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In-Faculty Practicum for TEFL Undergraduates at a Specially Created, On-The-Premises Language School: A Study in Innovation

ABSTRACT

Teacher trainees often consider the practicum to be the most critical aspect of their pre-service training. However, its duration is frequently insufficient, necessitating teacher-trainers to explore methods of increasing the trainees' direct teaching experience. The present study focuses on one such attempt – the establishment of a language school within a faculty – and its six-year existence. The study examines how participating teacher trainees received the project, with 30 of them taking part in a survey, which forms the basis of qualitative analysis and an overall project evaluation. Responses from the participating trainees reveal that they perceive the program as a unique and the most beneficial part of their teacher-training period. The trainees report having made significant progress, particularly in areas such as workload management, lesson-planning, utilization of materials, addressing students' needs, and general teaching fluency. The project's Director of Studies conducted observations to evaluate these areas, and the results align with the trainees' self-evaluations. The project is an innovative practicum type that encourages reflective practice and has led to changes in the ELT training carried out by the faculty.

KEYWORDS

practicum, teacher training, self-regulated learning, reflective teaching, peer observations, pre-service teaching

1. Introduction

The practicum has long been recognized as a key component in pre-service teacher-training programs and is judged by the trainees themselves as the most valuable part of their vocational preparation (e.g. Grudnoff, 2011; Mattsson et al., 2011; Pospíšil, 2017). It provides an immersion-type environment (Erben, 2005, p. 283) facilitating natural, experiential learning in authentic classrooms, and is undoubtedly the most direct way of connecting teacher-training theory with hands-on practice, thus surpassing in authenticity the microteaching sessions often carried out in teacher-training classes (Johnson & Arshavskaya, 2011). During practicum trainees encounter situations that are typical of the target teaching environment and are encouraged to discuss and analyze these with

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their mentors. This contributes to the development of teacher confidence and self-reflection skills, the latter of which is generally seen (see e.g. Farrell, 2018; Ghaye, 2011; McGregor & Cartwright, 2011; Richards & Farrell, 2011; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Rushton & Suter, 2012) as essential for the development of teaching professionals. Furthermore, the practicum tends to promote the growth of teaching fluency (Erben, 2005, p. 284).

During practicum trainees become familiar with out-of-classroom routines involving not only lesson planning and preparation but also the administrative aspects of being a teacher. Trainees may be encouraged to familiarize themselves with curricular documents and observe their implementation in day-to-day school life. They learn how to manage class-switching in the shortest of breaktimes; observe staffroom communication between colleagues, staff meetings and other school activities. All this eases the transition from teacher education programs to actual teaching career and raises trainees' awareness of theoretical and practical components of the profession and their interconnectedness. Moreover, well-executed practicums increase the likelihood of novice teachers' persevering in their profession within the early years of employment (Twomey, 2007).

Whilst most successful education systems are those that effectively combine the theoretical preparation of teachers with a strong teaching-practice component (Braun, 2008), no definition of the most efficient practicum model has been universally agreed upon. Various models exist (see e.g. Mattsson et al., 2011), and with varying results (Gray et al., 2017). Among the main variables in the models are the number of practicums during the whole course of teacher training; their duration; the degree of independence; the timing within the overall course; and the assessment tools. Gray et al. (2017) suggest that trainees prefer extended practicums to shorter ones. Much depends also on the thoroughness of the mentor (Pospíšil, 2017). However, mentors do not always receive training in providing feedback and may not always be fully aware of the importance of their role. Moreover, as Ure et al. (2009) observe, their work may not be sufficiently monitored by the teacher educators.

Johnson and Arshavskaya (2011) recommend that teacher-training programs ought to ensure that the all-essential theory-to-practice link is exploited not only at the end of a program but during the course of it, so that trainees have regular opportunities to hone practical skills along with theory. This is in line with Korthagen (2001), who advocates a practice-to-theory model in which practice comes first and facilitates the gradual acquisition of theory and experience.

