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English as a Second Language teacher training practicum – exploring Polish university students’ experiences and perceptions – in search of supportive strategies

Praktyka przedmiotowa studentów języka angielskiego jako drugiego – badanie doświadczeń i odczuć studentów/ praktykantów – w poszukiwaniu strategii wsparcia

Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Polish university students during their English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher Training Practicum. By examining the challenges and transformations they undergo, we aim to understand their journey towards becoming educators. Beyond students’ reflections, we explore strategies to improve their practicum experiences. Using the Inventory of Experiences and Perceptions at Teaching Practice (IEPTP), we evaluate key aspects: learning and professional growth, socialisation in professional settings, socio-emotional facets, support and supervision, and vocational development. The research highlights shifts in perceptions, emphasising areas like vocational and professional development. It suggests strategies to enhance learning and support for student teachers, emphasising the crucial role of supervisors. The findings guide institutions in refining teacher training and ensuring students become adept ESL educators.

Keywords: ESL teacher training practicum, learning and professional growth, IEPTP, support and supervision

Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano doświadczenia studentów uniwersyteckich po odbytej praktyce nauczycielskiej z nauczania języka angielskiego. Badanie skupia się na wyzwaniach i zmianach, jakich doświadczają przyszli nauczyciele, oraz na strategiach wsparcia podczas praktyki. Wykorzystując kwestionariusz doświadczeń i postrzegania w praktyce nauczycielskiej (IEPTP), oceniono pięć kluczowych obszarów praktyki, takich jak nauka i rozwój, socjalizacja zawodowa, wsparcie oraz rozwój zawodowy. Wyniki ukazują znaczące zmiany w postrzeganiu praktykantów, zwłaszcza w obszarach rozwoju zawodowego i socjalizacji. Badanie wskazuje na istotność wsparcia opiekunów oraz proponuje strategie dla instytucji kształcących mające na celu optymalizację doświadczenia praktycznego i przygotowanie do bycia efektywnymi nauczycielami języka angielskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: kształcenie praktyczne nauczyciela anglisty, rozwój zawodowy, praktyka przedmiotowa, IEPTP, wsparcie i nadzór

Introduction

The landscape of English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher training is both dynamic and intricate, especially when considering the experiences of university students in Poland. The preparation of future educators through practical experiences is pivotal, offering a bridge between theoretical knowledge and real-world classroom challenges. This study investigates the multifaceted journey of one group of Polish university students undertaking their ESL Teacher Training Practicum, aiming to highlight the challenges they encounter and the strategies that might enhance their learning experience. Drawing upon the Inventory of Experiences and Perceptions at Teaching Practice (IEPTP), this research underscores the pivotal role of support, supervision, and professional development in shaping these future educators. As we navigate through the complexities of this training phase, we aim to identify pathways that can optimise the preparation of ESL educators in Poland, ensuring they are adept, confident, and equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Context of the study: the significance and relevance of ESL teacher training practicum

The ESL teacher training practicum is essential for equipping educators to teach English effectively to non-native speakers, bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world classroom experience. This practical component of teacher education enables candidates to improve their teaching skills, cultural understanding, and professional identity¹. Despite its benefits, challenges exist for pre-service teachers, including lesson planning, classroom management, and collaboration issues². Guidance in second-language pedagogy is crucial during this phase for professional assimilation³. Moreover, the practicum offers valuable insights into actual teaching experiences and areas for improvement, emphasising its pivotal role in shaping competent and culturally aware ESL educators.

Understanding Polish university students' experiences during their ESL teacher training practicum, which is the primary aim of this study, is, therefore, relevant because it would serve as a tool to help to identify and respond adequately to the

¹ T.S.C. Farrell, *Here's here's the book, go teach the class*, "RELC Journal" 2008, 39(2), pp. 226–241; L.A. Scott, R. Gentry, M. Phillips et al., *Making preservice teachers better: examining the impact of a practicum in a teacher preparation program*, "Educational Research and Reviews" 2014, pp. 291–301.

² A.F. Alnwaiem, A.M. Alazemi, *Problems of female preservice Kuwaiti English language teachers during the practicum course*, "Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics" 2021, 3(13), pp. 01–07.

