Pre-Service English Language Teachers' Perceptions of A Good Language Teacher at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), AL-Rustaq, Oman

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Abstract

The study examines how the pre-service English language teachers at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS)-AL-rustaq perceive the notion of a 'good language teacher' before and after they undertake microteaching practices. Qualitative research was employed to answer the main research questions of the study, which is what are pre-service teachers' perceptions of a good language teacher before and after experiencing microteaching? In order to answer the research question, semi-structured interviews for twelve pre-service English language teachers were conducted before and after the microteaching context. By employing the content analysis, the findings revealed that pedagogical knowledge is the best quality that pre-service English language teachers must possess at the UTAS-AL-rustaq. Personal qualities such as being a motivator, being kind, being enthusiastic and having a sense of humor were also perceived as important features of a good teacher from the participants' point of view. The powerful influence of the microteaching practice made the participants able to incorporate their background knowledge (the studied theories) into practice. This was clear from their interpretation of the concept of good language teacher from only personal qualities to more into teaching with good personal qualities. This, therefore, emphasizes the importance of this practical course in shaping more practical teaching identities over simply theoretical ones amongst the participants. It is hence recommended to increase the practical courses and allocate them towards the end of the pre-service teacher education programme. It is also recommended that the teachers of these courses focus on post-lesson discussions, and make a balance emphasis on the overall good teacher qualities in order for the pre-service English language teachers to see the importance of all qualities in the language classroom.

Keywords: microteaching, pre-service English language teachers, characteristics of good English language teachers, University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS)-AL-rustaq

1. Introduction and Background Context

The concept of a good language teacher and its characteristics has presented a major concern for teacher educators and researchers, particularly in the field of teacher preparation. Teacher preparation programs around the world frequently equip its pre-service teachers with the skills and competencies needed to be quality teachers. They are well positioned to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Prior to the entrance into the teaching profession, many universities around the world utilize microteaching as a means to enable pre-service teachers to gain the repertoire of professional skills.

At higher educational institutions in Oman, Rustaq English Language Teaching (ELT) program offers courses in relation to teaching the language skills such as English language Teaching Method of Teaching, ELT School Curriculum Analysis and Assessment. In addition to these theoretical courses, there are practical courses, some of them are offered at the college and some of them are practiced at schools. The 'Practicum 1' and 'Practicum 2' college-based-courses have microteaching sessions, which are offered for pre-service teachers who are in their third year of their ELT program at Rustaq College of Education. They are studying a module on how to teach. In this module, the pre-service teachers, after they are mostly acquainted with the theory part of teaching, are required to put these theories into action. They are required to prepare a lesson plan from the Omani English curriculum and teach their peers in the college followed by a post-lesson discussion for each microteaching. It is

an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to fully understand and most significantly practice not only content knowledge but also pedagogical content knowledge. Thus, the essence of a good language teacher will probably be constructed when they practice teaching and putting theories in action. On other words, the pre-service teachers' beliefs and perceptions of a good language teacher will gradually be developed during the microteaching sessions throughout the course. However, if the pre-service teachers are not curtained with the good language teachers' characteristics either directly or indirectly, may influence their teaching practice negatively (as they may ignore some good teaching practice and hence some wrong beliefs about teaching might be formed).

Therefore, this study investigates how the pre-service English language teachers at UTAS, Rustaq college of Education, perceive the notion of a 'good language teacher' before and after they undertake microteaching practices in order to explore the impact of such courses in targeting the pre-service teachers' beliefs. It intends to answer the following research question: What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of a good language teacher before and after experiencing microteaching?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Microteaching and Good Pre-Service English Language Teachers

Microteaching can be defined as an established teacher training procedure through which pre-service teachers can obtain on-campus experience. Its ultimate aim is to ensure an adequate combination of theory and practice in these teachers' training. Currently, in many universities around the world, the microteaching uses have extended from its original focus of helping pre-service teachers to acquire teaching skills, to giving them the complete teaching experience in the natural classroom during field experience (Amobi, 2005). The training procedure is scaled down in terms of content, task, time and class size and the complexity of the teaching situation is simplified to provide an optimal training environment. In a typical microteaching session, a pre-service teacher is required to prepare a lesson plan in their subject and conduct it in front of his/her classmates and a supervisor. There has been consensus that feedback given immediately by the supervisor and peers is the most important component of microteaching.

