



The Inspectors' Attitudes Towards Bridging the Gap Between Teacher Training and Classroom Practices in Algeria. The Case of Khenchela Middle Schools.

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Abstract -

Starting a teaching career is always problematic for many teachers because of the discrepancies that exist between theory and practice. Novice teachers usually encounter many difficulties when they try to make use of the theoretical background they acquired during their educational phase at the university. They are often faced by many challenges that require a certain training that is unfortunately missing from their curriculum. The present research paper aims at confirming the discrepancy hypothesis and exploring ways of bridging the gap between teachers' training and classroom practices in the Algerian Middle schools so as to equip teachers with the necessary didactic tools to carry out their mission in the most favourable conditions. To reach our aim, we interviewed two inspectors in charge of the eastern region. The findings revealed the mismatch between theory and practice, besides we came up with the conclusion that a successful teaching can only be achieved through the integration of practical courses and pre-service training in order to bridge the gap between what is theoretically taught to future teachers and the requirements of the actual classroom practices.

Keywords -

teachers', training, classroom practices, EFL, curricula

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المخلص -

يعد بدء مهنة التدريس دائماً مشكلة بالنسبة للعديد من المعلمين بسبب التناقضات الموجودة بين النظري والتطبيقي. يواجه المعلمون المبتدئون عادة العديد من الصعوبات عندما يحاولون الاستفادة من الخلفية النظرية التي اكتسبوها خلال المرحلة التعليمية بالجامعة. غالباً ما يواجهون العديد من التحديات التي تتطلب تدريباً معيناً يفتقر للأسف إلى مناهجهم الدراسية. تهدف الورقة البحثية الحالية إلى تأكيد فرضية التناقض واستكشاف طرق لسد الفجوة بين تدريب المعلمين وممارسات الفصل في المتوسطات الجزائرية لتزويد المعلمين بالأدوات التعليمية اللازمة لتنفيذ مهمتهم في أكثر الظروف ملائمة. للوصول إلى هدفنا ، قابلنا اثنين من المفتشين المسؤولين عن المنطقة الشرقية. كشفت النتائج عدم التوافق بين النظري والتطبيقي ، إلى جانب توصلنا إلى استنتاج مفاده أنه لا يمكن تحقيق تعليم ناجح إلا من خلال دمج الدورات العملية والتدريب قبل الخدمة من أجل سد الفجوة بين ما يتم تدريسه نظرياً لمعلمي المستقبل ومتطلبات الممارسات الصفية الفعلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية -

تدريب ، المعلمين ، ممارسات الفصل ، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، المناهج

Introduction

Foreign language teaching has always been a very complex field where there is an inter play between many actors; namely teachers, students, textbooks and curricula. Although the general tendency today is towards learner centeredness, but still the teacher's role can, by no means, be undermined. In this respect, teacher-training is becoming of great concern for scholars, educationalists, teachers and inspectors. The training received by future teachers in Algerian universities is usually criticised for it does not allow teachers to respond adequately to the students' expectations and does not equip

teachers with the necessary tools to fulfil their task in the appropriate way. Teachers are not well-trained in dealing with the psychology of the learner and are often faced with situations to which they cannot find solutions. The theoretical knowledge they receive is often insufficient to deal with the different problems likely to emerge in the foreign language classroom. Their training does not predict many problematic situations. The training is usually based on static and rigid theories that are often discredited by practice. There is a tendency to idealise teaching where the teacher is provided with wrong assumptions about the learner and the learning conditions. The lack of flexibility in the programmes usually makes it impossible for teachers to cope with the unexpected learning problems. Learners are human beings where many factors, social, linguistic and psychological can, at any time, intervene and put the teacher in embarrassing situations. This fact requires an appropriate teacher-training that goes beyond the purely theoretical knowledge he receives to a more practically-oriented training likely to face the different learning problems.

Pre-service programs

Pre-service programs are made to build future teachers, they give them the premise of showing practice and they prepare them to connect theory to practice. Widdowson (2012) stated that the goal of pre-service training is to make student-teachers mindful and aware of classroom management. Similarly, Bransford (2005) asserted that

“Pre-service teacher education programmes aim to prepare graduates to become quality teachers equipped with pedagogical practices that will serve to meet the increasing demands associated with the teaching profession.”

(Bransford as cited in Mergler, A. and Spooner-Lane, R (2012 : 66).

Thus, Pre-service training is considered as a key process that any future educator ought to experience to get prepared for teaching. In fact, during this period in which the student-teacher gets knowledge about theory, pre-service education is carried out for preparing different types of teachers with a collection of interrelated courses and

field experience. The objectives set for pre-service training can be summarised in the following:

- 1-Enabling teachers to understand the objectives of education as a whole
- 2- Allowing teachers to grasp the basics of child psychology.
- 3- Helping teachers to discover ways of motivating students and facilitating the learning process.

