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Abstract

This study is qualitative in nature and is designed to analyze the experiences and perceptions of a group of MA students regarding an MA TEFL practicum course at Hebron University during the second semester of the academic year 2015/2016 and whether their experience improved their flair to convey educational practices to better serve students. The study was steered by experiential learning theory. The participants learned from their experiences, reflected on practical activities during the practicum course and contributed to a better understanding of the integration process between theory and practice. Three research questions addressed MA students' experiences during the practicum and how those experiences benefited them and allowed them to grow professionally. I concluded with a set of recommendations.

Keywords

Practicum, Micro Teaching, Class Observation, Lesson Planning, Reflection

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MA TEFL Students' Reflection on a Practicum Course: A Qualitative Study

Mohammed Farrah
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This study is qualitative in nature and is designed to analyze the experiences and perceptions of a group of MA students regarding an MA TEFL practicum course at Hebron University during the second semester of the academic year 2015/2016 and whether their experience improved their flair to convey educational practices to better serve students. The study was steered by experiential learning theory. The participants learned from their experiences, reflected on practical activities during the practicum course and contributed to a better understanding of the integration process between theory and practice. Three research questions addressed MA students' experiences during the practicum and how those experiences benefited them and allowed them to grow professionally. I concluded with a set of recommendations.

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Practicum courses have long been considered as essential constituents of any teacher training program at universities. The practicum training provides teachers the opportunity to practice inside the classroom, and to prepare them to real teaching and learning contexts to cultivate their experience in the classroom while preparing pedagogic and effective strategies (Gan, 2013; Mudra, 2018; Yüksel, 2014). They are supposed to be equipped with specific skills and abilities that develop practical professional development. Practicum courses contribute to support students in their learning process and provide enjoyable practicum experiences as they aid students put learning from the classroom into practice. Learners should have the opportunity to engage in self-reflection and evaluation to identify the areas of strengths and weakness of the training program. Henry (1997) suggested addressing a number of key issues to ensure building quality and effective programs. Among these issues are means of improving the quality of language programs and ensuring that the curriculum meets learners' needs. Practicum courses entail multidimensional activities and considerations involving students, instructors, micro teaching, class observation, and lesson planning. It is important to examine practicum students to see the usefulness of these activities (Gan, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

To understand learning experiences, it is vital to recognize that the basis of experiential learning is grounded in the context where learners create knowledge from experiences rather than just received instruction (Kolb, 1984). In his experiential learning theory, Kolb (1984) highlights the importance of using experiences by learners and assuming active roles in their learning and examining their beliefs and testing them to define how they suit what they learned. According to him, learners find the opportunity to encounter novel ideas and experiences, reflect on the ideas and experiences, thus creating ideas to integrate them in well-known theories. Finally, learners make use of theories to make decisions about certain courses. The experiences that learners undergo during practicum courses experience

help them build their capacity in a professional context in their study area. Nespor (1987) argued that a “crucial experience or some particularly influential teacher produces a richly-detailed episodic memory which later serves the student as an inspiration and a template for his or her own teaching practices” (p. 320). But learning will not take place unless the learner goes through a process of transforming experiences. Just being exposed to experiences does not guarantee effective learning. According to Hedin and Carroll (2010), the learning process begins when learners take actions based on their experiences.

Ferber and Nillas (2010) stressed the importance of offering teachers the opportunity to integrate theory with practice to develop their identities as teachers and to prepare them to practice in real-world contexts. Similarly, Dada (2012) emphasized the importance of combining theoretical knowledge and skills with practical experience. According to Johnson (2012) practitioners, through observation, make use of what is happening in the classroom to bridge the gap between research and practice and with the concerns of greatest practices they collect data that “are used to understand or inform theories and research related to best practice” (p. 20). Therefore, a noticeable purpose of theory is to facilitate reflection on practice. To achieve this and for the practicum programs to be effective, they should be “extended over multiple sessions, contain active learning to allow teachers to manipulate the ideas and enhance their assimilation of the information, and align the concepts presented with the current curriculum, goals, or teaching concerns (Johnson, 2012 p. 22). In order to offer learners with continuous training and to allow them grow professionally, we should understand their perspectives. Such insights will help researchers foresee learners’ expectations and thus help them to create meaningful learning experiences. When we investigate the practicum courses, it is imperative to know how learners view their experiences and to what extent they feel the practicum courses shape their learning process. Consequently, there is a need to examine how such courses develop learners’ pedagogic and content knowledge (PCK) and contribute to their professional growth.