There is a plethora of research in relation to the benefits and drawbacks of microteaching as perceived by pre-service English language teachers (Coskun, 2016; He and Yan, 2011; Ismail, 2011; Al-Humaidi and Abu-Rahma, 2015). To illustrate, some of the benefits pre-service teachers gain from microteaching are 'language improvement, teaching practice and competence, lesson preparation and effective classroom management' (Coskun, 2016, p. 821). In addition to that, the study found that microteaching activities helped pre-service teachers learn new activities while observing their peers' different classroom management procedures and language pronunciation. Moreover, the microteaching was a beneficial learning experience, as pre-service teachers could develop their pedagogical experiences and have sense of self-confidence (He and Yan, 2011). The findings of Ismail's study (2011) resonates with the previous studies that microteaching experiences helped the pre-service teachers to improve their language proficiency, and offered an opportunity to refine the language used when giving class instruction and directions. Moreover, the study found that microteaching experiences promoted pre-service teachers' teaching competence and awareness of pedagogical skills as they were able to discover their teaching strengths and weakness. In addition, the study found that microteaching enhanced pre-service teachers' managerial and preparation skills.

On the other hand, the literature indicates some drawbacks about microteaching as perceived by pre-service teachers, for instance the artificial nature of microteaching components, the feeling of anxiousness when graded on their performance and the unfair and personal comments written by their peers in the peer evaluation forms (Coskun, 2016). Similar to Coskun's findings, the lack of authenticity was a major drawback which is thought to have sabotaged the development of pre-service teachers' pedagogical skill (He and Yan, 2011). Thus, a number of the pre-service teachers suggested microteaching could be improved by the creation of authentic classroom settings, which would prepare pre-service teachers better for real-life school teaching contexts.

In Oman, one study conducted by Al-Humaidi and Abu-Rahma (2015) on the effectiveness of microteaching at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and found that the pre-service English teachers did not involve actively in the microteaching practice. The study proposed incorporating a number of elements that require pre-service teacher's active role. Some of these elements are peer-feedback and self-assessment. Therefore, in there study, when implementing this proposal through using experimental groups and control groups, the findings revealed that the experimental group excelled and did better than those who were taught using the traditional procedures. The study found that the proposed model improved the pre-service teachers' 'professional skills in planning, implementation, critical observation, self-assessment and reflection' (p. 35).

