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## **LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF PRE-SERVICE STUDENT TEACHERS FROM TEACHING PRACTICE: THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CURRICULUM**

### **Abstract**

Pre-service teachers in Zimbabwe face a number of challenges on their Teaching Practice (TP) usually because a second language (English) is the language of education. Challenges and experiences articulated by pre-service student teachers on TP therefore provide a strategic window into the practices of novice teachers. This study uses a concurrent mixed approach to examine the challenges faced by B.Ed. pre-service (Primary) student teachers in implementing the English as a second language (ESL) curriculum. Questionnaire, interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions were utilised. The study is based on Shulman's (1987) teacher knowledge framework to identify the worthwhile knowledges for teachers and Cummins's (2000) views on academic proficiency to establish what the ESL curriculum should entail for teachers to effectively manage classroom pedagogy. The teacher knowledge framework postulates that teacher professional competence can be viewed from seven interrelated knowledge strands. This study uses three most pertinent namely – content, pedagogical and curriculum knowledge. Results of the study showed that student teachers face a lot of challenges in teaching ESL and that those challenges can be mediated by the adoption of critical developmental pedagogies that recognize teachers and learners' linguistic competencies as in need of support.

**Key Words:** Teacher knowledge framework, English academic proficiency, pedagogical practices, ESL teachers and learners

### **Introduction**

Pre-Service teacher education in Zimbabwe has evolved over the years to enhance student quality through strengthening classroom management capacity. One of the components of training receiving close attention is Teaching Practice. Marais and Meier (2004) say that Teaching Practice (TP) is an integral component of teacher preparation that entails the inculcation of professional practice and conduct. The teaching practice window is a crucial time when practicing teachers get the opportunity to develop on-the-job experience and competences in preparation for full time practice. David and Hall (2003) add that TP is a socializing experience into the teaching profession that involves rigorous professional negotiation that leads to the development of confidence. The TP period is also when teacher educators get the opportunity to assess and evaluate the efficacy of their training programmes for continual modifications. Reflections on student teaching experiences are important in the understanding of the effectiveness of teaching practice to improve practice and programmes effectiveness. This is a Scholarship of Teaching Language (SoTL) based on a small scale study carried out on B.Ed pre-service.

## **The study contexts**

The concerns and challenges discussed here are from B.Ed. pre-service student teachers at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) who finished their TP stint where they implemented the ESL curriculum. B.Ed pre-service is a teacher training programme offered over a four-year full-time period to 'A' Level certificate holders who spent their third year on Teaching Practice. During TP, student teachers are expected to translate theoretical knowledge into pedagogical practice. Kablan (2005) posits that TP offers the possibility of improving the various innovative ways in which new knowledge is constructed and refined for positive meaningful experience.

## **Methodology**

This study examined the challenges faced by student teachers in ESL instruction during TP. A concurrent mixed approach was employed utilizing the questionnaires, interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions. Twenty two student teachers and ten lecturers participated in the study. The twenty two student teachers taught ESL during TP while the ten lecturers supervised and assessed English lessons taught during the same period. Harris (1985) sees TP supervision as a process of monitoring and analysing the teaching and learning process of the school. Data from questionnaires were collected from student teachers about classroom challenges. Informal interviews were conducted with selected lecturers to elicit their views on student teachers' classroom practices and challenges. Document analysis was used to ascertain recurring themes and features (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). TP supervision scripts were the documents analysed. A supervision instrument is a carefully designed form which incorporates the main skills or performance indicators that have to be developed in the pre-service teachers during TP. Forty supervision scripts for English lessons taught during TP were analyzed in two stages as follows; firstly, the scripts were categorized according to topics taught. Secondly, the supervisor's comments were critically examined and explicit comments were taken.

## **B.Ed. (Primary) Pre-service training in Zimbabwe**

Undergraduate pre-service teacher training at Great Zimbabwe University was introduced in the early 2000s to improve the quality of teachers and pedagogical practices following the call by government to shift emphasis from access and quantity to quality and sustainability. Pre-service teacher education therefore needed to continually provide evidence that procedures are accountable, effective and value added. The effectiveness of pre-service teacher training programmes can always be assessed during Teaching Practice (TP). The teaching practice window is a crucial moment when practicing teachers get the opportunity to develop on-the-job professional competence and to experience the transition from students to full teachers. It is an opportunity for pre-service teachers to experiment and test their knowledge and skills in an authentic teaching environment. The rigorous negotiation that takes place during TP leads to higher confidence in improving pre-service teachers' learning and a higher sense of teacher efficacy. By its nature, pre-service teacher learning is a daunting task given the complex nature of classroom dynamics,

the expectations of learners and society. This study examined pre-service teachers' classroom practices and the challenges encountered while on TP. This could serve as a reflective process to put together evidenced challenges that can be used to improve both student teacher practice and training programmes.

