



## PRACTICE TEACHING PROBLEMS AND THEIR SOURCES: REFLECTION OF YEMENI EFL STUDENT TEACHERS

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**Abstract.** *The aim of this study is to investigate the major sources of EFL student teacher's (STs') problems of teaching practice (PT) and the main problems associated to the major sources. The target group consists of 50 STs majoring in English from the College of Education of Seiyun University, Yemen. The data of the study is collected using writing journals, questionnaire, and semi-structured interview. The problems included in the questionnaire are extracted from the entries of the writing journals and then classified into seven sources: 1) Student teachers, 2) pupils, 3) textbook, 4) school principal, 5) cooperating teacher, 6) school environment, and 7) gap between theory and practice. Results reveal that the first major source of the STs' problems is the school environment, followed by gap between theory and practice. The third source of the problems is the pupils. The school environment, as revealed by the study, causes problems such as lack of teaching aids, large number of students, frequent cutoffs of electricity supply, and difficulty of arranging various activities in the classroom. On the other hand, the main problems related to the source of gap between theory and practice include difficulty of applying theories taught at the college, uselessness of literature courses taught at the college and feeling shock about the reality of teaching. Under the third source which is the pupils, the study asserts several main problems such as pupils' heavy dependence on their teacher, their negative attitudes towards learning English, their weakness in English, and their habit of coming to the class unprepared.*

**Keywords:** *EFL student teachers, problems, practice teaching, theory and practice, pre-service teaching.*

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a dynamic process built around unexpected problems, especially for novice teachers. Each classroom has a unique set of problems, some of which could be anticipated, while other problems will occur unexpectedly during teaching. Problems usually appear due to the contexts in which teaching and learning take place which differ from one country or culture to another. Various contexts of teaching may exist within the same culture or country. Norms which are accepted in one culture may not be the cup of tea of another culture. For the purpose of a success in applying a new teaching method<sup>1</sup>, the content of a universal approach needs to be localized to avoid the students'

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<sup>1</sup> as suggested by Tomlinson (2005)

and teachers' resistance of the approach. Consequently, the context of teaching and learning usually justifies the various teaching practices. For example, a teaching method which is successfully applied with certain learners in a certain context is not necessarily to be suitable for another group of learners in another context.

Student teachers (STs) of colleges of Education in Yemen are prepared to be teachers in both primary and secondary schools. In the colleges of education, STs study an eight-semester BA programme. In the colleges of Education affiliated to Seiyun University, for instance, EFL STs start their practice teaching (PT) in the 7<sup>th</sup> semester of the eight-semester BA programme. They are given freedom to teach for one semester in primary or secondary schools. In Yemen, the scenario of the PT and the experiences of the STs in schools appear to be ridden with problems for the fact that they practice in unique contexts varied from one another. The norm followed in the inviting schools in which the target group of the current study practice causes several difficulties. The inviting schools give STs full teaching load and they substitute regular teachers. Such experience of full teaching load in schools would overwhelm STs with teaching problems. Therefore, it is worth focusing on STs' practical problems stemming from the contexts in which they actually teach.

The study targets the fourth-year STs who are doing their PT during the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019. The participants in the study include 50 STs majoring in English from the College of Education of Seiyun University.

Investigation of the problems of PT would assist STs to have a comprehensive picture of their own PT scenario. It also could help STs to be aware about their own teaching behaviors of practice which, in turn, may encourage them to improve their professional practices and polish their teaching skills. Though awareness of these difficulties may not give STs the ability to overcome them, it will enable them to get through them. Whatever problems STs may face, PT would still be a useful experience for the STs to polish their professional skills and evaluate themselves as future teachers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section reviews literature pertaining to two main areas related to the research topic: 1) significance of PT for STs, and 2) problems experienced by STs.

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### Significance of PT for STs

PT is the first step for novice teachers to examine their teaching skills and capability to successfully involve in their future career<sup>2</sup>. It is an essential part of STs' career training and has a vital role in preparing them for teaching profession. It is one of the most important aspects of the TPP<sup>3</sup>. PT provides STs with numerous benefits as emphasized by many educationalists and researchers. Teaching practice is a chance for the STs to improve their professional teaching career in the context of a real classroom under guidance of experts<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, STs' performance during their PT helps predict their success as future teachers<sup>5</sup>. In many TPPs, the opportunity for STs to practice to teach is almost far-fetched in lecture halls. PT is a platform for STs to apply the theoretical knowledge which they received from the college into the classroom practices<sup>6</sup>. What distinguishes PT from any other practices such as peer teaching or microteaching is the uniqueness of context and the group of learners with which STs interact. Teaching practice gives STs' "first-hand experience in working with a particular group of children under the supervision of an experienced teacher"<sup>7</sup>.

