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The Change of Conception of English-language Teaching of Taiwanese EFL Student-Teachers after Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

This study explored the change in English as a foreign language (EFL) student teachers' conceptions of English language teaching (ELT) after a year-long ELT practicum. The participants were given surveys about their conceptions of ELT before and after their teaching practicum (TP). Analysis of the survey data revealed four main categories of conceptions about ELT. After TP, there were substantial differences in the distributions of responses in the four main categories. The environment that an ELT practicum fosters could be the key to new insights and knowledge about English teaching.

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1. Introduction

To be an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher one must have both a theoretical and practical knowledge of EFL teaching, besides subject knowledge of the English language itself. Practical teaching experience will therefore make a difference to someone preparing to be an EFL teacher. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (1999) asserted that student teachers are particularly interested in real classroom teaching practice. They believed that having real teaching experience is vital for both their professional and personal growth as they learn to be teachers (Clement, 1999; MacDonald, 1993; Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007; Yeung and Watkins, 2000). Teacher-training programs commonly provide either a semester- or year-long teaching practicum (TP) as a formal requirement at the end of their programs. Once they have experienced teaching in a real classroom setting, and have thereby discovered the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, student teachers will soon realize what teaching is really all about (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004).

Teaching practice has been found to influence student teachers in a positive way. Through such practice student teachers are exposed to valuable opportunities to acquire professional knowledge, improve their teaching skills, and gain teaching competence (e.g., Hascher et al., 2004; Kaldi, 2009). Furthermore, after the experience, they have a more helpful attitude toward learners (Hascher et al., 2004), and they are more conscious of and reflective about their teaching (Lee, 2005); both of these represent shifts in perception which may bring about changes in their conceptions of teaching and learning.

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What a student teacher believes teaching is about can determine how he/she will teach in the classroom and what teaching strategies will be adopted, and this may, as a result, affect how learners go about their learning and achieve their learning outcomes (Gao & Watkins, 2010; Kember & Gow, 1994; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). The accumulation of an individual's experiences of a particular phenomenon in a particular environment or context constitutes that person's conception (Pratt, 1992)—meaning that the conception of teaching is constructed on one's own, through personal experiences. It is unique to the individual, and it is context dependent. Once this conception is formed, it will affect the actions of the individual. Understanding one's own conception of teaching provides information about experiences in a particular context or culture (Gao & Watkins, 2010; Marton & Booth, 1997). Therefore, understanding EFL student teachers' conceptions of English language teaching (ELT) may provide information about their experiences of TP.

A large body of research has explored the conceptions of teaching in the general sense of already-practicing teachers at the tertiary level. Kember (1997) reviewed a number of studies on teaching conceptions in a Western cultural context and categorized the conceptions of teaching on the basis of two orientations linked with the notion of student teacher interaction/apprenticeship: teacher-centered/content-oriented and student-centered/learning-oriented. The teacher-centered/content-oriented approach includes two notions: seeking to impart information and to transmit structured knowledge. The student-centered/learning-oriented approach includes two further notions: attempting to facilitate understanding and conceptual change/intellectual development. Studying physics teachers in China, Gao and Watkins (2001) similarly identified two orientations for describing teaching conceptions: molding, which includes knowledge delivery and exam preparation; and cultivating, which includes ability development, attitude promotion, and conduct guidance.

However, only a limited number of studies have explored the conceptions of ELT in particular. One relevant example is the recent case study by Li and Shi (2012), which explored the conceptions surrounding oral English teaching held by two college-level English teachers in China. There have been fewer studies which have investigated changes in the conceptions of ELT held by student teachers before and after completing their TP. One previous study found that a short-term practical teaching experience in a 5-day English language summer camp introduced changes to student teachers' conceptions of ELT and the learning of EFL (Chan & Chen, 2011). The question of whether there are changes in student teachers' conceptions of ELT after a one-year TP and, if so, what those changes are, is therefore worthy of further exploration.

2. Research Method

The study participants were 90 student teachers in their senior year (72 females and 18 males) who were pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Foreign Language Instruction at a college in Southern Taiwan. This degree program aimed to prepare students to be EFL teachers in Taiwan. Each student was enrolled on one of three identical year-long English TP classes consisting of three units with elementary learners. At the beginning of the first and second semesters, the instructor guided all of the student teachers in the design of a 12-week English language program, to be held at their own college, for local elementary learners. Each teaching group was responsible for teaching three lessons each semester. After every two consecutive lessons there was a feedback session.