However, there is yet a scarce of investigation into the influence of micro-teaching in determining the pre-service teachers' perceptions of a good language teacher. what perceptions have pre-service teachers constructed about a good language teacher when involved in a microteaching have not fully investigated. There are few studies though which have attempted to investigate this area yet unrelated to microteaching (such as Dinh, 2020; Mahmoud & Thabet, 2013; Febriyanti, 2018). Dinh (2020) conducted a mixed-method research to identify the characteristics of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) as perceived by Vietnamese pre-service teachers. The findings show that the qualities of teachers are attributed to a) content knowledge including, but not limited to, understanding spoken English well, reading, writing and speaking well; b) pedagogical knowledge and skills such as preparing lessons well, giving clear instructions, varying teaching methods to suit different learning styles; c) attitudes and behaviors towards students, for instance, showing respect to students, treating students fairly, and being available to help students; d) personal characteristics and attitudes including being caring, friendly, patient, and creative, having a sense of humor, and behaving professionally (e.g. being punctual and well-dressed) and e) broader educational goals and skills, such understanding different cultures, inspiring students to take responsibilities, and providing a good moral example. Similarly, Saudi and Yemeni pre-service teachers consider English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, socio-affective skills and organization and communication as the qualities of good English teachers (Mahmoud & Thabet, 2013). However, among the mentioned qualities, Yemeni, unlike Saudi pre-service teachers, stress more upon socio-affective skills such as being 'patient, relaxed, good tempered, fair, helpful, encouraging, respectful, kind, loving and caring' (p. 72). These qualities are unequivocally reported in Febriyanti's (2018) study using a survey, however the pre-service teachers emphasized more on the teachers' communication skills. They mentioned that English language teachers must have an ability in 'using communicative language learning through activities and discussion in the classroom' (p. 93). Thus, the present study is an attempt to fill this gap by investigating the perceptions of pre-service English language teachers at the UTAS-AL-rustaq before and after experiencing microteaching. The research is based on Dİncera, GÖksub, Takkacc, & Yazici (2013) study, which overviewed more than 30 studies in the field of foreign language education about the most salient characteristics of effective English language teachers. The findings reveal that the characteristics are categorized into four main headings, namely socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge and personality characteristics. The socio-affective skills include motivating students, having positive attitudes towards students and creating a positive and supportive environment in the classroom. Pedagogical knowledge is the knowledge of how to teach students in a stress-free environment, whereas subject-matter knowledge is knowing what to teach in terms of preparing effective lesson plans, having good pronunciation and knowing the target culture. Personality plays an essential role in making the teacher effective, thus the literature lists some of the qualities that teachers should possess such as having a sense of humor, being kind, patient, creative and enthusiastic. The categories of the study will be further used when analyzing the obtained data.

3. Method

A qualitative study was employed to find out the pre-service English language teachers' perceptions concerning their interpretation of a good English teacher (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2011). An in-depth case study approach was employed, that might reveal patterns comparable to others found within the Omani context (other local institutions) and the international level (Denscombe, 2007). Berg (2009) in addition, asserts that case studies are employed to reveal in-depth information about particular cases. One of the main drawbacks of case studies however, is that they cannot be generalized to different and wider settings (Bryman, 2012; Denscombe, 2010; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This particular research case study is neither intended to generalize the findings to the Omani context nor to the international one. This case study can in particular help the teacher education program in its own context, since the university is in the process of reviewing the ELT programme. The context and research methodology though, are thoroughly described in order for other researchers to be able to transfer to other contexts.

3.1 Participants

A non-sequential purposive sampling was employed (Bryman, 2008; 2012) where particular samples were selected from the initial stages of the research and remained fixed until the end. The study group of this research consists of (12) pre-service teachers from the UTAS-AL-rustaq, in Oman from a particular batch. They are in their third year of study of an ELT major. 6 of the participants are male learners and 6 are female. Prior to the research, the participants were given consent form and informed that their names will be anonymized to protect the confidentiality of the data gathered and the participants' identities and sustain the study's credibility and trustworthiness.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, which is one type of qualitative research data collection tools where the participants are allowed to openly discuss the discussed issue with some control from researchers (Densecombe, 2007; 2010). Semi-structured interviews were employed in order to collect data from the participants before and after the course. The implemented open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their thoughts about the course before and after taking it in order for the research to find out the impact of the course on the pre-service teacher' perception of a good language teacher. There were two semi-structured interviews conducted for each participant, one at the beginning of the course and one towards the end of the course; each one lasted approximately 30 minutes where the 12 participants expressed their perceptions and opinions of what makes a good language teacher. The discussed points in the interviews were mostly stem from the research questions, the research objectives, the researchers' experiences and the reviewed literature.

The data was analyzed manually since the sample of the study is small. The data were coded based on the research questions, the reviewed literature and the data itself. Then, the data were themed and clustered into four main categories based on Dİncer et al.'s study (2013) framework, as indicated in the literature review, which are socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, subject knowledge and personality. The data were further analyzed using a content analysis approach in order to get an in- depth view of the pre-service teachers' perceptions of a good English language teacher.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section the gathered data is discussed in order to answer the study research question. The main research question of this study is what are pre-service teacher's perceptions of a good language teacher before and after experiencing microteaching?

