

Attitudes and Expectations of Teacher Trainees Regarding a Pre-service Program¹

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Abstract

After the Iraqi Operation Freedom in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power by the USA, an increasing number of teacher education programs have been opened in public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan to train specialized teachers, including English teachers, to teach in the basic and senior high schools. An important program that is offered is called Observation and Teaching. The objective of the Observation and Teaching Program is to prepare high quality teachers with thorough knowledge of both content and pedagogy. The goal of this paper is to examine circumstantial considerations regarding how the program was offered as well as to investigate the attitudes of the students towards the program. The researcher designed and distributed a questionnaire to 250 students. The descriptive analysis shows that the participants have positive attitudes towards the Observation and Teaching Program as an educational mean to support their learning experiences. The results also demonstrate that the program has several strengths, such as helping students gain practical teaching experience, as well as aiding them in developing knowledge about learning theories and approaches related to language teaching. Due to the lack of research studies on the attitudes and expectations of students regarding the Observation and Teaching Program, the results of the study may be useful for policy-makers within teacher education programs to improve the current situation of their programs.

Resumen

Después de que la operación iraquí Freedom 2003 eliminara el régimen de Saddam Hussein, se ha abierto un número cada vez mayor de programas de educación docente en universidades públicas del Kurdistán iraquí para capacitar a maestros especializados, incluidos profesores de inglés para enseñar en las escuelas básicas y secundarias. Un programa importante que ofrecen es el de Observación y Enseñanza. El objetivo del Programa de Observación y Enseñanza es preparar maestros de alta calidad con un conocimiento profundo tanto del contenido como de la pedagogía. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar las consideraciones circunstanciales con respecto a cómo se ofreció el programa, así como investigar las actitudes de los estudiantes hacia el programa para apoyar sus prácticas educativas. El investigador diseñó y distribuyó un cuestionario-encuesta a 250 estudiantes. El análisis descriptivo muestra que los participantes tienen actitudes positivas hacia el Programa de Observación y Enseñanza como un medio educativo para apoyar sus experiencias de aprendizaje. Los resultados también demuestran que el programa tiene varias fortalezas, como la experiencia práctica de la enseñanza, el estudio de teorías de aprendizaje y los enfoques relacionados con la enseñanza de idiomas. Debido a la falta de estudios de investigación sobre las actitudes y expectativas de los estudiantes con respecto al Programa de Observación y Enseñanza, el resultado de este estudio puede ser útil para los responsables de los programas de educación docente para mejorar la situación actual de sus programas.

The role of teachers and teacher education

Today more than ever, the function and role of a teacher in an education system are crucial, decisive, and challenging because the teacher needs to guide the students through learning rather than be a mere transmitter of knowledge to the students. Thus, teachers need to develop productive relationships with their learners and guide them through the learning process (Edelman, 2017). It is believed that the effects a teacher has on the students are eternal and that his/her influence never ends (Adams, as cited in Prothero, 2011).

Smith (1986) argues that teaching as a profession has a far-reaching impact on the lives of every person in the society as well as "the strength and well-being of the nation" (p. 39). Thus, the reputation and future of a nation are directly linked to its educational system. The role of teachers should not be isolated behind classroom doors and limited to teaching students the content of the subjects allocated for them. A teacher needs to take on other responsibilities (Fullan, 2013). The new role of teachers demands they perform duties which are not restricted to teaching activities but are directed in a wider sense to human development by being "a symbol of guidance and inspiration for their students to achieve the estimated goals in their future lives" (Mubashra & Saadia, 2014, p. 726). In order to have these attributes, future teachers need to be trained in the undergraduate teacher education programs in order to obtain a well-rounded background in pedagogical practices.

Today, in many countries around the world, governments invest a lot in order to prepare high quality teachers with thorough knowledge of both content and pedagogy through teacher education programs

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(McGalliard & Wilson, 2017; Zambak & Tyminski, 2017, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014b)). Teacher education may play an important role in providing teacher trainees with the knowledge and skills that qualify them to meet the requirements of the teaching profession (Morris and Stommel (2018), Fisher & Fisher (2018), Eyler (2018), Cuban (2018), Fullan and Edwards (2017), and Darling-Hammond (2010)). Darling-Hammond (2010) believes that teacher preparation programs search for the best possible approaches to equip their trainees with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to become effective teachers in the future. Evidence of studies (e.g., Lašek and Wiesenbergova (2007), Hargreaves and Fullan, (2012), Caena, (2014), Htang (2017)) emphasize the fact that teacher education programs do not necessarily depend on cognitive competences, such as knowledge and pedagogical skills alone. These programs need to focus on affective competences such as positive attitudes as well in order to educate a teacher who will be able to teach effectively in the future and stand against the problems they may face in the process of teaching (Vare, 2018, Suyatno et al., 2019).