While the practicum is an official requirement in the Czech Republic, the way in which it is carried out varies from faculty to faculty. Teacher-training courses are organized primarily by faculties of education but sometimes also by other faculties (of science, the arts etc.). On the whole, faculties of education include more direct classroom experience than do the latter-mentioned institutions, which

tend to prioritize the development of technical skills required within the given field. At the faculties of arts, the main focus is on the development of sound theoretical foundations in the respective fields of expertise and the space for practicum is often restricted. Consequently, the practicum sometimes fails to meet the students' needs and expectations (Pospíšil, 2017) in terms of both its duration and the quality of feedback.

As an English-teacher trainer at a faculty of arts, I was aware of the lack of teaching opportunities in its study programs and started to seek different ways of extending them. In keeping with Mattsson et al.'s (2011) I embrace the notion of there being three strands of knowledge that play a part in the education of pre-service teachers, namely: "declarative knowledge (knowing that), procedural knowledge (knowing how) and conditional knowledge (knowing when and why to apply certain procedures)" (p. 5). Whilst not adhering to the purely technicist view of teaching as a set of discrete behaviours that can be practised and eventually adopted by the trainees, I find that in the work of a foreign-language teacher the fluent command of certain specific classroom procedures both saves time and helps create an environment conducive to learning. That these techniques and procedures need to be understood in the light of theory goes without saying. But surely these techniques also have to be presented to trainees – and tried out by them – 'for real', so that they may evaluate them and decide whether or not they will include them in their repertoire, respecting principles of self-regulated learning. The question was where to find the space in what was already a very tight study program.

Following the usual path of bringing the sense of 'real' classrooms into the TEFL courses in the form of classroom videos, micro-teaching slots and voluntary observations seemed to offer only limited opportunities. It became clear that real teaching time would simply have to be sought outside the scope of the study programs. And there seemed to be no solution more ideal than the setting up of the faculty's own language school. The aim of this article is to present a report of how this idea was brought to fruition and what we have learnt during the six years of its existence.

2. The on-the-premises in-faculty language school *JazykoFFka*

In 2016 the faculty published a list of requisite levels of English for each administrative position and applied for a grant to provide tuition which would help employees reach the standards and keep them. I came up with the idea that a faculty's own language school run by its English teacher-trainees could be established. While it would help the faculty, it would give its teacher-trainees the much-needed teaching practice. The suggestion was approved by the faculty's management and the school, henceforth in this study referred to as *JazykoFFka*, was founded.

The approximately 120 employees who were targeted were divided into 20 groups based on placement tests. Their proficiency ranges from A1 to C1+. The length of classes is set at 90 minutes per week. The courses are free for all faculty employees.

The teaching is carried out by English-language teacher trainees. They are paid an hourly rate comparable to that typically paid at private language schools in Prague. The teachers rotate mostly on an annual basis so that as many of them get a chance to participate. They are obliged to participate in further methodological training and in compulsory peer observations. They are also involved in administrative affairs of the school and help run the placement tests, final test administration, teacher substitutions, timetabling and accounts.

The main coursebook chosen for all classes was the Oxford University Press *Navigate* series, supplementary materials (such as items from the National Geographic *Keynote* series for use in the most advanced classes) being purchased as per teacher suggestions.

To monitor standards, the director of the school carries out regular 45-minute observations and follow-up feedback sessions aimed to both encourage and foster improvement. In addition, each teacher is obliged to actively participate in two peer-observations per term, to complete and return an observation protocol, and to discuss findings with the observed teacher. Throughout the year the teachers are provided with on-going support in regular methodological seminars. These typically have a main topic (e.g., the teaching of pronunciation), in connection with which teachers are expected to come along prepared not only to present appropriate sample materials and classroom techniques but also to ask questions regarding specific problems they might have encountered in relation to that skill.

The progress of the course participants is monitored not only during the year by means of regular unit tests, but also in an end-of-year assessment designed to measure the student progress. These tests record a general upward tendency commensurate with the time spent in the classrooms. However, a long-term analysis of these tests is problematic because of employee fluctuation.