³ D. Fleming, F. Bangou, O. Fellus, *ESL teacher-candidates' beliefs about language*, "TESL Canada Journal" 2011, 29(1), p. 39.

challenges observed in this sector, improve the quality of ESL education, inform policy development parties and, possibly, reshape teacher education programs where needed to educate competent ESL teachers who are fully prepared for the diverse teaching environments they may encounter in Poland.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to explore one group of Polish university students' experiences during their ESL teacher training practicum, focusing on identifying supportive strategies for a better practicum experience. Using Caires and Almeida's Inventory of Experiences and Perceptions at Teaching Practice (IEPTP)⁴, the research seeks to understand factors influencing students' experiences, highlighting challenges and positives. Other research has explored various aspects of the teacher training process, including emotional and practical elements⁵. Quick & Siebörger⁶ stress that learning to teach is complex and influenced by individual and contextual factors like student teachers' traits, learning experiences, supervisor support, and school environment quality⁷.

ESL teacher education – Polish context

In Poland the organisation and standards by which a teacher is to be educated is stated in the Act of Minister of Science and Higher Education of July 25, 2019, on the standards of education preparing for the teaching profession. Below we briefly outline the main areas of interest to paint the background to our research and study, excluding from the discussion those forms of teacher education that are not relevant⁸.

To start with, the number of semesters, study profile, number of ECTS points required for completion of the studies, the number of hours of classes, including

⁴ S. Caires, L. Almeida, *Teaching practice in initial teacher education; its impact on student teachers' professional skills and development*, "Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy" 2005, 31, pp. 111–120.

⁵ K. Burn, H. Hagger, T. Mutton, T. Everton, *Beyond concerns with self: sophisticated thinking of beginning student teachers*, "Journal of Education for Teaching" 2000, 26, pp. 259–278.

⁶ Q. Quick, R. Siebörger, *What matters in practice teaching? The perceptions of schools and students*, "South African Journal of Education" 2005, 25, pp. 1–4.

⁷ J. Dean, *Beginning Teaching in the Secondary School*, Buckingham: Open University Press 1996; M.A. Flores, *Person and context in becoming a new teacher*, "Journal of Education for Teaching" 2007, 27, pp. 135–148; P. John, *The professional craft knowledge of the history teacher*, "Teaching History" 1991, 64, pp. 8–12.

⁸ <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20210000890/O/D20210890.pdf> Journal of Laws – 6 – Pos. 890 (accessed on December 9th 2023).

professional internships, and the scientific or artistic disciplines to which the field of study is assigned, with an indication of the leading discipline, are specified in the study program. University-based education preparing for the teaching profession may also include didactic preparation for teaching another subject or conducting subsequent classes – groups of classes A1, A2, B, C, D and E. The minimum number of ECTS points, groups of classes that achieve detailed learning outcomes is shown in Table 1 below (we provide only those sections which are relevant for this research). For the sake of this study, below we present group of classes D as most relevant in our context.

Table 1. Minimum number of class hours organised and ECTS⁹

D. Didactic preparation for teaching the first subject or conducting the first classes	In the case of a subject taught or classes conducted in primary and secondary schools, theoretical vocational subjects and practical vocational training:			ECTS
		D.1. Didactics of the subject taught or classes	150	15
		D.2. Student internships	120	
	In the case of a subject taught or classes conducted in primary or secondary school:			
		D.1. Didactics of the subject taught or classes	90	7
		D.2. Student internships	60	

Source: see footnote 8.

Supportive strategies

One of the goals of this paper is to diagnose the situation of the students engaged in ESL teaching practice in order to determine what strategies still need to be introduced to the programme and organisational routines to support them during their practicum.

In the existing research literature on this subject we find that, for example, Mtika¹⁰ notices that what tends to help trainee teachers increase their commitment to teaching during their teaching practicum is appropriate support from their mentors and cooperating teachers. Mohamed and Embi¹¹, on the other hand recognised that during the teaching practicum, there is a significant prevalence of computer-mediated tasks among teacher trainees, which underscores the promising potential of these tasks to assist trainees in effectively conveying and interpreting meaning.

⁹ <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20210000890/O/D20210890.pdf> Journal of Laws – 6 – Pos. 890 (accessed on December 18th 2023).

¹⁰ P. Mtika, *Trainee teachers' experiences of teaching practicum: issues, challenges, and new possibilities*, "Africa Education Review" 2011, 8(3) pp. 551–567.