As a lecturer and a researcher at Hebron University, it is important to note that a driving force for this paper is Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory. As my research interest concentrates on English education programs, I found that the MA EFL practicum course as part of my research interest. Accordingly, I decided to conduct research on MA students’ experience in a practicum course because I wanted to investigate the usefulness of the course, its impact on the participants’ professional growth. The aim is to help me as a researcher and the decision makers at universities promote the quality of such courses and to improve the experiences of the MA Students.

The perception of practicum learners is very vital to the teaching learning process as it reveals their actual experiences. This paper seeks to describe practicum experiences as perceived by practicum MA students in Hebron University. Thus, it aimed to investigate the usefulness of the course and how it contributed to the learners’ profession growth as understood from their experience. To achieve the aim of this study, the guiding research question for this study is:

How do MA practicum students perceive the MA TEFL practicum course?

Literature Review

Educational institutions worldwide seek to develop the quality of teachers at schools to enable them to find solutions to real classroom problems. In other words, they want to cultivate teachers’ knowledge, teacher identity, and to promote professional growth (Bobrakov, 2014; Cuenca, 2010; Gan, 2013; Jenkins, 2014; Johnson, 2012; Sulistiyo, Mukminin, Abdurrahman, & Haryanto, 2017; Yüksel, 2014). Practicum programs became

vital aspect in the teacher education program (Gan, 2013; Hennessy, 2014; Mudra, 2018; Sulistiyo et al., 2017). Reflective practice in practicum courses has the potential to help learners relate theory and practice in order to synthesise from their practical experience (Bobrakov, 2014; Hennessy, 2014).

Several studies examined practicum learners' experiences and reflections (Cuenca, 2010; Jenkins, 2014; Johnson, 2012). Reflective practice has become a widespread model and gained importance in teaching and became a recognized tool in encouraging professional development (Farrell, 2013). Reflective tools such as and peer observation, peer coaching (Bright, 1996; Day, 2013; Garber, 2014) offer teachers with opportunities to observe and experience a variety of ways of being reflective and extend their prospects.

Tin (2006) listed a number of key functions for the practicum programs such as to raising awareness and developing pre-service teachers' experiences through activities in the classroom to attain thoughtful teaching experiences.

A study carried out by Cuenca (2010) emphasized the importance of preparing, advising, and assisting practicum students providing them with teaching materials, introducing them to teaching routines, engaging them practically in teaching, and allowing them to have the feeling of real responsible teachers in the classroom. Most importantly, he noted that they should perceive teaching as a craft where they can make mistakes within a comfortable and supportive environment. In this way they are going to combine what they have learnt to teach and shape the way they are teaching in the professional setting.

Jenkins (2014) demonstrated how students in a practicum course moved in their reflection of focusing on pedagogy to focusing on pedagogy and teacher's behavior. She noticed that during the beginning stages of the practicum, the students focused their reflections on teaching practices and pedagogy. As the course progressed the focus of the students changed as they started to reflect on their existing coursework and what they see practiced in classrooms. Accordingly, they started to reflect on the teacher's behavior. They began to have a critical look at the class as teachers and not students.

In a qualitative study, Gan (2013) illustrated the major challenges non-native ESL student teachers experienced by sixteen participants in an English language practicum program at The Hong Kong Institute of Education. To attain a comprehensive description of the participants' perceptions of their field-based practicum experiences, the researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The results revealed that classroom management seemed to be the biggest concern in the teaching practicum program. The findings reported the necessity for teacher education institutions and school supporting teachers to explicitly discuss the student teachers' challenges in the implementation of innovative practices, and to clearly promote and model classroom management strategies. Yüksel (2014) conducted a study with 40 pre-service teachers of English as a foreign language to investigate how they assess their teaching competences and how they project themselves as teachers of future. The study found that the participants felt themselves competent enough in teaching subject matter knowledge, engaging the students, and pedagogical knowledge. However, the weakest competency domain was the classroom management; they needed improvement in the areas of working with diverse students, managing time, monitoring student progress, handling disruptive behavior, connected learning, giving homework, motivating learners and assessing learning, and error correction and offering feedback. In the same vein, Numrich (1996) emphasized the importance of assisting student teachers through creating good classroom management routine and opportunities to work with learners.