### **English as a Second Language and the Zimbabwe School curriculum**

English has continued to establish itself as a global lingua franca in many countries of the world including Zimbabwe where it is used as a medium of instruction. It occupies a high status in the school curriculum as in all formal contexts. The goal of teaching English is to make learners acquire a high linguistic proficiency that enables learners operate effectively in academic and social situations. However, ESL instruction presents host of challenges to teachers and learners who both do not possess the prerequisite proficiency. Vespoor (2003) says that the policy of using English appears to have a major impact on the discursive patterns found in many of the classrooms. Students on TP therefore, face a double-barrelled challenge of being second language users of ESL with the attendant limited proficiency and teachers of ESL learners who grapple worse with acquiring basic linguistic ability, let alone academic proficiency. At their TP stage, student teachers only have a degree of linguistic and professional competence to use to mediate classroom pedagogy and English language teaching. In many cases however, both remain a real challenge especially given the mismatch between their competences and the learners' needs for support. Inevitably, student teachers resort to 'classroom survival skills' such as 'safe talk' (Hornberger & Chick, 2001), ritualised techniques in Zimbabwean primary schools (Ngwaru, 2010) and code-switching between English and Kiswahili in Kenyan classrooms (Bunyi, 2005).

### **Teacher knowledge framework and academic proficiency**

#### ***Teacher Knowledge***

The Zimbabwean situation is similar to many other bilingual contexts characterised by teachers who are ESL users of English while students are English Language Learners (ELLs). Implicit in the definition is that ELLs' proficiency in English is insufficient for them to academically succeed in English-only classrooms. ELLs have different linguistic and academic needs from first language speakers of English (L1) and need special assistance to bring them to the same grade level proficiency as L1 speakers. Teachers therefore need a strong knowledge base of English in order to effectively assist their learners. Knowledge base refers to a repertoire of knowledge, skills and dispositions that teachers require to conduct classroom practices effectively. Shulman (1987) probes seven categories of teacher knowledge that are essential for effective classroom practice. Three of those (content, pedagogical & curriculum knowledge) are the main focus of this study while four (learners, trends, contexts & values) provide a broader view of the situation.

Content knowledge or subject matter knowledge is the 'what' of teaching usually acquired through adequate exposure to comprehensible linguistic input. It is the knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions that children should learn Shulman (1987).

Pedagogical knowledge is the ‘how’ of teaching generally acquired through education coursework and experience in schools Ball (2000). It was later revised and blended with content to become Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) - which is a form of practical knowledge used by teachers to guide their actions in highly contextualised school settings Shulman (1987). It entails knowledge of specific strategies, methods and rules of classroom management that can be used to address student learning needs in particular classroom circumstances. A sound grounding in relevant (PCK) therefore prepares teachers who understand learners’ needs, are able to diagnose learners’ problems, can select and design suitable learning tasks and make use of authentic instructional materials. This is reminiscent of Freire’s (1995; 2006) critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a teaching approach that attempts to help students to question and challenge domination and the beliefs and practices that dominate. Freire endorses students’ ability to think critically about their education.

Curriculum knowledge is the ‘why’ of teaching that justifies worthwhile knowledge required by teachers for effective pedagogy. Pre-service teachers need to be comfortable with the components of the curriculum - how to interpret the curriculum correctly, having the ability to identify suitable goals and objectives for specific lessons and how to develop unique activities that reinforce the lessons being presented. Finally, they need the expertise to effectively implement the curriculum. This paper regards curriculum implementation a process of interaction among student teachers, ESL learners and the learning content. Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011) say that the process of curriculum implementation is based on a number of activities on the part of the teacher and if they miss the point, the intended curriculum is not achieved.

### ***Academic Proficiency***

Cummings (2000) indicates that English academic proficiency is a special genre that learners need to develop in order to cope with school knowledge. It refers to a degree to which an individual has access and expertise in understanding and using specific kind of language that is employed in academic contexts and is required to complete academic task. Academic Language Proficiency is the second type of proficiency needed to read books, to participate in debate and to provide written responses to tests. Students require a considerable time as much as seven years to become more academically proficient in English (Cummings, 1981). What that means is that ESL learners frequently confront the demands of academic learning through a yet un-mastered language again making it difficult to achieve expected level of proficiency.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The results reported here are presented and discussed according to ‘knowledges’ established earlier on.

### ***Academic Proficiency***

The results of the study showed that many of the lessons taught were heavily flawed with a variety of weaknesses most of which emanated from the low proficiency levels of most learners and some teachers. The following comments highlight lack of language proficiency on teachers and learners.