¹¹ M. Mohamed, M. Embi, *Teacher trainees' use of computer-mediated tasks in teaching English as a second language: a preliminary study*, "English Language Teaching" 2013, 6(10), p. 166.

Furthermore, Gan¹² studied the experiences of ESL student teachers, illustrating how their interactions with supporting teachers, supervisors, and school staff enriched their grasp of professional learning. This highlighted the crucial role of interpersonal exchanges in the educational journey. In a similar context, Arshavskaya¹³ introduced a mentoring initiative within a Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language practicum, aiming to aid teacher collaboration and mutual support. Additionally, Akuamoah-Boateng (et al.)¹⁴ noticed the vital and mutual bond mentors form with trainee teachers during their practicum. This bond not only fosters the career progression of the trainees but also prompts mentors to reflect on and enhance their pedagogical strategies, increasing the trainees' professional skills.

Research design and methodology

In this study, we explore the complexities of university students preparing to be ESL teachers, focusing on their Teacher Training Practicum. Borko, Whitcomb & Liston¹⁵ note the intricate nature of learning to teach, influenced by a range of factors and contexts, making it unique to each individual. Given these complexities, our research questions are:

1. What achievements and challenges do student teachers encounter during their practicum?
2. How do they view the impact of teaching practice on their personal and professional growth?
3. Which strategies can enhance their learning-to-teach journey?
4. Do factors such as: number of hours of teaching practice, gender, living in a city/village or the type of studies influence the students' perceptions?

Using a modified version of the Inventory of Experiences and Perceptions at Teaching Practice (IEPTP), our research captures student teachers' perspectives on achievements, challenges, and the significance of their practicum experiences. The IEPTP evaluates five facets of teaching practice using a 5-point rating system, detailed in Table 2.

¹² Z. Gan, *Learning from interpersonal interactions during the practicum: a case study of non-native ESL student teachers*, "Journal of Education for Teaching" 2014, 40(2), pp. 128–139.

¹³ E. Arshavskaya, *Complexity in mentoring in a pre-service teacher practicum: a case study approach*, "International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education" 2016, 5(1), pp. 2–19.

¹⁴ C. Akuamoah-Boateng, J. Sam-Tagoe, *Distance teacher trainee perception of teaching practice mentors at the university of Cape Coast, Ghana*, "Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal" 2018, 5(8).

¹⁵ H. Borko, J. Whitcomb, D. Liston, *Wicked problems and other thoughts on issues of technology and teacher learning*, "Journal of Teacher Education" 2009, 60, pp. 3–7.

Table 2. Categories of the 5 sub-scales of the IEPTP

No. of the sub-scales	Facets of the subscales of the IEPTP
1	Professional and institutional socialisation
2	Learning and professional development
3	Socio-emotional aspects
4	Support and supervision
5	Vocational aspects

Source: Caires and Almeida (ibid).

With the use of this data collection tool, we managed to investigate the experiences and perceptions of Polish university students (University of Rzeszów) in ESL teacher training practicum and identify possible supportive strategies.

Description of the statistical analysis used

The dependent variables were measured on a quantitative scale and the independent variables on a qualitative scale, and when the conditions for using parametric tests were not met, the non-parametric Mann Whitney U difference test was used (for 2 samples). During this analysis, in addition to the standard statistical significance, appropriate “p” values were also calculated using the Monte Carlo method, which was additionally marked with the letter (b) next to the significance result. The analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS 26.0 package with the Exact Tests module. Any differences are statistically significant when $p \leq 0.05$.

Participants

The research took place at the University of Rzeszow in Poland in 2023, encompassing student teachers of English Philology/Teaching Specialisation, who had completed at least one month of teaching placement (depending on the cycle of studies attended), in accredited primary or secondary schools. A formal arrangement had been established between these schools and the university to facilitate this collaboration. The study’s target population consisted of all BEd (Bachelor of Education) and MA (Master of Arts) degree students, totalling 87 individuals. The link to an on-line questionnaire was made available to the students on the MS TEAMS platform and notifications and reminders were sent via e-mails. The return rate was 64% ($n = 64$).

During the data collection process, participants were briefed on the study’s objectives, time requirements, confidentiality protocols, and the voluntary aspect of their involvement.

Results: findings and discussion

Below, in the subsequent tables we present the findings and the discussion of the study, organised according to sub-scales of the main categories of the IEPTP (see Table 2 above).