Moen and Standal (2014) found that the learners were able to think critically about both their performances as prospective teachers as well as on the cooperating teachers' way of teaching in the practicum in terms of lesson planning and delivery. They concluded that

learners are active constructors of knowledge. One of the weaknesses in their study is that they have not visited the practicum site to obtain an insight into what actually happens in the practicum. In order to expand the knowledge and understanding of the practicum, they highlighted the need for site observational studies of the practicum as well as longitudinal studies.

Akyel (2015) described efforts to provide opportunities to EFL pre-service teachers to learn in and from practice teaching and research engagement in the school practicum. Data collected from an open-ended questionnaire, student teachers' written reflections, and semi-structured interviews. The author concluded that participants benefited from research engagement during their practice teaching experience in analyzing, questioning and reshaping their understandings of teaching, learning and researching.

In a qualitative study, Johnson (2015) examined 4th year preservice teachers' points of view that reflected their practicum experiences and whether that experience improved their capability to deliver educational practices to better serve students. The research questions addressed preservice teachers' experiences during the practicum and how those experiences contributed to their professional growth. Data collected through individual interviews to eight teachers revealed that the interviewee felt that the practicum benefited them in experiencing the role of the classroom teacher the challenges he encounters. In order to help students professionally, she recommended helping students by assessing their needs, identifying instructional classroom practices, and planning lessons to influence their future work in the classroom setting and improve the necessary skills they need for effective teaching.

Sulistiyo et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative case study to examine the perceptions of beginner teachers, principals, and teacher educators upon the implementation of teacher education practicum program. The data collected through background survey, document analyses and interviews. They used document analyses to examine the aims and content of the English teacher education program and English teacher education curriculum and policies. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the main data from graduates and collect information from the beginner teachers. Interviews with principals and teacher educators were used to obtain further data and evidence about the beginner teachers' knowledge and preparedness to teach. The findings revealed that teaching practicum assignments performed throughout the program offered appropriate but partial experience for student teachers to transform their knowledge learnt at university into the real practice of the classroom setting. In order to address the overall effectiveness of the program, they recommended making practicum placements longer to offer sufficient for teaching practice in schools and take place in several semesters during the candidature. Additionally, to create an effective shared responsibility for ongoing collaboration, they recommended establishing different, closer relationships and promoting openness and mutual respect between university and schools to maintain better integration of theory and practice components of selected supportive courses in the program. They emphasized the need for good communication between university and schools to take place to inform the teaching practicum program. Finally, in order to make partnerships effective, they recommended offering workshops to train teacher educators and mentor teachers in their roles and to provide a forum to share knowledge between universities and schools.

Though a number of studies have been conducted in various parts of the world to investigate the practicum experiences, to my best knowledge, no empirical studies have ever been conducted in Palestine to address this crucial issue in English language teaching. Addressing the quality of EFL practicum experiences in Palestinian schools in terms of is vital as it offer important information for improving the EFL practicum experience, both in Palestine and the educational institutions around the world. Stakeholders around the world would benefit from the gathered information (Gan, 2013; Hennessy, 2014; Mudra, 2018;

Sulistiyo et al., 2017). As the aim of practicum courses is to equip educational institutions with qualified teachers, it is crucial to examine practicum learners' experiences. Learners are exposed to theoretical as well as practical preparation that is expected to help them solve problems in the real-world setting of a classroom. During practicum courses, learners are exposed to practical experiences that put them in contact with the teaching profession. During these experiences, learners start to encounter the real problems and assume greater responsibilities as teachers and not as learners. It is essential to recognize how MA learners view their experiences. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to investigate the implementation of an MA EFL practicum course in to improve the quality of the at Hebron University, Palestine.

The Context of the Study

This study was conducted at the English Department of Hebron University, Palestine. In 2007, the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Hebron University, through the English Department, embarked on offering an MA program in Applied Linguistics and the Methods of Teaching English to equip the future teachers with the necessary skills needed for their professional growth. The program started with 18 students and now there are more than 60 students who graduated from this program.