The pre-service teachers in the study, as in other institutions, believe that language teachers should be characterized with features (earlier mentioned) that enable them to function effectively in the language classroom. The vast majority of the participants, both before and after the course, indicated that having pedagogical skills was the most important quality of a language teacher. This goes in line with Dinh's (2020) study. Here, the participants perceived pedagogical knowledge as the most important quality of a language teacher, because of the different ELT teaching courses they had been previously exposed to, before taking the microteaching course. More noticeably, pedagogical knowledge was selected by the vast majority of the participants after having taken the microteaching course. This indicates that as a result of the experience, the participants have decided that the real purpose behind learning to teach is the practical side of it (Amobi, 2005).

A Socio-affective skill was perceived by most of the study participants as the most identifiable characteristic of a good language teacher before they took the microteaching course. The influence apparently here because they gathered both their anecdotal experience being learners and because of different modules of ELT they have been exposed to, the participants felt that they were 'caring', 'motivating' and 'a role model'.

Interestingly, the vast minority, both before and after the course, did not acknowledge knowledge of subject matter as an important quality of a language teacher, though it is considered as one of the important skills since it helps teachers to deliver the lesson as required as mentioned in Dinh (2020) and Mahmoud & Thabet (2013).

4.1 Socio-Affective Skills

The socio-affective skill was perceived as the second most important quality of an English language teacher by the study's participants. This was acknowledged before taking the course more so than after it. This is because of the accumulation of experience of being learners throughout schooling and tertiary education. One of the participants indicated that the teacher's attitude and behavior affects the learning experience, and also the more the teacher is favored by the learners, the more the learners enjoy the class:

"The teacher is the one who can seriously affect his/her students. I understand that if someone loves a person he will try to like him……. My best teacher is my English teacher.

Another pre-service teacher in line described her teacher before taking the course as:

"… my hero, my treasure who encourage(s) me a lot not only in term of studying but in different life cases"

The same pre-service teacher after the course shifted the importance from socio-affective to more practical term to focus on pedagogical and personal skills:

".… and knowledge one of them is to be punctual …..good teacher is the one who starts his/her lesson effectively and in attractive way …"

One of the participants interestingly, indicated socio-affective skills as the only and most important qualities of English teacher. She described her teacher as ever the best:

> "My teacher is the best teacher because he gave us all of what we want to understand and like his subject. Being a best teacher mean that teacher can both make students like the subject and at the same time also achieve the goals and the aims of the course."

The same participant interestingly, shifted the focus from the socio-affective qualities to more pedagogical qualities, and this was because her experience of learning to teach had shifted from theory into practice, as will be discussed in the coming part of discussion.

4.2 Pedagogical Knowledge

The pedagogical knowledge means understanding the methods and techniques of teaching the English language in this context. Implementation of revised teaching methods according to the learners' needs is key to knowing how to teach. In this study, it is not surprising to see most of the participants leaning towards teaching pedagogy as the most favorable quality of an English teacher after having studied the course. The participants throughout this course (as discussed earlier) had noticed the importance of putting theories into action. The shift in acknowledging this type of quality as the most important can be observed strongly in the following quotes:

> "…. that a teacher should use an effective warm up to take students' attention to class…"

> "…. a teacher should make sure that students know how to answer every activity by asking them some questions to check understand'.

> "…. good teacher is the one who starts his/her lesson effectively and in attractive way so that students can be activated from the beginning".