According to Oruç (2011), one of the key factors in understanding and improving the teaching process is investigating the attitude of the teacher trainees towards that profession. It should be the priority of teacher education programs to address the attitude of their participants because it may influence their academic achievements. Itter and Meyers (2017) investigated the attitude of third-year teacher trainees towards mathematics through a written reflection task requiring the participants to describe their views about mathematics and the factors that they thought had shaped those views. The researchers found that the participants' attitudes varied on a continuum from highly positive to neutral or to highly negative. According to Zimbardo and Lieppe (1991), by having a positive attitude towards the teaching profession, trainees may take full advantage of every moment of their training and fully utilize that knowledge in the future.

As LaCour (2005 as cited in Karanezi & Rapti, 2015) says:

...if we ask veteran teachers what their job is like, they will answer: difficult, wonderful, exhausting, fun, stressful, enlightening and rewarding. Then, when we ask them, if they would choose the same career if they could live their lives over, the answer is usually "Yes". (p. 625)

The main motive for conducting this study is pedagogical. It is hoped that it will result in a better understanding of the attitudes and expectations of the teacher trainees towards the Observation and Teaching Program in the departments of English language at the Kurdish universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Such an understanding should help university policy makers (deans, head of departments and teachers) to adopt a more sensitive approach to the organization of the program.

Observation and Teaching at the College of Basic Education

In order to improve the quality of education and that of teacher qualifications and inculcate positive attitudes towards the teaching profession, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research designed the Observation and Teaching Program to be taught at the fourth stage within the departments of English language at the Faculties and Colleges of Basic Educations in the Kurdistan universities. The main purpose of the Observation and Teaching Program is to equip teacher trainees with skills, educational principles, knowledge, and attitudes relative to the teaching profession. Observation and Teaching is an obligatory and takes two full-time semesters (Fall and Spring). trainees spend the fall semester observing experienced teachers in their schools. The trainees have observed a veteran teacher and note how the class is taught. As a result of this observation, the students will get firsthand experience which may be useful to improve their teaching when starting teaching practices in the second half of the program. A supervisor is chosen by the departments of English language to take the trainees to the schools and put them in the experienced teachers' classrooms. After finishing the observations trainees return to their universities and they give a seminar about their experiences in the Observation part of the program.

In the spring semester, trainees go to the schools and start teaching. The process of selecting the schools is carried out by the departments of English language and the directorate of Education of the city where the university is located. At the same time, the interest and needs of the trainees are considered regarding the schools where they have to teach.

The trainees spend a semester teaching English as a foreign language in the schools. During their teaching practice, two teachers visit the trainees, and sit in their class for the whole lesson to evaluate their teaching. One of the teachers has to be specialized in psychology and evaluates the psychological aspects of the trainee during the teaching practice. The other teacher is specialized in English language

teaching to evaluate trainee’s teaching. The trainees are graded based on these evaluations by the teachers.

After three decades of offering different models of teacher education programs by both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Iraqi Kurdistan, no significant project has yet been carried out to investigate the attitudes and expectations of teacher trainees about their future careers as teachers. Such inattention to the teacher trainees' attitudes justifies the present study. Thus, this paper is an attempt to discover the attitudes of the teacher trainees toward the Observation and Teaching Program because no matter how well-planned and implemented teacher training is “if the teacher trainees have negative attitudes towards the teaching profession, they will not be successful” (Taneri et al, 2014, p., 533). The findings of the study can help teacher-educators and researchers to find out whether trainees are satisfied with the program offered or not, and to understand whether the teacher training helps them have positive attitudes towards the teaching profession.

Although the above synthesis of the research literature reveals that the main role of the teacher education programs is to prepare teachers for teaching purposes, there are many factors that may influence the attitude of these teacher trainees towards their future profession both positively and negatively. Among these factors is how well the teacher education programs are planned and designed. However, the lack of research on attitudes and expectation provides the rationale for carrying out the present study to find out the academic benefits of the Observation and Teaching Program for the teacher trainees, as well as to answer the following research question:

What characterizes the attitude of teacher trainees towards the Observation and Teaching Program in a public university in Iraqi Kurdistan?

