methodology and classroom discipline and management.

*“There were like some improvisations we did in our simulated teaching but based on your question, I think it can be added more situations in our simulated teaching. For example, **lecturers can create situations that make us feel the need to improvise.**”*

Teacher 3 | Recommendation | Focus group interview

*“A Q&A session? **The lecturer can ask questions and give situations, and then we can come up with solutions and ways to handle the situation.**”*

Teacher 5 | Recommendation | Focus group interview

The comprehensive Q&A session for the pre-service teachers to scrutinize on their teaching methodology and skills are mentioned in Hiebert et al.'s (2007) paper in which they proposed sessions of pre-service teachers learning how to teach through focusing on how they learn and how that can help them to further improve on their teaching skills. Hiebert et al. also mentioned that it is very important for the teacher training programme to provide a comprehensive and systematic medium for the pre-service teachers to learn how to be more effective over time. Howard (2003) also mentions the importance of having a comprehensive Q&A session after every session of simulated teaching and micro-teaching as they help pre-service teachers to determine which pedagogical practices are most suitable and relevant to be applied in classroom so they would be meaningful for the students’ learning process (as cited from Wright, 2010). Bell (2007) further added that micro-teaching and simulated teaching will be more effective in preparing pre-service teachers for teaching practicum if there is an authentic exchange of ideas among the pre-service teachers. The Q&A session should also integrate reflection session in it so the pre-service teachers can develop their reasoning skills as to why they employ the teaching methodology and pedagogical approach of their choice and how their performance can be improved (Chien, 2014). Liou (2001) argued further on the critical reflection by stating its importance in raising the pre-service teachers’ awareness and knowledge related to pedagogical approaches, apart from giving them deeper understanding on teaching thus triggering positive change in their teaching performance.

The participants of the study are aware it is impossible for them to be well-versed in everything in teaching just after attending a few sessions of simulated teaching since learning how to teach is an on-the-go process. However, they still believe they would be able to perform better during teaching practicum if they were exposed to a more comprehensive introduction of teaching methodology, pedagogical approaches, and classroom discipline and management. Ralph's study (2014) also shared the same result in which the participants of his study are aware that micro-teaching is designed as a “developmental, graduated simulation activities” to help prepare them for simulated teaching, teaching practicum, and later for when they decide to serve in the teaching profession.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Participants were consistent in saying that micro-teaching and simulated teaching should have been introduced earlier to make them a more effective teacher training programme. Apart from that, they also suggested that teaching practicum should have longer duration than two months. Roles of teacher trainers and simulated students were also mentioned to increase the efficacy of the said training programme.

It is believed that the courses simulated teaching and micro-teaching need a lot of revamp in order for them to be more effective in preparing pre-service teachers for teaching practicum and for the teaching profession later. It is hoped that the faculty would not only recognise the shortcomings of simulated teaching and micro-teaching as shared by the pre-service teachers, but also try to maintain all the positive aspects of the said courses and overcome and better the negative aspects. Based on the findings of the study, the faculty can perhaps consider for a longer duration of teaching practicum, apart from providing a pre-practicum for the pre-service teachers. Those who are in-charge of outlining the assessments for the said courses can also benefit from the findings of this study. As per suggested, simulated teaching and micro-teaching can be done on semester basis every academic year rather than introducing them a semester before the pre-service teachers go for their teaching practicum. It is also hoped that this study can provide a platform for further investigation in the area of teacher training, efficacy of simulated teaching, and motivation to teach among pre-service teachers. To quote, “micro-teaching [and simulated teaching as part of teacher training programme] can be a successful learning experience [for pre-service teachers], provided that it is implemented appropriately” (Ralph, 2014, p. 24).

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