At the end of each term the employees are asked to complete course-evaluation forms. The comments are typically highly positive as regards both teaching standards and the courses in general, and, thus, they provide the teachers with a good deal of encouragement. Since the covid-19 pandemic the courses have been running online. Although this gives the teachers an opportunity to learn new teaching techniques, the employees miss the personal experience of live lessons. In its 6 years of existence the *JazykoFFka* has provided teaching experience for 30 teacher-trainees and catered for over 500 student places (many of the students are actually the same and stay at the school to maintain the level of their English).

At the end of each year teachers are asked to fill in an anonymous questionnaire designed to evaluate the school as a whole and their own learning experience.

This questionnaire consists of ten open questions designed to provide an evaluation of the school and the usefulness of the training tools provided. The current study showcases responses from 30 teachers, which were coded, categorized, and analyzed. The following chapter provides the results. It aims to describe the experience from the perspective of the trainee students and serve as recommendation for anybody who might consider launching a similar project.

3. Results – the school as seen by the teachers

The prevailing feature of the responses was the high frequency of positive adjectives, superlatives and intensifiers with which the respondents evaluated the overall experience of being *JazykoFFka* teachers. This was especially apparent in sections which reflected the teachers' awareness of the progress they had made. Such comments were present in all answers, in which repetitions of the more general "learning an awful lot", "improving" and "gaining experience, teaching fluency and automaticity" are interspersed with mentions of gaining confidence and loss of initial anxiety. The teachers highly valued the amount of freedom they had to experiment and try out a wide variety of techniques and develop their own preferred approaches and teaching styles, reaping the benefits of self-regulated learning combined with regular mentoring. Several mentioned that this was the most important element in their teacher-training and called the experience a "unique program".

The most frequently reported area in which progress was achieved is that of learning to cater for students' needs (e.g. regarding their proficiency, personal preferences and specific professional language needs) and learning to communicate with students about their expectations and requirements. The second most frequently mentioned specific area in which progress was made was felt to be that of effective textbook use and materials adaptation and development. Additionally, the majority of the teachers mentioned that they felt improvement in the areas of lesson planning and time management and learned to better prepare for lessons.

Various mentions of increased efficiency were also common. Teachers reported that lesson planning and preparation initially proved to be a frustratingly time-consuming activity but eventually required less time. The teachers reported a reduction from an initial 60 minutes needed to prepare a 90-minute lesson to c. 30 minutes. This was due to the development of various strategies such as the preparation of reusable materials, the designing of materials for use by more than one group, the maximizing of textbook exploitation and adaptation as a preferable option to designing new materials, the setting of personal time limits for preparation, and the use of good sources of reliable materials on the internet. Other strategies mentioned included making their plans less detailed (shifting from the initial writing out of detailed instructions for everything to eventually just sketching a lesson outline); becoming better acquainted with their textbooks

and thus knowing better how to work with activities; developing their ability to improvise (and occasionally even to teach without planning); learning to rely more on published teachers' books as sources of ideas rather than searching elsewhere; and acquiring a greater sense of what and how much could be achieved in one lesson and thus avoiding overplanning.

What the teachers were happiest with was the fact that extremely positive relations had been established between all course participants. This had greatly contributed to creating a highly enjoyable learning environment in which the initial anxiety from having to communicate in a foreign language was quickly abandoned. Several teachers mentioned a sense of pride in seeing their students' progress and realizing how much can be shared and expressed with even a limited level of language proficiency. In feeling that, they made a very positive move towards adopting the principles of communicative language teaching.

Asked to formulate a message to future teachers in the same project, they unequivocally labelled the experience as invaluable ("If I were to choose which component of my 5 years at university was the most useful for eventual employment it would definitely be teaching here", Teacher 5), and as an opportunity to experiment with teaching in a non-threatening environment where experimentation is not only possible but actually welcome. They appreciate being given the chance to develop their skills – both pedagogical and interpersonal – under professional guidance and with on-going feedback and support, thanks to which they have gained confidence and reliably assessed the extent to which teaching is the right profession for them. They have also found this the ideal environment in which to test in practice and very directly all the practical skills they developed in their TEFL seminars. Teacher 18 summed all this up by saying that "This is the best school for anyone thinking of taking up teaching as a profession".