Research Method

Sampling

A convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants of the study who were a group of 250 trainees (74% female and 26% male) in their fourth year of study in the departments of English language at five public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan (See Table 1). The main criterion for their selection was that they possessed "certain key characteristics that are related to the purpose of the investigation" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012, p. 1), which in this case is that they participated in the Observation and Teaching Program.

Gender	N	%
Male	65	26
Female	185	74

Table 1: Distribution of the teacher trainees according to their gender

Data Analysis

After receiving the completed questionnaires, the responses were analyzed using IBM's Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0. The results were further analyzed in terms of descriptive statistical measures (i.e., mean scores and standard deviations). In order to determine what trends in the data suggested about the learners' attitudes and expectations about the Observation and Teaching Program, participants' responses were analyzed descriptively by calculating percentages and mean scores.

Results

In order to find out to what extent the research participants are satisfied with their teachers' instructions and clarification regarding the purposes of the Observation and Teaching practices as a whole, they were asked to answer a question on a five-point Likert-scale. Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis (Means, Std. Deviations, and Percentages). The results indicate that the mean score was 4.16.

						Percent (%)	
Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Uncertain	Not satisfied	Not satisfied at all	Mean	Std.	
30	22	16	14	18	4.16	.615	

Table 2: Distribution of mean scores and percentage of trainees' satisfaction with their Observation and Teaching teachers.

The results show the majority of (52%) of the participants are satisfied with the teachers' instructions and clarification for observing the teaching practice while 32% of them were not satisfied with the form of instruction provided by the teacher in charge of the program.

Results show that 100% of the trainee teachers want the overall aim of the Observation and Teaching Program to be compiled in a handbook. This will be a document which may include recommendations, guidelines, and principles about observation of the trainee teachers in the Observation semester and provide information about teaching profession, teaching management and implications for the use of teaching resources in the teaching semester.

In order to find out the attitude of the teacher trainees participants towards their experience after finishing the Observation and Teaching Program, the participants were asked to answer a question on a five-point Likert scale. From data presented in Table 3 below, the results of descriptive analysis (Means, Std. Deviations, and Percentages) indicate that the highest mean score is 4.39 for the item of "I learned necessary language teaching methodologies" in which 83% of the trainees strongly agree or agree that the program is helpful to learn certain language teaching methods through taking some actual teaching practice. The second highest mean score is 4.35 for the item of "As the result of the program, I know how to teach my students certain way to learn English in the future" in which 82% of the trainees either strongly agree or agree that the program is useful to get experience and teach their future students English language in some certain ways.

The third highest mean score is 4.30 for the item of "I learned approaches related to language teaching and learning" in which 80% of the trainee teachers either strongly agree or agree that the teaching Practice helped them to learn more theories and approaches related to language teaching.

The lowest mean score is 4.12 for the item of "I developed my personal academic interests" in which 72% of the trainees agree that their teaching practice is important to improve their personal academic interests.

The second lowest mean score is 4.15 for the item of "The program helps me to improve my learning experience" in which 62% of them agree that it will be beneficial to shape their future learning and working experience. The overall results show that the teacher trainees have positive attitudes towards the Observation and Teaching Program. Table 3 shows the mean scores and percentage of participants' attitudes towards Observation and Teaching Program.

Items	Percent (%)					Mean	Std.
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
I learned approaches related to language teaching and learning	13	67	16	2	2	4.30	.907
The program helps me to improve my learning experience	18	61	11	9	1	4.15	1.013
I learned necessary language teaching methodologies	12	71	11	2	3	4.39	.919
As the result of the program, I know how to teach my students certain way to learn English in the future	21	61	10	7	1	4.35	.860
I developed my personal academic interests	6	72	19	2	1	4.12	.724

Table 3: Distribution of mean scores and percentage of the participants attitudes towards their experience after finishing Observation and Teaching

In order to find out about the expectations of the participant trainees of the Observation and Teaching Program, the participants were asked to answer another question on a five-point Likert scale. Table 4 shows the descriptive analysis (Means, Std. Deviations, and Percentages). The results of Table 4 indicate that 80% of the trainee teachers expected the Observation and Teaching Program to broaden their knowledge and make them aware of the interconnection between different aspects of EFL teaching, which enables them to share idea with others.