It was very interesting to note that more than half of the participants mentioned different qualities of a good teacher before taking the course but perceived pedagogical knowledge as the only important feature of a good language teacher afterwards. This indicates the strong influence of the course on the pre-service teachers and how they saw the power of theories in action. An example of these participants is as follows:

> "… involving all the class in the activities', "giving clear instructions for the task and illustrate the first example for the students'

This participant before the course perceived the personal qualities such as motivator and carer as the most important features of English language teacher.

4.3 Personal Qualities

The personal qualities were perceived by most of the participants to be the second most important characteristic of a good English teacher after pedagogical knowledge. The accumulation of experience as students and also pre-service teachers, as mentioned earlier, enabled this quality to grow systematically where the pre-service teachers perceived it as important quality of English language teacher. This was noticed in the analysis stage as most of the participants indicated this feature was equally important, before and after having taken the course. This influence (the accumulative experience of being a student and pre-service teacher) is still good as it is acknowledged by most of the studies mentioned earlier in the literature review such as Mahmoud & Thabet (2013), and Dinh (2020).

One of the participants in the study believed that the best quality of a good English teacher is the personality, both before and after the course. She considered a good relationship between the teacher and the learners to be the most and only important quality before studying the course:

> "She is also the best teacher because she was dealing with her students as her friends like smiling and chatting with us…"

The same participant gave more emphasis on personal quality of good language teacher and integrated it with the pedagogical aspect because of the influence of the course:

> "I think a good language teacher is the teacher who put himself/herself in the shoe of the students. For example, by considering students' levels, needs and interests while preparing for the lesson and while teaching in the classroom".

It is observable from the content analysis of both the course outline of college-based practicum and the research data, that the pre-service teachers' perceptions of being good English language teachers, generally started to change from being theoretical to more practical in nature. Here, most of the participants believed that personal qualities of a good English language teacher before taking the course and indirectly were able to reserve the

same qualities but with pedagogical knowledge incorporation as discussed earlier. The course thus successfully enabled the participants to apply the previously studied 'methods of teaching' in practice.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the perceptions of the characteristics of good language English teachers before and after experiencing microteaching at one of the practical courses at the UTAS-AL-rustaq. The gathered data revealed that pedagogical knowledge is perceived as the most important quality that pre-service English language teachers should have. Personal qualities such as being a motivator, being kind, having a sense of humor and being enthusiastic were also perceived as important features of a good teacher from the participants' point of views. The powerful influence of the course enabled the participants to incorporate their background knowledge (the studied theories) into practice. This was clear from the shift in their interpretations of the concept of a good English language teacher, from only personal qualities to more into teaching with good personal qualities. This therefore, emphasizes the importance of this practical course in shaping the participants' teaching identities from more theoretical to more practical. It is hence recommended to increase the practical courses and allocate them towards the end of the pre-service programme. It is also recommended for the course teachers to focus equally on all characteristics of a good language teacher in order for the pre-service teachers to see the importance of all qualities in the language classroom.

It is worth mentioning that the pre-service teachers' beliefs of a good language teacher are shaping their current and future practice which may influence the quality of teaching either positively and/or negatively. The study has contributed to the field of teacher education both in Oman and internationally in relation to the importance of the practical courses in determining and altering the pre-service teachers' beliefs of the good practice of teaching and carefully designs the content of the courses and the way the verbal feedback after each micro-teaching should target such beliefs. The study has also contributed to the literature by adding the Omani context pre-service teachers' perceptions of a good language teacher if compared by other context internationally.

6. Limitation

Every study has a limitation. This study's limitations are described in the following discussion. The sample of the study is limited to twelve participants but not all of the students at the UTAS, AL-rustaq. Because of the limited numbers, a qualitative approach was employed to investigate the issue in depth (Bryman, 2012; Cresswell, 2016). The main findings of the study are not generalized to the wider context, though the research design is described in detail in order for the research to be transferred to another context. There was a need for follow up data about because of the time constraints, this will be followed up by another forthcoming research paper. Finally, the participants were selected from one section, it would have been preferable if more sections were involved to gain more insight.

Statement and Declaration

The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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