Table 3. Professional and institutional socialisation (total sample n = 64)

(5-strongly agree, 1-strongly disagree)		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation (SD)	Min.	Max.
1.	Working with experienced teachers was important	4.36	4.00	0.76	1	5
2.	It was difficult to develop team work	2.69	3.00	0.94	1	5
3.	I was satisfied with school's resources for teaching activities	3.58	4.00	1.17	1	5
4.	I felt welcome in school	4.19	4.00	0.94	1	5
5.	I experienced good relationship with school administration	4.09	4.00	0.99	1	5

Source: results of my own study.

On Table 3, respondents largely valued working with experienced teachers, as indicated by a median score of 4, signalling strong agreement. Regarding teamwork development (point 2), responses hovered between neutral and slight disagreement, suggesting moderate challenges. While there was satisfaction with school resources, an SD of 1.17 hinted at varied feelings about their adequacy. Overall, respondents felt welcomed in school, with a positive rapport with the administration, though sentiments showed moderate variability. In essence, pre-service teachers highly appreciated experienced mentors, had mixed feelings on teamwork, yet generally felt supported and valued within the school environment.

Table 4. Learning and professional development (total sample n = 64)

(5-strongly agree, 1-strongly disagree)		Mean	Median	SD	Min.	Max.
1.	I developed skills for competent exercise of teaching	3.77	4.00	0.92	1	5
2.	Teaching practice varied to prepare me for different challenges	3.58	4.00	1.08	1	5
3.	Teaching practice was an important component of my qualification	3.66	4.00	1.14	1	5
4.	Theoretical modules prepared me for the demands of my teaching practice	3.41	4.00	1.09	1	5
5.	Teaching my classes with English as a predominant language of instruction was a challenge	3.09	3.00	1.19	1	5

Source: results of my own study.

Analysing Table 4 on learning and professional development, respondents generally felt they acquired essential teaching skills, with some variability indicating mixed feelings but overall positivity. Most believed their teaching practice

adequately prepared them for challenges, although they had mixed perceptions on the effectiveness of theoretical modules, slightly leaning towards agreement. When teaching in English, most respondents saw it as challenging but not overwhelmingly. In summary, while participants felt well-prepared and valued their practical experience, teaching in English presented some moderate challenges

Table 5. Socio-emotional aspects (total sample n = 64)

	(5-strongly agree, 1-strongly disagree)	Mean	Median	SD	Min.	Max.
1.	Teaching practice contributed to my personal growth	3.78	4.00	1.05	1	5
2.	Teaching practice affected my self-concept and self-efficacy positively	3.70	4.00	1.02	1	5
3.	Teaching practice was responsible for high levels of physical fatigue	3.36	3.50	1.13	1	5
4.	Teaching practice responsible for high levels of psychological fatigue	3.61	4.00	1.06	1	5
5.	I had sleeping problems	2.77	2.00	1.51	1	5
6.	Teaching practice caused disturbances on diet patterns	2.67	2.00	1.36	1	5

Source: results of my own study.

In analysing this data, most respondents acknowledged that teaching practice positively influenced their personal growth, with some variability indicating mixed yet predominantly positive feelings. This practice enhanced their self-concept and self-efficacy. While respondents recognised moderate levels of physical and psychological fatigue from teaching, it was not overwhelmingly negative. Regarding sleep disturbances, the sentiment leaned towards disagreement. However, opinions were divided on whether teaching practice impacted dietary habits, with many respondents neutral or slightly disagreeing. Overall, teaching practice was seen as largely beneficial for growth and well-being. However, experiences varied on specific aspects like fatigue and diet.

Table 6. Support and supervision (total sample n = 64)

	(5-strongly agree, 1-strongly disagree)	Mean	Median	SD	Min.	Max.
1.	I closely followed by my supervisors' requirements and comments	3.78	4.00	1.05	1	5
2.	Supervision was important source of emotional support	3.70	4.00	1.02	1	5
3.	Good coordination between school and university supervisors	3.36	3.50	1.13	1	5

Source: results of my own study.

Regarding support and supervision, respondents largely adhered to their supervisors' guidance, as evidenced by the median score reflecting a strong agreement. They also felt that the supervision offered essential emotional support. However, opinions

on the coordination between school and university supervisors were more mixed, indicating potential areas for improvement or differing experiences among participants.