Percent (%)					Mean	Std.
Very Much	Much	Uncertain	A little	Not at all		
24	56	10	8	2	4.10	.790

Table 4: Distribution of mean scores and percentage of teachers attitudes expectations about Observation and Teaching

In order to find out the preference of the participants regarding the teaching profession, they were asked if they would choose another profession if they had the chance; the participants had to answer with a Yes/No. The results in Table 5 show that almost all the female teacher trainees would choose the teaching profession while 62% of the male students would not choose the teaching profession if they had the chance to choose a different profession. On the contrary, 87% female teacher trainees prefer the teaching profession to other professions.

	Percent (%)	
	Yes	No
Male	38	62
Female	87	13

Table 5: Distribution of percentage of teachers regarding teaching profession.

Discussion

The findings obtained through investigating teacher trainees' expectations and attitudes regarding pre-service teacher education programs described above are discussed below. The results of the study are in broad agreement with the findings of many other studies that examined trainees' attitudes towards the teaching profession (Erdem, 2012; Özder, Konedralı & Zeki 2010; Bulut, 2009). The results of the study confirm that the professional success of a teacher trainee is closely related to his or her perception of the teaching profession. Students with a positive attitude towards the teaching profession may undertake the program with more enthusiasm, love, and in a more efficient manner. This is in line with the research findings of Alkan (2018) and Oruç (2011) who argue that one of the key factors of understanding, analyzing and improving teaching process is the attitude of the teacher trainees towards the teaching profession.

The participants of the current study reported that the Observation and Teaching course helped them to gain new knowledge, to understand teaching methodologies and learn from their practical experience of how to teach EFL in many ways. Such a positive attitude of the research participants of the study supports the arguments of Darling-Hammond (2010) and Richard Riley (2000), U.S. Secretary of Education, who believe that intense and coherent teacher education programs can lay a foundation to develop conceptual and pedagogical knowledge of their students. He also claims that teacher education programs may have a "defining role in preparing the next generation of teachers" (Riley, 2000). Thus, providing continuous professional development is crucial to prompt the interests of the students with the knowledge, abilities and skills that qualify them to meet the requirements of the teaching profession and to become great teachers in the future.

Conclusion

The main motive for conducting this study is pedagogical in order to improve the quality of Observation and Teaching Program as well as bridge the gap available in the process of offering this program. It is hoped that the study would result in a better understanding of the attitudes and expectations of teacher trainees towards the Observation and Teaching Program in the departments of English language at the Kurdish universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Such an understanding should assist university decision makers (deans, head of departments and teachers) in adopting a more sensitive approach to the organization of the program.

Our study shows that the students have a positive attitude towards the program but their attitude and expectations vary towards the teaching profession.

The results of the study confirm that the Observation and Teaching Program has many academic benefits for the teacher trainees, such as:

1. Gaining new pedagogical knowledge to teach their students how to learn English in the future
2. Learning theories and approaches related to language teaching
3. Improving learning experience from practical experiments and developing personal academic interests

Pedagogical implications of the study

There is a common consensus among teachers, students, and policymakers that teacher education programs have to focus on the issues of enhancing the attitudes and interests of the teacher trainees, as well as help them get a well-rounded background in pedagogical practices. However, the overall results of the study reveals that the attitudes of the teacher trainees and their affective needs are

neglected from all the perspectives. Thus, based on the findings of the study, the first implication of this study is to investigate how the neophyte teachers realize the purposes and goals of the Observation and Teaching Program and how it may influence their expected future profession (teaching). The second implication of the study is to inform the policymakers about these perspectives. It is, therefore, important for the policymakers to improve the current situation of the Observation and Teaching Program by compiling its objectives into a document where teacher trainees may find the overall aim of the program such as recommendations, guidelines, and principles in the teaching profession, teaching management and implications for the use of teaching resources. Another implication of this study is that teacher education programs need to be more involved in supporting the educational practices of the teacher trainees by investigating their attitudes and provide an environment where they can take full advantage of every moment of their education. The present study might be of considerable importance and a valuable contribution as well to fill the gap that exists in literature on the topic of investigating the attitudes of why students choose English language teaching as a profession in the Kurdish context.

Limitation

The present study may have yielded more reliable results regarding the attitudes of the teacher trainees towards the Observation and Teaching Program if other data collection sources had been used for triangulation purposes. Interviews with heads of departments, deans of colleges, and directors of the quality assurance and curriculum development at the university level would be effective to produce more reliable results.

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