To put it otherwise, pre-service programs are intended to support and instil in teachers a greater degree of self-confidence. In this context, Kasanda affirmed that “During the teaching practice, a student-teacher is given the opportunity to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession.” (Kasanda 1995: 2).

Pre-service training programmes guide the trainees and provide them with basics of teaching practices and they train them to link theory to practice.

In-service training

Pre-service training is an essential process for an effective teacher, but this latter cannot stand in isolation, it needs to be accompanied with another process called In-service teacher training which play; also a vital role in the educational system in general and the improvement of future teachers in particular. In other words, one of the ways for teachers who were already employed to improve their way of teaching is to receive in-service training. Thus, in-service training program is a program intended to improve the performance of all personnel already holding assigned positions in a school setting or to implement a specified innovation or program (Sapp ,1996). Similar remark was made by Omar (2014) who stressed the importance of in-service training for novice teachers to face classroom challenges. In-service training are, thus, programmes that are prepared for teachers in order to fill the gap between developments in education and preparing teachers for professionalism.

Bridging the Gap

Pre-service and in-service programs mainly aim to prepare future professional EFL teachers. However, the pre-service training of EFL teachers in Algerian universities rarely take into consideration what is really happening in the classrooms. Consequently, the inadequate pre-training program for future EFL teachers and the lack of in-training programs resulted in a noticeable gap between what those teachers receive as knowledge and skills during their instructional phase at the university and the reality of teaching at schools and their ability to reflect proficiently on their own classroom practices. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to bridge this gap in order to improve English language teaching in Algeria.

A possible explanation for this empirical gap may be the existence of a discrepancy between what the student-teachers receive at the university and what they face in the classroom (Berger 2009 and Gielber 2009). This means that subject-matter knowledge must not be independent from practice (Dewey in Wren & Wren, 2009). Correspondingly, Berger (2009) claims that since the studies are not relevant in the classroom context, in the long run, this leads to theory-practice gap.

The key to effective teaching is definitely a bridge between theory and practice. The absence of one element makes the other one meaningless. Williams (1997) believes that linking theory and practice through classroom situation brings flexibility in teaching and helps practitioners to make real correspondence between their personal theories and what really happens in different learning contexts. Roehaig et al (2007) stressed the importance of implementing what actually happens inside the classroom practices in teacher-training programmes. The need to take context into consideration has also been stressed by Johnson (2006:235) who claimed:

“Teachers educator could no longer ignore the fact that teachers” prior experiences, their interpretation of activities they engage in and most important the context within which they work are extremely influential in shaping who and why teachers do what they do.”

Context evaluation provides the rationale for justifying the training programme. Therefore, this study is carried out to confirm and explore ways of bridging this gap by analyzing the relationship between student-teacher training and classroom practices. The study findings provide an understanding of the attitudes of EFL inspectors of middle schools in Khenchela towards the pre-training program and its contribution in improving classroom practices. It may also help decision makers to review the pre-service training programmes.

The following questions were raised in order to address the purpose of this study:

- 1- What are the inspectors' attitudes towards pre-service programs in Algerian English departments?
- 2- Do inspectors believe that the pre-training contributes to the classroom practices?
- 3- What are the necessary elements that need to be inserted in the pre-service training programmes to produce more successful and competent teachers?

Research Methodology and Design

Choice of the method

In order to confirm the discrepancy hypothesis and explore ways of bridging the gap between teacher-training and classroom practices in Khenchela Middle schools, a qualitative research design was employed. According to Peter Woods (1999) qualitative research is concerned with life as it is lived, things as they happen, situations as they are constructed in the day-to-day, moment-to-moment course of events. Thus, the use of the qualitative research is an attempt to gain indepth information and ensure that the data reflect what is happening.

Subjects of the Study

Two inspectors of English language in charge of 85 middle schools in Khenchela city and supervising 180 teachers of English who graduated from Algerian universities. The total number of

English teachers is 190. The 10 teachers who graduated from ENS are not concerned with in-service training.

Data gathering tools

To answer the research questions, qualitative data are collected from the structured interview organized with the inspectors. This interview was used for two main reasons. First, it is administered individually to members and the information is completed by the researcher himself, thus ensuring that all the questions are answered by the informants. Second, the interview allows for personal explanations of questions, in case any point needs clarification, the interviewer can paraphrase or put the question otherwise or provide more explanation regarding the requested information. For all the above reasons, the structured interview may be regarded as a more reliable data gathering tool, especially when dealing with a small sample. Gall, Borg, & Gall, (1996) also hold that “an interview permits open-ended explorations of topics and elicits responses that are couched in the unique words of the respondents”.