*Interviews*

- There was excessive code-switching from the target language to the mother language
- Pre-service teachers failed to devise meaningful activities from which learners could benefit
- Student teachers failed to make themselves understandable to learners
- Student teachers did not have the confidence to teach English in the presence of a supervisor

*Supervision scripts*

- Teachers' instructions and explanations were not clear
- Children gave wrong answers and the teacher accepted them as correct
- There was no meaningful pupil to pupil interaction

All the above comments clearly indicate that both teachers and learners have serious problems in using the target language. Both need a certain level of proficiency in order to engage in meaningful pedagogic tasks. Teachers whose English is not good enough can not correct the learners' English hence the acceptance of wrong answers. Cook (1996) laments that if teachers or learners are not fully conversant with the use of English, it is difficult to sustain their activities, hence meaningful and interactive classroom discourse is compromised and code-switching takes centre stage. Cummings (2000) adds that code-switching should be avoided because it acts as an obstacle to competence and fluency hence denying the learner the benefits of education.

**Content knowledge**

The results of the study showed that although pre-service teachers possessed some level of desirable content knowledge of English, it was not adequate enough to enable them to teach English in ways that are consistent with desired expectations. The following comments highlight pre-service teachers and learners' lack of adequate content knowledge in English.

*Focus group discussion*

- Some of us had difficulties in extracting the learning content from the syllabus
- Lack of adequate vocabulary and correct grammar made it very difficult to teach composition
- Many of the learners lacked the conceptual understanding of the concepts they had to learn

*Questionnaires*

- English was rated the most difficult subject to teach
- Oral skills were rated as most difficult to develop
- Integration of language skills was rated as very difficult

*Supervision scripts*

- Both student teachers and learners heavily relied on textbooks for information
- The lessons were heavily flawed with repetition of concepts resulting in poor teaching
- The teacher did not show adequate mastery of the subject matter

From the above comments it is evident that both teachers and learners face a number of challenges during ESL instruction. This is consistent with Medgyes's (2001) point that the majority of learners grope in the dark unless they are fortunate enough to receive tailor-made support from knowledgeable teachers. Heavy reliance on textbook deprive learners the opportunity to explore their world since actual language use involves many varieties of knowledge.

### ***Pedagogical knowledge***

The results of the study showed that: pre-service teachers need a lot of pedagogic English skills to teach English effectively. The following are some of the comments which reveal lack of pedagogic knowledge on the part of students.

#### *Focus group discussion*

- We did not know what to do with rowdy pupils during group work
- Varied and meaningful group activities were difficult for to design
- We did not know the appropriate strategies to use for certain lessons

#### *Supervision scripts*

- Lesson introductions were not linked to the concepts to be developed
- They moved back and forth and no teaching took place
- Teacher talk dominated the lesson depriving learners the opportunity to interact meaningfully

From the above reports, it is evident pre-service teachers' abilities to impart pedagogic skills were inadequate. Failure to manage group work and to design varied and meaningful group activities that enhanced learner interaction is indicative of lack of adequate PCK. Krashen (1985) says that language acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language. The best way are those that supply comprehensible linguistic input in low anxiety situations containing messages that learners want to hear.

### ***Curriculum knowledge and implementation***

#### *Supervision scripts*

Data from supervision scripts showed that:

- Student teachers lacked the confidence to teach English in the presence of supervisors
- Objectives for oral lessons were poorly stated
- Some students teachers could not differentiate between aims and objectives

It is clear that pre-service teachers need a lot of support to acquire the necessary skills to transmit the curriculum effectively. However, while a lot of serious weaknesses were noted in student teachers' practices, a number of strengths were ascertained. Data from questionnaires indicated that up to seventy percent of the students were very comfortable with teaching reading comprehension and guided composition.

### **Conclusions**

There is no doubt that successful implementation of the ESL curriculum by pre-service teachers in Zimbabwe rests on teacher expertise. Their agency is critical in the attempt to build a cumulative and useful body of knowledge about pedagogy

content knowledge in general. This is why the complexity of teachers' pedagogic content knowledge becomes most apparent. The official curriculum specifies content, which is brought to life by teachers with varying knowledge, and resources working in particular school classrooms.

## Recommendations

In view of the above discussion, this study recommends that:

- Critical developmental pedagogies should be applied to ESL teaching.
- Effective methods of assessment on how well pre-service have internalized the theoretical and pedagogic knowledge for becoming effective teachers be put in place.
- Teacher education courses on content knowledge of ESL, vocabulary, grammar and the four language skills should be improved to ensure adequate mastery of essential teaching skills.
- The language curriculum should be more specific about the need for proficiency in the language of schooling for ESL learners to succeed academically.

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