A phenomenographical approach was adopted for this study, as this method is often used to explore the manner in which people think and learn (Marton, 1986), and in studying conceptions of teaching and learning (Gao & Watkins, 2010). According to this method, descriptions of experiences of teaching are collected and put into qualitatively different categories in order to identify different conceptions of teaching (Marton & Booth, 1997). Prior to the start of the 12-week program in the first semester, a pre-survey asking the participants' about their conceptions of ELT was distributed to the student teachers. At the end of the second semester, they were given a post-survey meant to measure any changes in their conceptions of ELT which might have occurred. All of the pre- and post-survey data was then analyzed separately by the researcher, using the categories of conceptions of teaching defined by Kember (1997) and Gao and Watkins (2001) as a reference, with similar conceptions combined into like categories. A second evaluator was employed and the analyzed data and categories were crosschecked. Agreement was reached following discussion about any discrepancies encountered during crosschecking. With the categories

and conceptions thus defined, each idea was counted and the categories were ranked according to the popularity of the ideas as they appeared in the survey data.

3. Results

3.1. *Distributions of conceptions of ELT before and after TP*

The survey conducted prior to the TP produced a total of 154 ideas about what ELT entailed. After analyzing the data, four categories of conceptions of ELT were identified: cultivation (41%), ways of teaching (27%), knowledge delivery (25%), and nature of teaching (7%). After completing the TP, 83% of student teachers ($n = 75$) expressed changes in their conceptions of teaching. The post-survey data of the student teachers included a total of 134 ideas about what ELT entailed. Analysis of the data revealed the same four categories of conceptions of ELT. Ways of teaching (54%), however, became the dominant category of the four, followed by cultivation (24%), knowledge delivery (13%), and the nature of teaching (9%).

3.2. *Four categories of conceptions of ELT*

3.2.1. *Cultivation*

Cultivation was the most commonly conceived purpose of ELT of the student teachers before the TP. The focus of cultivation is on assisting students' learning. In this study, this category was further divided into four subcategories: "facilitating students' ability," "facilitating students' ability to apply learned knowledge," "promoting attitude," and "facilitating students' ability for examinations." Taking these in turn, for the subcategory of "facilitating students' ability", the student teachers emphasized students' English language learning outcomes and considered that the goal of teaching English was to facilitate students' English language learning or understanding of the English language. The ideas in the subcategory of "facilitating students' ability to apply learned knowledge" was generally concerned with enabling students to use the language, in addition to facilitating students' English ability. Many also emphasized the use of English in students' daily lives. The subcategory of "promoting attitude" contained ideas about enhancing students' learning motivation and fostering their interest in learning English. A small number of ideas fell into the subcategory of "facilitating students' ability for examinations." The idea of helping students prepare for English tests or examinations was mentioned. In the survey carried out after the TP the number of responses in the cultivation category decreased moderately, from 41% to 24%. Three of the subcategories ("facilitating students' ability," "facilitating students' ability to apply learned knowledge," and "promoting attitude") and some similar ideas were found, but the responses in the subcategory "facilitating students' ability to apply learned knowledge" focused mainly on the use of English in students' daily life.

3.2.2. *Ways of teaching*

Ways of teaching was the second most prevalent category of conceptions of ELT among the student teachers in their responses to the survey prior to completing the TP. It included comments on how to teach. The ideas were centered on the use of various suitable teaching methods, the use of English or the native language as the medium of instruction, meeting students' needs, matching students' levels of English, attracting students, providing activities, and so on. The number of responses in this category increased dramatically, from 27% before the TP to 54% after. This increase rendered the ways of teaching category the most commonly-held conception of ELT among study participants after the TP. As was the case prior to the TP, the student teachers continued to use this category to discuss ideas about how to teach. Nevertheless, following the TP, student teachers provided more detailed descriptions in their responses, which also included new ideas such as being creative, lively, and relating lessons to students' everyday lives.

