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TEACHING PRACTICUM OF AN ENGLISH TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM IN VIETNAM: FROM EXPECTATIONS TO REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Teaching practicum is very essential in the process of learning how to teach, so it should be paid great attention by not only teacher education program designers but also implementators. The paper reports a study on the efficiency of teaching practicum which has been conducted at Public University (pseudonym) in Vietnam. The research employed qualitative approach, and semi-structured interviews were used as the instrument for the data collection. Findings reveal that the implementation of the teaching practicum did not provide student teachers with sufficient chances to develop their teaching skill efficiently. Inappropriate method of implementing the teaching practicum, loose cooperation between the university and high schools, and insufficient support are major issues that caused the teaching practicum to be ineffective. Peer mentoring and a more suitable method of implementing the internship are recommended solutions to improve the effectiveness of the teaching practicum in the English Teacher Education Program at Public University in particular and other English teacher education programs in Vietnam in general.

Keywords: Educational program, peer mentoring, teacher education, teaching practicum, teaching skills, Vietnam

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since “Doi Moi” (innovations) policy in 1986, Vietnam has been trying to open up its economy and relationship with the Western countries. Therefore, the role of English language has become increasingly important (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Vo, 2017). English is considered as the facilitator for the social and economic change in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2017).

However, the reality is far from expectations when the quality of teachers of English is quite low. As part of the National Language 2020 project, all teachers of English at all educational levels are required to take the English proficiency tests. It is reported after the tests that 44.6% of tertiary teachers of English, 55.5% of English specialized teachers, 83% of primary English teachers, 87.1% of lower secondary English teachers, 91.8% of senior secondary English teachers do not meet the requirements of language proficiency (Nguyen, 2013). It is required that teachers of English at tertiary level and senior secondary schools have to obtain English at C1 of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) or level 5 of Vietnamese six-level framework of language proficiency (Nguyen, 2017). Besides language proficiency, the use of teaching methods like audio-lingual teaching methodology or rote learning are widely employed in English language teaching in Vietnam (Le, 2001; Nguyen, 2017).

The low quality of the in-service teachers of English raises the concern for the quality of English teacher education programs whether these programs have provided student teachers with sufficient language proficiency development and methodology skills (Nguyen, 2017). In order to have insights into the English Teacher Education Program (ETEP) at Public University, one of the three largest universities that educate teachers of English in Vietnam, the research was conducted on the implementation of the teaching practicum of the program. The research aims at featuring a comprehensive picture of ETEP's teaching practicum from students' perspective and suggesting solutions to problems for improvement.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English Teacher Education Program at Public University

Currently, there are 133 institutions that take part in training teachers and educational managers, among which there are 14 universities of teacher education and 39 colleges of teacher education (Nguyen, 2014). Public University is one of the three largest universities that educate teachers of foreign languages in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, all English teacher education programs have somehow similar curriculum because they all have to conform to the guidelines provided by Ministry of Education and Training (Ministry of Education and Training, 2015). Each program has two main parts: general knowledge domain and professional knowledge domain. The teaching practicum is implemented at the end of the program when students finish all their compulsory subjects.

ETEP is one of the 13 programs implemented by Public University. The program has 274 students. The number of lecturers who are responsible for the program is 16, among whom are two Doctors of Philosophy and the rest are Master of either TESOL or Linguistics.

ETEP is supposed to normally cover four years, but students can finish their program earlier if they can accumulate enough credits for their graduation. Among 148 credits, 31 of are reserved for general courses, 58 credits for language courses, 12 credits for methodological courses. Teaching practicum accounts for five credits and the rest of credits is reserved for literature, and linguistic subjects (Public University, 2015).

2.2 Teaching Practicum

Teaching practicum is a compulsory part of any teacher education programs in Vietnam. Teaching practicum is conducted at the end of teacher education programs, which is “believed to be an important stage in the process of teacher training and the time when the teacher-student has a chance to make contact with the lively world of their profession, helping them reinforce, expand and improve what they have learnt in the pedagogical institutions.” (Nguyen, 2014, p. 47) Student teachers are sent to schools in groups. Each group is guided by one university lecturers and members of the group are under the supervision of school teachers. The duration for teaching practicum is from 8 weeks to 10 weeks, which may account for up to 10 credits, depending on each university. In ETEP, teaching practicum lasts for 8 weeks and takes up 5 credits.