One of the tools the teachers highlighted as essential was the regular peer observations. As observers, the teachers appreciated not only the new ideas they encountered ("I instantly adopted some of the techniques and used them in my own classes", Teacher 2) but also the fact that they were led to self-reflection and the realization of some of their own weaknesses ("I realized I didn't pay enough attention to teaching and recycling vocabulary", Teacher 16). As observers, the teachers appreciated the feedback from their peers, and the contribution of it to self-reflection ("The observers' views helped me identify the problematic aspects of my teaching, especially when different observers pointed out the same things", Teacher 13) but they also learnt to give and receive feedback and respond to negative points ("I had to think how to express criticism and how to receive it, and without being afraid of either.", Teacher 4). As regards working with criticism, one of the teachers expressed the view that training in this area would be very helpful as not all teachers know how to formulate and deliver constructive criticism and know what to focus on. The answers here revealed a high degree of maturity in

these novice teachers in terms of an ability to critically evaluate the experience of observing lessons and identify respects in which that experience was beneficial. It would appear that in such a project peer observations are a vital tool for learning to teach, and that even novice teachers are capable of providing quality feedback.

Asked to compare the *JazykoFFka* experience with official practicum, most were of the opinion that both experiences are quite different and indispensable. The main advantage offered by the language-school experience would appear to be lesson duration, which is 90 minutes as opposed to the 45 minutes generally timetabled at secondary schools. Teachers felt that preparing lesson plans for these longer lessons is much easier, as there is more space offered for the creation of variety and coherence, as well as to be more relaxed regarding time management and to spontaneously decide to devote more time either to a classroom activity that is proving especially enjoyable and beneficial or to an area of acquisition that is presenting a challenge. This all combines to make the language-school experience a more flexible one. At the same time, however, *JazykoFFka* classes take place only once a week, which, in comparison with secondary-school tuition, leaves the teacher with a diminished feeling of continuity. Trainees also observed that it was much easier for them to form successful relations with adult students than with teenagers.

There were three areas of the *JazykoFFka* project the teachers considered problematic: methodological, affective, and student-related. As regards methodological issues, the most frequently mentioned was the teachers' inexperience in planning and the time it required. Teachers also mentioned that learning to manage lesson time and follow lesson plans proved much more challenging than expected. They also felt pressure as a result of having to prepare interesting lessons every week, of not always knowing how to present new material effectively and of how to activate students, and experienced disappointment with "activities that looked good on paper but didn't quite work in the class" (Teacher 17). Some teachers felt restricted by the syllabus ("I occasionally felt a mismatch between the official needs (testing) and the need of the students just to enjoy the classes and talk", Teacher 22).

As for affective issues, the most commonly mentioned were nervousness, a lack of confidence especially when getting to know new students, and a fear of not being able to answer students' questions. Teachers also initially felt unsettled by the experience of being observed but reported that this feeling gradually faded as observations were a regular component of their work.

The largest number of problems were student-related, including practical issues like absences (and the consequent need to adapt lesson plans), and "people mismatch" in some classes. Some teachers also mentioned uncertainty as to how to deal with learner beliefs (e.g. students' claims not to like a certain textbook or their inability to accept that language learning happens also through communicating and

not only working through grammar exercises). But, as Teacher 28 observed, some of these problems actually supported the learning process: “It was hard, working with a student who often said how ridiculous some of the textbook exercises were. Whilst this was initially frustrating, I gradually learnt to see some sense in it and view activities more critically. And I learnt how to cope with such students”.

Teacher 9 observed that one of the toughest challenges consisted in the fact the students were busy working adults: “For me the toughest aspect was finding the balance between wanting to teach them as much as possible and realizing that they are adult learners whom I cannot shower with homework and expect them to do it, or even make them do some learning at home at least once a week”.