Results

1-The first question was about the criteria and requirements teachers should satisfy to be accepted to teach in middle schools. The inspectors claimed that the degree of BA is often the first requirement in addition to success in the written and oral tests organised by the ministry of education. Those candidates who succeed in these tests are called to become English teachers in middle schools without any specific training to follow. This in fact poses many problems to these novice teachers who are often faced with the foreign language classes for the first time in their lives. They often possess a good linguistic background, but usually a very limited experience in teaching.

2- The second and third questions were asked to inspectors to compare between teachers who graduated from the ENS (Ecole Normale Supérieure) and those from universities. In their response to questions, the inspectors asserted that the ENS graduates usually receive an adequate pre-service training programme and are

consequently not obliged to go through the written and oral tests. They often come to middle schools with a good experience in foreign language teaching and consequently they do not encounter the same difficulties as their counterparts coming from universities.

3-The fourth question was about the inspectors' overall evaluation of the programme content for university students who decided to join the teaching profession. Our interviewees claimed that the programme the student-teachers receive at the university does not allow them a full mastery of the didactic and psychological aspects of teaching. Their programmes are well-varied but often not oriented towards the teaching profession.

4- The fifth item attempted to introspect about the existence of an in-service training for these teachers and the inspectors said that seminars and workshops are the only occasions where teachers can talk about their teaching experiences and the difficulties they usually encounter in their classes. However, the time allotted to these seminars is usually very limited and can by no means provide the adequate answers to all the questions raised by the teachers. We are trying our best to remain attentive to teachers' concerns, but the working conditions are not all the time favourable. With the newly introduced reforms, more time is devoted to the in-service training especially during official holidays.

5- In our sixth question, we attempted to ask for more details about the content of the in-service training. The inspectors claimed their discontent of the theoretical nature of the in-service training which does not allow for enough space to respond to the novice-teachers aspirations for practical solutions to their everyday teaching problems.

6- Our seventh question was meant to collect suggestions from the inspectors as to the solutions they recommend to bridge this gap between theory and practice. They enlightened us with very significant ideas that could be summarised in the following points:

- Being exposed to more practical ideas and less to theoretical concepts.
- Being familiar with current pedagogical curriculum.
- Attending conference, seminars

- Adopting new teaching methods.
- Emphasis on language skills development.
- Dealing with Algerian textbooks in a critical way that is being selective according to learners' needs.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of the study obliged us to deal with a small sample of inspectors; only two, therefore we should not expect it to provide us with a complete reflection of the teaching problems faced in all Algerian middle schools. Teacher-training may, in many cases, be conducted the appropriate way but, still teachers may not be successful in fulfilling their duty simply because of extra-curricular reasons. They may simply be unmotivated or not devoted to teaching. We did not explore this variable in our study knowing it could be decisive in many instances, but we wanted our study to be limited to a search of the most suitable techniques to bridge the gap between what is taught theoretically to future teachers and the requirement of classroom practices. This study is an attempt to provide additional background for further research in the field of foreign language teaching.

Recommendations

This study was conducted with the aim of discovering the inspectors' beliefs and attitudes towards student-teacher training at the university level and classroom practices and how to bridge the gap between theory and practice. We came up with the following recommendations for a more successful teacher training:

- 1- The context in which teachers work should be taken into account before devising any training programme. By 'context' we mean more than the foreign language classroom; the learners and their cultural background should be fully explored.
- 2- The pre-service training should be reviewed to become more practical than theoretical. It should be based on real-life

situations and should address the teacher's concerns in order to provide full answers to the major problems they encounter in their classrooms.

- 3- The ENS programmes could be adopted in universities where the majority of students are motivated for a teaching career.
- 4- Senior teachers can contribute to devise training programmes based on their own experience and can help novice teachers overcome their difficulties.
- 5- The collaboration between the university and schools is highly recommended because it often plays a complementary role likely to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to confirm the discrepancy hypothesis and explore ways of bridging the gap between teachers' training and classroom practices in the Algerian middle schools through interviewing two middle school inspectors in charge of the Eastern region. The findings revealed the mismatch between theory and practice and consequently there is an urgent need for reviewing these programmes in order to provide student-teachers with authentic hands on experience in teaching. Besides, collaboration between the university and schools is very important since it is the only way to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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Appendix

Inspectors' interview

Dear inspectors

The present research paper aims at confirming the discrepancy hypothesis and exploring ways of bridging the gap between teachers' training and classroom practices in the Algerian middle schools. This interview is meant to gather data as to improve the teacher training programmes.

Q1. According to you what are the criteria that teachers should have to teach in Middle school?

Q2. Do the same criteria apply for those who graduated from ENS?

Q3. According to you, who is well qualified for the teaching profession :ENS graduates or university graduates?

Q4. Do you think that the program the student-teachers receive at the university is enough to embark on the teaching career?

Q5. Is there any kind of in-service training/support available for these teachers?

Q6. What is the content of the in-service training?

Q7. Do you have any suggestions to improve the situation?