The content of teaching practicum is to help students get acquainted with educational practice, to practice the work of a form teacher, to practice teaching and to prepare final internship report. Among the four components of teaching practicum, practicing teaching is considered the most important one and it takes most time of students at schools. Practicing teaching involves four different activities: conducting instructional planning for eight weeks of teaching practicum, observing at least two lessons given by their school teachers, developing lesson plans under the guide of school teachers, conducting at least eight lessons (Nguyen, 2014).

The activities of teaching practicum is evaluated using 10 point-scale: excellent (9-10), good (8-<9), fair (7-<8), pretty average (6-<7), average (5-6), low (4-<5), weak (below 4). In ETEP, students are assessed by both lecturers, who are responsible for students’ teaching practicum and school teachers, who directly guide students at high schools (Public University, 2015).

2.3 Previous Studies on English Teacher Education in Vietnam

Several research studies have been done in the field of education, but often with the focus on in-service teacher training, especially when National Language 2020 Project, which aims to improve language teaching and learning context in Vietnam at all levels, has been implemented. Studies which focus on the effectiveness of the in-service teacher training programs were carried out to improve not only teachers’ English language proficiency but also their pedagogical skills (e.g. Phan & Locke, 2016; Phan, 2015; Pham, 2017; Vo, 2017). These programs are effective in upgrading the quality of English teachers though these programs need to consider specific needs of teachers of English in different areas of Vietnam. Nevertheless, pre-service teacher education including teaching practicum is not paid sufficient attention (Le, 2013).

Teaching practicum is one essential part of the process of learning how to teach in teacher education programs (Nguyen, 2014, 2017). In Vietnam, a teacher education program often lasts for four years and its curriculum often focuses on the process of learning how to teach. It is normal that students of teacher education programs have two chances to practice teaching at schools (Nguyen, 2014). Yet, students of ETEP have only one time for teaching practicum at the end of the program (Public university, 2015).

Le (2013) conducted a study on teaching practicum as part of a TESOL program. Le found that teaching practicum is one of the important aspects that greatly contributes to the process

of learning how to teach. Yet, the reality of teaching practicum far reached the expectations of learners. Instead of applying what students learn at universities, students often imitate the way their school teachers teach. In this case, the process of learning how to teach seems to be the process of transferring teaching methods from experienced teachers to “apprentice teachers”. Essential factors like reflection and collegiality which play an important role in professional development are not actually found in teaching practicum. Therefore, the process of learning to teach in teaching practicum becomes an isolated action. Le’s (2013) study is useful in highlighting the challenges of teaching practicum, but it fails to suggest appropriate solutions to shortcomings found in the teaching practicum.

Nguyen and Baldauf (2010), Nguyen and Hudson (2012), and Nguyen (2017) provided an abundant amount of information on teaching practicum in EFL in Vietnam. These series of studies were conducted at one teacher training university in the north of Vietnam. These studies focused on peer mentoring in teaching practicum to enhance the process of learning how to teach in Vietnamese context. In these studies, what is peer mentoring, how important is mentoring in the process of learning, how to teach in English teacher education programs and how peer mentoring is applied in teaching practicum are discussed. Findings of these studies are very useful for English teacher education programs to revise their implementation of teaching practicum with the peer mentoring method. Yet, the studies focused on peer mentoring method, so the challenges faced by students in their work with school teachers are not covered.

All in all, there is a gap that needs to be bridged in the field of teaching practicum so that a comprehensive understandings on what really happen in teaching practicum are provided, especially in ETEP.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research applied qualitative approach, which aims at having a deep investigation into the effectiveness of teaching practicum. Semi-structured interview was employed as the instrument of the research. The research made use of the semi-structured interview because this kind of interviews allows the researchers to both control the focus of the interview and have flexibility in gathering information (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Seven fourth year students were invited for the interview. These students are all 22 years old, and three of them are males.

The interview was conducted in two stages. The first stage was implemented before teaching practicum to find out what they expected to learn from it. On the second stage which was conducted right after students finished their teaching practicum, students were asked about their experience in teaching practicum. Data was recorded for nearly 6 hours and then transcribed into a 10,167 word document for thematic analysis.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students’ Expectations from Teaching Practicum

Before teaching practicum, seven students were interviewed about what they expected to get from teaching practicum. They all showed their excitement that they were going to have interesting time at high schools.