4. Conclusion

As the school’s director I carry out regular observations and manage to see all teachers at the beginning and end of the year. Detailed notes taken at start-of-term observations help greatly with the preparation of repeat observations and with assessing the main areas in which progress was made, which very much correspond with the teachers’ own perception of self-improvement. The most visible growth is in the confidence and fluency with which teaching is carried out, as well as in the planning and structuring of lessons.

Progress is also visible in the performance of the course participants themselves, the results they achieve in the final tests demonstrating very clearly that the courses have considerable effect on their language proficiency. Given both the low frequency of lessons (once a week) and the very busy lives of the participants, all adult professionals, this can surely be regarded as an achievement on the part of the trainee teachers and of the project itself.

The lesson learnt from those areas the teachers viewed as problematic (see above) is clear: these young teachers need to be thoroughly trained in matters of lesson planning (using concrete, practical examples of lesson plans and of ways of compiling them), effective coursebook use, classroom management techniques, and in dealing with adult learners and ways of approaching their beliefs and attitudes. Regular meetings and workshops to discuss these matters are highly recommended as they have proved invaluable to the success of the project. Their effect on the professional development of the teachers and the self-regulatory nature of the project appears to be considerable.

The project demonstrates the feasibility of creating an environment for teacher training within one’s ‘home’ institution, using local space and resources and founding an innovative type of practicum in which trainees not only receive regular feedback on their own work but also see long-term progress in their own students, a situation that is all too hard to create in shorter-term practica. The experience is evaluated very positively by the trainees, who claim it to be a unique program and one of the most meaningful components in their vocational preparation. The trainees feel

they make considerable progress in many aspects of lesson preparation and delivery, which is proved by both the official observations and the responses contained in feedback forms from peer observations. On an affective level, trainees feel they gain confidence, whilst on a practical level they become more efficient in preparing and conducting lessons. The experience serves to simulate an environment close to that of a 'real' school, as teaching is complemented with other regular duties including reflection, observation of peers, attendance at meetings and workshops, and for close interaction between the teachers. At *JazykoFFka* all of this happens on a much larger time scale than within the usual official practicum, which, in the Czech Republic, is rarely of more than a month's duration, whilst the *JazykoFFka* experience takes place over a whole academic year. The trainees, however, point out that both forms of experience are important as the official practicum provides experience in teaching at real schools.

One of the greatest benefits of *JazykoFFka* to the research and professional development of the current author – also author and supervisor of the project as a whole – is the close, on-location contact with the trainees, the language learners and the teaching itself; this would have been hard to achieve by simply monitoring a group of TEFL students involved in standard practice, which take place at different locations and therefore could not have been as closely and consistently monitored by the teacher trainer, let alone by the trainees' peers. This has also led to the reevaluation of some components in existing TEFL courses taught at the same institution (e.g. lesson planning and management, efficiency techniques, working with coursebooks etc.).

As has been illustrated in literature, the practicum is without doubt a key tool in pre-service teacher training, and interviews with trainees not only after their practicum experience but also later in their careers have shown that this is how trainees themselves also see it. And yet the length of the teaching practicum is still barely sufficient in many countries. Consequently, teacher trainers are obliged to find other ways of creating space for the practicing of teaching, and unfortunately many of the available options (which include microteaching, materials development, the viewing of recorded lessons etc.) are artificial and lacking in authenticity as they happen outside the real classroom and in the artificial conditions of teacher-training workshops and seminars. Whilst commercial language and teacher-training schools may carry out teacher training in the authentic conditions of the real language-school classroom, universities typically do not avail themselves of such options – unless, that is, they create their own on-the-premises language schools. Not only does the *JazykoFFka* project stand as convincing and tangible proof that this can be done, but it has also demonstrated that the results can be highly beneficial to all concerned: from teacher trainee to teacher trainer, from individual language learner to academic institution, from research to practice.

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