Another advantage is that STs would have a large positive change in their attitudes towards teaching profession after completing their practice teaching<sup>8</sup>. Acting as real teachers gives STs a sense of responsibility and care about young generations and this realization encourages them to exert themselves tirelessly to provide better learning to their young learners. More merits of PT for benefit of STs include (1) building a proper confidence and competence in lesson preparation<sup>9</sup>; (2) gaining knowledge and interest in teaching; (3) growing personality<sup>10</sup>; (4) developing teaching skills and attitudes of competent and successful teacher; and (5) learning a constructive criticism<sup>11</sup>. The

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<sup>2</sup> (Myles, Cheng, and Wang, 2006; Rozelle and Wilson, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> as stated by Farrell (2003)

<sup>4</sup> Wallace (1991)

<sup>5</sup> Achuonye and Ajoku (2003)

<sup>6</sup> according to Brown and Brown (1990)

<sup>7</sup> Perry (1997)

<sup>8</sup> (Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009; Osunde and Izevbogie, 2006; Wambungu, Barmao, and Ng'eno, 2013)

<sup>9</sup> Andabai (2013)

<sup>10</sup> Bukaliya (2012)

<sup>11</sup> Brown and Brown (1990)

aforementioned advantages are just examples to clarify the importance of teaching practice as an essential part of TPPs. Otherwise, more and more advantages could be gained from PT that sharpen and develop ST's overall professional success.

### **Problems experienced by students' teachers**

There is no disputation that STs go through numerous problems during their PT as teaching is a new experience for them and teaching is a process surrounded in nature by problems occurring while interacting with young learners, cooperating teachers, cooperating school, parents, course books, etc. Several studies have examined problems that STs encounter during their PT. Bin-Hady<sup>12</sup> identified several major problems such as problems in pronunciation, overuse of Arabic, difficulty of managing time, insufficient space for classroom activities, difficulty in assessing the pupils, and in preparing lesson plans. Al-Magableh<sup>13</sup> in his study shows that STs experience several problems during their training programme such as lack of visual aids, large number of students in class, lack of references and lack of working space for STs. Audio-visual materials is the main source of most of the problems involved in practice teaching<sup>14</sup>.

Some STs consider trainers as well as practicing schools as main sources of their problems<sup>15</sup>. STs complain that the latter is not cooperative enough with them<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, many STs complain of poor supervision, and short period of teaching practice<sup>17</sup>. According to Ngada<sup>18</sup>, poor supervision is attributed to inadequate funding of teaching practice programme to supervisors to the extent that STs help their supervisors in acquiring school textbooks or for transporting them to the practicing schools. Here we can notice that some supervisors might be lenient with STs when evaluating them as a manner of returning their goodness. This lenience is covertly supported Abo Nimreh<sup>19</sup> who confirms that STs have no problems relating to

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<sup>12</sup> (2018)

<sup>13</sup> (2010)

<sup>14</sup> Saricoban (2009)

<sup>15</sup> Aljasar and Altamar (2004)

<sup>16</sup> as it is revealed by Azeem (2011)

<sup>17</sup> Almikhalaphi (2005)

<sup>18</sup> (1992)

<sup>19</sup> (2003)

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supervisors. However, some STs may feel anxious and react negatively and thus make mistakes when their supervisors are observing their classes<sup>20</sup>.

Moreover, STs during their PT encounter problems related to lesson planning, subject matter knowledge, using instructional materials, motivation, communication, time management, and behavior management skills<sup>21</sup>. Paker<sup>22</sup> considers preparation of a detailed lesson plan as one of the challenges of STs. Furthermore, Ersen Yanik<sup>23</sup> identifies nine problems pertaining to PT including 1) difficulty in planning the lessons; 2) poor class management and control; 3) lack of facilities in practicing schools; 4) poor methods of teaching practice; 5) ineffective usage of teaching aids; 6) inability to balance between the needs of the pupils and supervisors; 7) lack of support in terms of materials and equipment; 8) problems resulting from the course book; and 9) problems resulting from the pupils and classroom environment.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research tools used in this study include a retrospective writing journal, a questionnaire, and an interview. The STs are asked to keep a writing journal at home about the problems that they face during their practice teaching. The STs' journals are analyzed to identify the problems of PT. The identified problems are classified under seven sources: STs themselves, pupils, textbook, school principal, cooperating teacher, school environment, and gap between theory and practice. The questionnaire included the 51 identified problems which are classified into seven domains based on the seven sources (see the appendix). The questionnaire is given to the STs after validating its data by four experts in English language teaching. Mean in SPSS is used to analyze the data of the questionnaire, while frequency is used for the data of the writing journals and interviews.