Learning from school teachers is one of the aspects that students expected to obtain from teaching practicum. They thought when working with school teachers, they could learn how to

conduct a lesson, how to design an appropriate lesson plan or to deal with problems arising in class. During teaching practicum, students are considered “apprenticed” to “master” teachers (mentor teachers at schools). Students are hoped to learn from school teachers of English by observing their lessons, getting feedbacks, and working with them (Nguyen & Hudson, 2012).

I hope that I can have a good mentor school teacher who I can learn a lot from. I can learn from her the way to design a lesson plan for specific class. I really expect that I can have chances to learn from observing her lesson about how to deal with classroom issue. I have some knowledge of classroom management but actually find it hard to control up to 45 pupils in class.

(Interview with Student 3, 1/11/2017).

Applying knowledge from teacher education programs into teaching during teaching practicum is the main goal of all teaching practicum (Nguyen, 2014). It is also the major expectation of ETEP students when all students were eager to apply their methodological knowledge in teaching.

My expectations? oh I think I am going to have chance to see whether I can use my pedagogical knowledge I learn from our courses into teaching. It must be an exciting experience.

(Interview with Student 6., 1/11/2017)

Besides, two students also hoped that they could improve their public speaking when taking part in teaching practicum. Five students wished to be familiar with the role of teachers.

...being a teacher is my dream. It will be great to be in front of pupils and work as a teacher. I am not very confident when I am in front of the crowd, maybe this time I will become more confident and improve my public speaking

(Interview with Student 1., 1/11/2017)

During teaching practicum, students not only have to teach some periods but also function as a form teacher (Le, 2013). Under the supervision of school teachers, students are responsible for class activities during teaching practicum.

4.2 Reality of Teaching Practicum

The second stage of the interview was conducted when students finished their teaching practicum. This time, the interview aims at finding what students really experienced during teaching practicum. Overall, four out of seven students replied that their teaching practicum satisfied their expectation. They can learn from their school teachers and had good time at high schools though they were not really happy with their practicing teaching.

My teaching practicum is somehow similar to what I expected. I have a good instructor and she gave me a lot of useful information and guidance but she always wanted me to teach like her. I was not happy all the time because sometimes I don't like her way of teaching.

(Interview with Student 1 at 8:00p.m. 2/4//2018)

Students expected that they could apply what they learnt from methodological courses into teaching at high schools, but the reality is different. They were not allowed to teach in the way they wanted to, but had to follow their school teachers.

My instructor is old and she does not allow me to teach in the way I often do in micro-teaching in methodological courses. She just wants me to focus on grammar and even with speaking lesson, she still asks me to introduce grammatical rules to pupils. I find it unhappy with that.

(Interview with Student 3 at 9 a.m., 2/4/2018)

Actually, it is revealed that in Vietnam, students had tendency to follow or were forced to follow the way of teaching of their school teachers rather than pursuing their own teaching philosophy (Le, 2013). Some school teachers focus too much on the final examination and tend to teach pupils grammatical points, but ignore listening and speaking skills. Under pressure of producing favorable scores coupled with time limitation, some school teachers do not want students to apply the ways of teaching they learn from university because they are afraid that their pupils are not familiar to such ways. In fact, the process of learning how to teach during teaching practicum in Vietnam limits itself around learning how to teach from school teachers and as a result, teaching practicum is not effective (Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010; Le, 2013; Nguyen & Hudson, 2012). Such reality is also seen in ETEP. In ETEP, teaching practicum is not as good as expected because there is a lack of connection between the supervision of ETEP lecturers and mentoring of school teachers during students' teaching practicum, resulting in student teaching with the method decided by the teachers.

Furthermore, one student complained that she did not receive enough support from her teachers. She had to managed all issues herself during teaching practicum. Therefore, she thought she could not develop her teaching skill sufficiently.

I do not know what to say here, terrible time at school. Pupils were not obedient and didn't want to learn, they just wanted to have fun. My instructor (i.e. school) was busy and didn't have much time for me though she was nice and helpful.

(Interview with Student 5, 4/4/2018)

Another problem is the cooperation between lecturers and school teachers. It is expected that lecturers and school teachers will cooperate to mentor students during teaching practicum. Yet, from students' opinions, lecturers just came to high schools to observe one or two periods per students. They let school teachers have full control of students' activities at high schools.

I didn't agree with what my teacher commented on my lesson plan. She asked me to change the lesson plan, but with such change, I did not think that the lesson could develop students' speaking ability well. But when I asked my lecturer for solution, I am advised not to make conflicts with my teachers because it may affect my result later.