3.2.3. Knowledge delivery

Knowledge delivery was the third category of conceptions of ELT expressed by student teachers prior to completing the TP. This conception concerns the transmission of knowledge to students. The student teachers mentioned four different areas of knowledge delivery: “knowledge delivery in general,” “knowledge delivery concerning teaching a language in general,” “knowledge delivery concerning teaching English language skills or elements,” and “knowledge delivery concerning cultures.” The ideas contained within the subcategory of “knowledge delivery in general” included responses about transmitting knowledge without specifying what areas of knowledge or whether the said knowledge pertained to a language. In the subcategory of “knowledge delivery concerning teaching a language in general,” the student teachers expressed ideas about the transmission of knowledge of a language. The subcategory of “knowledge delivery concerning teaching English language skills or elements” contains conceptions about the transmission of specific knowledge of English language skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing—or of English language elements such as vocabulary, spelling, sentence structures, and grammar. Some student teachers expressed ideas concerning the transmission of knowledge of cultures. These responses fell into the subcategory of “knowledge delivery concerning cultures.” After the TP, the number of responses in the knowledge delivery category decreased moderately from 25% before the TP to 13%. The same four subcategories were identified. Nevertheless, only a few responses were assigned to each subcategory.

3.2.4. Nature of teaching

The fourth category of conceptions of ELT expressed by student teachers prior to completing the TP was the nature of teaching, but only 7% of participants’ responses were assigned to this category. Comments which touched upon ideas about what teaching is, or what a teacher is, were assigned to this category. The student teachers generally thought that teaching was not easy and that teaching itself was a learning process. They also believed a teacher should be patient, enthusiastic, and proficient in English. The number of responses in the nature of teaching category remained low after the TP (9%), with only a 2% increase. However, there were some new ideas about what teaching means or what a teacher is like. The former included teaching being interesting and professional, and requiring a high degree of responsibility and preparation. The latter included a teacher being energetic and having the ability to respond spontaneously.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, four main categories of conceptions of ELT were identified—cultivation, knowledge delivery, ways of teaching, and nature of teaching. Using the models proposed by Gao and Watkins (2001) and Kember (1997) for understanding the conceptions of teaching, the cultivation category can be classified as oriented towards student-centered/learning or cultivating, and the knowledge delivery category as oriented towards teacher-centered/content or molding. These two orientations represent two divergent views of teaching: the constructivist view, in which teachers attempt to cultivate the learners, and the traditional view, in which teachers transmit knowledge to learners (Cheng, Chan, Tang, & Cheng, 2009). The categories of ways of teaching and the nature of teaching were singled out from Gao and Watkins’ (2001) and Kember’s (1997) models, but the participants’ responses for these two categories were not primarily focused on the transmission of knowledge or cultivating the learners. So, to add to their models, the ways of teaching category can be described as method- and skills-oriented, whereas the nature of teaching category can be described as affect-oriented. These two orientations are particular to this study, and the ways of teaching category could be a unique conception among student teachers, particularly in the period of TP.

Before the TP, the student teachers’ conceptions of ELT were more about cultivation, which is oriented towards student-centered/learning or cultivating (Gao and Watkins, 2001; Kember, 1997). The participants seemed to be more concerned with learners’ development at this point. This might reflect the student teachers’ theoretical backgrounds and personal experiences with ELT before the TP. After the TP, 83% of the student teachers expressed changes in their conceptions of ELT, and the full distribution of student teachers’ conceptions of ELT was markedly different from that before the TP. Ways of teaching became the dominant category of conceptions of ELT, and the conceptions associated with cultivation and knowledge delivery became less significant. In other words, after the

TP, the student teachers' conceptions of ELT became more oriented towards methods and skills than towards both student-centered/learning or cultivating and teacher-centered/content or molding (Gao and Watkins, 2001; Kember, 1997). The student teachers seemed to be more concerned with practical skills instead—thinking more about how to teach rather than cultivating students and what to teach. It could be that the student teachers realized the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge (Hascher et al., 2004). They might have discovered that their previous knowledge of teaching, which was more about theoretical concepts of ELT, was not enough to help their performance in real teaching practice, and that ELT skills and techniques were more practical when they needed to deliver their lessons in real teaching situations. Based on their experience, they constructed new ideas about teaching. Nevertheless, it is unclear that whether there will be further changes in their conceptions of English language teaching after they enter the work force becoming a real teacher. A follow-up study would provide more understanding of this issue.

Furthermore, developers of TP course programs may need to aware that the type of development which the environment of the ELT practicum fosters could be the key to new insights and knowledge about ELT. The approach to an ELT practicum should therefore be reviewed thoroughly, as it may affect student teachers' conceptions about ELT, which may in turn affect the end results for the learners. However, a true cause and effect relationship cannot be established from this study, since it was a qualitative study in which it was difficult to control for a number of variables. Furthermore, as conceptions of teaching are context-dependent (Gao & Watkins, 2010; Marton & Booth, 1997), the results of this study apply only to the particular target school. Further research on conceptions of ELT in different contexts should be conducted to further our understanding of this issue.

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