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<sup>20</sup> Okorie (1979)

<sup>21</sup> according to Tok (2010)

<sup>22</sup> (2011)

<sup>23</sup> (2008)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the data collected by the questionnaire supported by the data collected by the writing journals and interviews. The table below shows the seven sources of STs' problems.

### Sources of STs' problems of practice teaching

The following table introduces the seven sources of STs' problems of practice teaching. These sources are identified and categorized based on the data of ST's writing journals.

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Domain 1: Problems resulting from the student teachers	2.79
Domain 2: Problems resulting from the pupils	3.22
Domain 3: Problems resulting from the textbook	2.96
Domain 4: Problems resulting from the school principal	2.84
Domain 5: Problems resulting from the cooperating teacher	2.06
Domain 6: Problems resulting from the school environment	3.51
Domain 7: Problems resulting from the gap between theory and practice	3.39

In the table above, the first major source of the STs problems is the school environment ( $m=3.51$ ), followed by the gap between theory and practice ( $m=3.39$ ). The third source is the pupils ( $m=3.22$ ). However, the least source of the students' problems is the cooperating teacher.

As per the first source, there's no wonder why STs assign most of their problems to the school environment. Several reasons support this finding. In the interview conducted in the current study, one of the STs confirmed that they are "working under stress, many things have to be done". Administrations of practicing schools require STs to take over the exact duties assigned to the regular school teachers. As a result, STs complained about the full teaching load that has been given to them, besides the inviting school requires them to participate actively in almost all school extracurricular activities. This is beside the fact that STs still have to attend two courses in the college on Thursdays and these courses have their own requirements such as tests, exams, home assignments, presentations, and micro-teachings. It seems that these frustrating situations are not peculiar to the Yemeni setting, but there is evidence that they exist in other EFL

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countries. Majoni<sup>24</sup> found out that Zimbabwean STs complain of being overloaded during practice teaching. Shortage in regular teaching staff compels school administrations to make most of the existence of the STs in the schools ignoring that the STs are still on their training mission and in need for much more support from the school.

The second source of the STs' problems entails that when STs try to put the theory they have learnt at the college into practice, they find several problems. This finding was previously revealed by Loughran, Mitchell, Neale and Toussaint<sup>25</sup>. The difficulty of applying theory to practice could be attributed the unsuitable school conditions in which STs practice to develop their teaching skills. Abongdia, Adu and Fonclia<sup>26</sup> assert that teaching practice provides STs with an opportunity to learn that theory and practice are separated partners "who seem to share the same bed but with different features". PT thus is a good tool to help them realize the difference between what they learnt in the college which is the ideal side and what they actually encounter in school which the real side. However, STs through their PT could realize that theory is not applicable due to context limitations. Such situation would give them insights on how to develop their own practical theories that fit well in their own classrooms. STs are presented with the opportunity to "practice theory and theorize their own practice"<sup>27</sup>. Practical knowledge acquired from the teaching place will be more valuable and meaningful to STs as it helps them to deal successfully with the teaching dilemmas arouse. The gap between theory and practice need to be addressed in relation to context-specific solution because the mismatch between these two variables is multifaceted so one straightforward solution will be impossible<sup>28</sup>.

The third major source of STs' problems revealed by the questionnaire is the pupils. In the interview session, the majority of STs (87%) assured that the most problem they faced is the pupils whom they labeled as weak in English and reluctant to study English. Some interviewees commented that "most pupils do not have the basic information about what they have taken before". Another interviewee complained that "the pupils want everything said in the classroom to be translated into Arabic, otherwise

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<sup>24</sup> (2015)

<sup>25</sup> (2001)

<sup>26</sup> (2015)

<sup>27</sup> Rakicioglu-Soylemez and Eroz-Tuga (2014)

<sup>28</sup> as concluded by Cabaroglu (2014)

they don't understand". A third interviewee defended his negative attitude towards the pupils' English proficiency level and their learning readiness by saying that "when I speak English they didn't understand". A fourth interviewee argued that "some pupils told me that they do not know English and that they will not know it and this is the main reason behind their weakness".