(Interview with Student 7, 6/4/2018)

The issue of lack of support from mentors in teaching practicum is common in many Asian countries where teaching practicum of English teacher education programs is found not very effective (Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010; Hu, 2005). The lack of support from the supervisor and mentor in the teaching practicum is the essential problem in Asia countries. In China, Hu (2005)

identifies a problem about the unsatisfactory quality. In Singapore, there is a need for more effective mentoring programs for EFL service teachers during internship (Farrell, 2008).

One more issue raised by students during the interview is that they had no way except for imitating the way their school teachers taught because they did not have flexibility in teaching they must conform to what they were provided by schools. If their lesson plans would not be approved to use if they did not focus to enable pupils to score in tests.

Besides, unlike other teacher education programs of other universities like Teacher Education University of Hochiminh City (Nguyen, 2014), ETEP does not have field trips for students at the end of ETEP. With such time for teaching practicum, it is a doubt that students can develop their teaching skills sufficiently.

In sum, the reality of teaching practicum is far from what students of ETEP expected to have. Specifically, students were not provided with chances to apply what they learnt from methodological courses into their teaching. Lack of support from school teachers and a loose cooperation between school teachers and lecturers also result in the ineffectiveness of teaching practicum in ETEP.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Teaching practicum is the time for students to practice teaching or in other words, to learn how to teach in the real teaching context. However, in ETEP, the implementation of teaching practicum is not very effective when students lack support from both high school teachers and lecturers, and are not given sufficient chances to apply what they learn from methodological courses. The pressure of marks prevents school teachers from appropriately guiding students to develop their teaching ability (Nguyen, 2017).

Teaching practicum of ETEP has issues regarding the mentoring process. Mentoring is very crucial in teaching practicum because it is “the most common mechanism used to develop pre-service teachers’ instructional practice in their classroom” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 1). In fact, the quality of mentoring depends on many elements such as the need for substantial investments of time, money, efforts and resources and the roles of teachers as role models and mentors (Dyer & Nguyen, 1999; Saban, 2002; Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010).

To raise the effectiveness of teaching practicum, there should be a better connection between lecturers and school teachers, as well as lecturers’ on-time and effective support for students, and school teachers’ sufficient supervision for students. First of all, the connection between lecturers and teachers mentoring students at schools should be strengthened. Lecturers are responsible for initiating students to schools and support them when they need. School teachers have more important role because they guide students to learn how to teach through observation and actual teaching. An unfortunate fact is lecturers cannot intervene what school teachers do, which may lead to student teachers imitating what they observe from school teachers instead of applying what they learn from methodological courses (Le, 2013). It results in the reality that no matter how well students are prepared to teach in the modern way at university, what they get when leaving university may be traditional methods of English language teaching (Le, 2001).

Secondly, lecturers and school teachers need to have meetings to decide on the methods of the lessons before students’ observation. In this case, lecturers and school teachers can make

sure the teaching method in the model lesson that students will observe uses advanced teaching methods. Besides, both lecturers and school teachers need to guide students to prepare lesson plans for their teaching. Before students deliver the lessons in class, their lesson plans have to be approved by lecturers and school teachers to ensure the lesson plans are appropriate in terms of teaching method and suitability for pupils. All decisions during teaching practicum should be supported by both lecturers and school teachers. Besides, lecturers should visit their students at high school more frequently to give students instant support and intervene on time if school teachers do not guide students on the right track.

Finally, peer mentoring is also a good solution to support students during teaching practicum and develop their ability to cooperate with colleagues for professional development later (Nguyen, 2017). Peer mentoring helps students to have more effective teaching practicum when they can learn from each other and alleviate the fear of being evaluated (Nguyen, 2017). Lecturers who are responsible for students' teaching practicum should have a clear plan to support students while they work in groups for peer mentoring. The plan will specify what students do each week in accordance with what they do at high schools, and how they work in the mentoring process. For example, during the first week while students attend classes for observation, they need to meet and share on what they have observed and learned. Subsequently, each student designs one lesson plan on one specific skill. The lesson plans are shown to the rest of the group for opinions. The whole group will then discuss together to redesign the lesson plan. This exercise can be enhanced with the attendance of the lecturers. With such peer mentoring, students can help each other and learn from each other.

To sum up, teaching practicum will be more effective in providing students with opportunities to learn how to teach if it is organized more professionally. Better mentoring and better connection between lecturers and school teachers are vital in closing the gap between theory and practice for teaching practicum in particular and for ETEP as a whole.

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