Table 7. Vocational aspects (total sample n = 64)

	(5-strongly agree, 1-strongly disagree)	Mean	Median	SD	Min.	Max.
1.	Began to feel like a teacher	3.69	4.00	1.10	1	5
2.	If I could have gone back I would not have chosen another course/profession	3.09	3.00	1.29	1	5
3.	Teaching practice made me believe that I have no vocation other than to be a teacher	2.80	3.00	1.13	1	5
4.	Teaching might fulfill my expectations of being a teacher	3.42	4.00	1.05	1	5

Source: results of my own study.

Overall, respondents leaned towards identifying themselves as teachers and were optimistic about their future professional expectations. While many felt satisfied with their career choice, not everyone was convinced that teaching was their only calling. The data suggests a mix of feelings, with a prevailing sentiment of emerging fulfilment in the teaching role but without unanimous conviction that it is their only vocation.

With reference to the analysis with the Mann Whitney U test, it showed that the results of individual answers and the five subscales were not statistically significantly different due to gender ($p > 0.05$), or the number of hours of teaching practice. The respondents living in rural areas, compared to respondents living in cities, agreed more with “Teaching my classes with English as a predominant language of instruction was a challenge” and “Teaching practice caused disturbances on diet patterns”. In turn, respondents living in the city agreed with “Began to feel like a teacher” and “Teaching might fulfil my expectations of being a teacher” to a greater extent than those living in the countryside. Only the results of these four variables differ statistically significantly in relation to place of residence ($p < 0.05$). Taking into account the 5 isolated subscales, no statistically significant differences were observed ($p > 0.05$).

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

Based on the data generated, we can draw several conclusions, and suggest supportive strategies and recommendations.

The journey of pre-service teachers is enriched by various aspects that significantly influence their professional development. One of those is the invaluable experience received from from experienced teachers. Pre-service teachers universally recognise the immense value of working alongside these mentors. Such interactions not only provide practical insights but also shape their professional development route, laying a solid foundation for their teaching careers. While the importance of

teamwork and collaboration is widely acknowledged, it is intriguing to note that many respondents do not perceive it as a significant problem. Nevertheless, there is a consensus on the need to further bolster collaborative skills. To this end, regular team-building workshops can play a pivotal role. These workshops would serve as platforms allowing student teachers to master their collaborative skills, fostering environments that encourage mutual learning and growth. The environment in which these pre-service teachers operate is pivotal. Thankfully, the feedback indicates a positive sentiment. The respondents largely feel supported by their school environments, appreciating the available resources and maintaining favourable relationships with school administration. Such conducive environments are essential as they instill confidence and provide the necessary backing for budding educators. However, the path is not without its challenges. While many feel equipped with the requisite skills for competent teaching, some obstacles, particularly related to teaching in English, are evident. Recognising this, it becomes imperative to provide additional language proficiency support. Tailored resources or training modules, including those within the formula of micro-teaching being conducted in the target language, can assist pre-service teachers in navigating language barriers more effectively.

Beyond the vocational aspects, teaching practice also serves as a transformative platform for personal development. Many respondents acknowledge the positive impacts of teaching training practice on personal growth and self-efficacy. While a certain level of fatigue is acknowledged, it seldom lowers the passion and enthusiasm for the profession. Nevertheless, to ensure sustained well-being, implementing targeted initiatives becomes paramount. Addressing both physical and psychological fatigue can bolster resilience and ensure longevity in the teaching profession.

In terms of guidance, the role of supervisors cannot be overstated. The respondents universally appreciate and value the guidance they receive. However, there remains room for enhancement, particularly in terms of coordination between school and university supervisors. Investing in supervisor training can bridge this gap, ensuring seamless communication and guidance for pre-service teachers.

Lastly, as these prospective ESL teachers navigate their careers, establishing a good sense of satisfaction and identity is crucial. While many resonate deeply with the teaching profession and voice optimistic expectations, it is essential to address the concerns of those grappling with mixed feelings. Mentorship programs can be instrumental here, providing platforms for introspection, guidance, and strengthen their commitment to teaching.

In conclusion, the journey of pre-service teachers is multifaceted, marked by growth, challenges, and immense potential. By leveraging supportive strategies like mentorship programs, team-building workshops, resource evaluations, language proficiency support, appropriate micro-teaching sessions, supervisor training, and well-being initiatives, educational institutions can ensure these future ESL teachers are well-equipped, motivated, and poised for success in their noble profession.

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