Deeply examining this disadvantageous view of STs towards the pupils, one can blame STs themselves for not caring about the pupils' progress and for not trying to improve their levels using different useful techniques and methods of teaching. Generally speaking, the teacher is the one responsible for the pupils' learning process. The role of teachers as well as school administration is very crucial in creating an encouraging environment for the pupils that helps them love English and learn it through interesting ways. STs, in the interview, stated that they mainly focus in the classroom on grammar. They also confessed that "they teach grammar in a traditional way which seemed boring to the students" and that "the pupils do not understand grammar easily". The STs here blame themselves and their own teaching styles for the pupils' low proficiency in English. They admitted that their way of teaching is traditional and that they find it difficult to simplify grammar for the students. Furthermore, the study revealed through the interview that the second most problem of teaching practice is losing control of the classroom (47%). Usually this problem per se appears as a result of problems related to teachers themselves such as boring way of teaching, or weakness of teacher's personality, etc.

***Problems related to the school environment***

Several problems were revealed under the first source of ST's problems. Table 2 includes the problems extracted from ST's writing journals.

<b>Table 2: Problems related to the school environment</b>		
	<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1.	There is a shortage of teaching aids.	4.1000
2.	The classroom is full of distracting pictures and drawings.	2.2400
3.	The classroom is not suitable for doing different activities such as group work.	3.3200
4.	The classroom is full of pupils.	4.0200
5.	Electricity switches off frequently.	3.8600



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Table 2 above shows that the school environment is the source of four main problems of STs: lack of teaching aids ( $m = 4.1000$ ), large number of students ( $m = 4.0200$ ), frequent cutoffs of the power supply ( $m = 3.8600$ ), and difficulty of arranging different activities in the classroom ( $m = 3.3200$ ). One of the STs Comments on the lack of teaching aids in his school and what he did as a solution to this problem. He said "When I was practicing in school, I couldn't find any teaching aids, so I prepared teaching aids by myself even when I was busy with researches and tests at college". This situation depicts how STs suffer not only physically and psychologically, but financially as well. They have to depend on themselves for class preparation, buy the materials they need to use in the class and take care of their college duties. On the other hand, another ST commented on the crowded classrooms by saying that "the classroom did not help me to teach in a good way. It was small and very old. It has also a large number of students. So, I could not interact well with the pupils and I could not move between them". In a third writing journal, a ST wrote about the cutoff of supply and how it hinders their teaching. He stated that "When the electricity turns off, the temperature goes up and this affects badly on our own performance in teaching, and our students' understanding, and that is because of the small area and the large number of the students in the class". Concerning the difficulty of arranging various classroom activities, another ST mentioned that:

There are no enough rooms in the school to help me arrange of my performance according to the fit method which I planned for, there are pattern classroom with unchangeable tables or chairs in order to help freedom to do the activities. Also, there are no suitable rooms for discussion, arts, and rest, and theatre or sport hall.

Examining all the STs' observations above, we can notice that the problems revealed in the study under the school environment category are connected closely to one another that one problem is either cause or a result of the other. For instance, the problem of crowded classrooms is the cause of the problem of having difficulty in arranging different activities, while the lack of teaching aids especially the ones that require electricity is a result of the frequent nonexistence of electricity in the school. In other words some teachers and schools administrations do not provide their teachers with some of the teaching aids because these devices work by electricity which is frequently turned off. Generally speaking, if we examine most

school environments in Yemen we can notice that these conditions or worse exist in every single school. Novice teachers who come with much enthusiasm become disruptive and disappointed due to lack of facilities in schools. However, novice teachers need to look at these difficulties as problems that help them to contribute more in improving the school environment. They can prepare their own teaching aids and think of alternatives to replace the frequent loss of power in schools such as battery-operated devices.

***Problems related to gap between theory and practice***

The study demonstrated that the gap between theory and practice is the second source of STs’ problems. The table below provides the problems associated to this source.

<b>Table 3: Problems related to gap between theory and practice</b>		
	<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1.	There is a reality shock when I start to teach.	3.1600
2.	I find difficulty in applying principles and theories I learned at the college.	3.8400
3.	Literature courses are useless in practice teaching.	3.5600
4.	There is no link between what I studied at college and what I experienced at school.	2.9600

The table shows that the gap between theory and practice is a source for some major problems including difficulty of applying theories taught at the college (m = 3.8400), uselessness of literature courses taught at the college (m = 3.5600) and feeling shock about the reality of teaching (3.1600). One ST in his writing journal interestingly commented on the first two problems under the category of gap between theory and practice and he also shows the relationship between them as follows:

There was no match between what I have studied in college, whether theories or any other information about how to teach, and practice that in the school for some reasons. First, in college, they focused on literature subjects, but I did not see any use of them, especially when you become a teacher in primary schools. Second, in college, we learned the duties of the cooperating teacher towards the trainee, but he did nothing to help me.

The quote above states that STs explained that they have difficulty in applying theories to their teaching practices and make use of the knowledge received in the college. Partly, there is a big gap between the real situation in which they teach and the

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ideal situation they are supposed to teach in; and partly literature courses which are offered in the English language TPP outnumber the English language teaching courses. STs seem to perceive no much benefit of literature courses in their teaching career. One ST described how they felt shock when they have started teaching in real classrooms. The following are her comments:

My first impression was shocking. Most of the students speak the mother tongue in the English class. When I wrote a word on the blackboard and its meaning in English, all the students were looking aside as if it were something strange. After my repeated request, one of the students answered in Arabic that they do not know the meaning of the original word. "Teacher! Explain it in Arabic!" Shocking! Students are very poor in all the four skills- reading, writing, listening and speaking. Not to talk about grammar. Their vocabulary too is very weak. In such a situation I felt frustrated in the beginning. It was a real challenge for me as a trainee teacher.

Some STs in their writing journals assessed the shocking reality about the pupils' weak ability in English. They stated that the pupils are not very much interested in English. They also blamed their parents of not trying to encourage their children to study English. As a solution, they emphasized that pupils are in need for motivation in this regard both from teachers at school and parents at home.

### *Problems related to the pupils*

The third source of the ST's problems, as revealed earlier in this study, is the pupils. The problems under this source are given in the following table.

Items		Mean
1.	Their English is not good enough to enable them to understand the lessons.	3.2400
2.	They have negative attitudes towards learning English.	3.3400
3.	They depend mostly on the teacher.	3.9200
4.	They are noisy.	2.8800
5.	They do not prepare at home.	3.0200
6.	They do not accept me as their teacher at the beginning.	2.9400

The above table presented the main problems attributed to the pupils that hinder STs to do PT well. They involve pupils' heavy dependence on the teacher ( $m = 3.9200$ ), their negative attitudes towards learning English ( $m = 3.3400$ ), their weakness in English ( $m = 3.2400$ ), and their attendance of the class unprepared ( $m = 3.0200$ ). One ST in his

writing journal commented that “the pupils depend on teacher mostly in everything. One day I asked them to participate in a speaking activity, only two students participated out of 30 students”. In one of the journal entries, a ST provides the reasons for his realization that the pupils hold negative attitudes towards leaning English. He stated that:

I noticed that the pupils have negative trend towards English language. They are passive students. For example, they don't respect the teachers; they talk when the teacher explains the lesson. Some students don't complete their homework. They don't participate in the activities in the class that I give them because they don't prepare at their home. Their pronunciation is wrong and their voice is low, I couldn't listen to them well.

The pupils' behaviors mentioned in the STs' quote above, could be accepted as evidence that students hold negative attitudes towards learning English. Otherwise, had they held positive beliefs, they would have showed respect to their teachers and become active pupils. The finding that students hold negative attitudes necessitates the existence of the other problems which are revealed under the pupils' category. Due to these negative attitudes, the pupils depend heavily on their teachers and come to the class unprepared. That, in return, could explain their weakness in English. Some STs in their writing journals emphasized the pupils' weakness in English and gave some of the results of such weakness. One ST asserted that “... due to their weak understanding in English language they always ask me to speak in Arabic. Another ST mentioned that “their level was not enough to understand from the first time so, I re-explained but that made me neglect following the lesson plan and waste the class time”. One might wonder if such weakness-related problems will enable STs cope up with their lesson plans and succeed in completing the prescribed syllabus.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis above has achieved the two objectives of the study. Regarding the first objective, the study revealed that among seven sources of ST's problems three are considered as major sources: 1) school environment, 2) gap between theory and practice, and 3) pupils. As per the second objective, the problems that go under the first source include lack of teaching aids, large number of students, frequent cutoffs of the supply,

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and difficulty of unsuitable classrooms for arranging various activities. Moreover, the main problems related the second source comprise difficulty in applying theories taught at the college, uselessness of literature courses taught at the college and feeling shock about the reality of teaching. Finally, the problems belonged to the third source encompass pupils' heavy dependence on their teacher, their negative attitudes towards learning English, their weakness in English, and the habit of coming to the class unprepared.

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