TEFL Practicum II (Classroom Observation, Analysis and Practice) is one of the compulsory courses in the MA program. This course is intended specifically to build on students' knowledge and understanding of the Palestinian English curriculum, language teaching methodology, testing and assessment and appropriate use of technology. During this professional experience students are provided with the opportunity to teach whole classes for a sustained period of time. The students are required to carry out micro teaching classes, class observation, lesson planning and reflection.

In this study, the researcher examined the MA students' experiences during a practicum course. The researcher was interested in investigating the usefulness of the course and its impact on the learners in the Palestinian context. Furthermore, it is necessary for stakeholders (instructors, policy makers at university, faculty, department level) to have a critical look on what happens during such courses and the most useful aspects that may lead to better professional growth. Thus, they can make use of the positive points and to overcome the challenges so as to improve the quality of the practicum experience and thus to prepare quality future teachers.

Methodology of Research

Design

This qualitative study was designed to investigate MA TEFL students' reflection on a practicum course at the English Department, Hebron University, Palestine. This is a qualitative study in nature as it allows the participants to reflect their point of views and experiences during a practicum course. Reflective journals are considered as one of the methods of data collection by which qualitative data can be gathered to elicit the respondents' perceptions (Saldaña, 2009). According to Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002), a reflective journal involves learners in "self-assessment, collaborative critique, self-reflection and goal setting" (p. 1). Additionally, Uzum, Petrón, and Berg (2014) found that reflective journals enable learners to revise their teaching practice in their practicum program as participants shared their classroom experiences through reflective journal writing. They added that the process helped participants connect their theoretical knowledge with teaching practice. Similarly,

Burhan (2015) considered reflective journals as an important foundation of personal professional development as it supports teachers in transferring their “pedagogical knowledge into their teaching experience.”

Reflective journals are one sources of collecting data in qualitative research (Wagner, 1999). According to Wagner (1999), reflective journals offer researchers with invaluable qualitative data that they may not access from other sources. According to Ortlipp (2008, p. 704), this methodology is an acknowledged “practice from constructivist, feminist, interpretivist, and poststructuralist perspectives.”

Based on the participants’ experiences, the research was meant to examine how the course contributed to the learners’ professional growth. In this study, a qualitative study design was employed as the appropriate research tool to collect information about the usefulness of the MA TEFL practicum course. I chose the qualitative research because it produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Watkins, 2012). Hoepfl (1997) suggested that researchers should carry out research that investigates profound understanding, rather than probing surface features. She opines that qualitative research is a powerful tool. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this design helps produce much better – more complex, richer – data. Among the various qualitative traditions, Leedy and Ormrod (2001) applaud the following five: Case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and content analysis. Creswell (2003) explains how case studies explore processes, activities, and events. Thus, case study was one of the traditions appropriate for studying issues regarding programs, institutions persons, processes, etc. Therefore, in this study, the case study design was designated as the suitable research strategy to collect information about the experiences of the MA TEFL students in the practicum course.

Participants

The participants were 12 MA TEFL students enrolled in a practicum course offered in the second semester of the academic year 2015-2016. The 12 students were all the students enrolled in the practicum course. They were in their final semester of a two-year MA program in Applied Linguistics and Methods of Teaching English at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Hebron University. The age of the students ranged from 23 to 35 years, and ten of them were females and two were males. Their first language is Arabic. Eight of them were working as teachers at secondary schools, two at basic schools, and two were new graduates who started their MA program and had no previous teaching experience. To ensure the anonymity of the students, the abbreviation RJ (for Reflective Journal) followed by a number of the question and the number for each student was used. Thus, the journals were labeled from RJ1 through RJ12. The numbers were randomly assigned to the Journals.

Data Gathering and Analysis

I decided the qualitative research design as it assists efficiently to develop in-depth understanding and effective analysis in unique contexts rather than means of statistical procedures (Cohen et al., 2007; Watkins, 2012). This design analyses and describes vividly the experiences of the participants in genuine learning conditions. In this study, to understand the experiences of the MA TEFL students in the practicum course, I collected data through reflective journals. The production of the reflective journal was one of the required assignments by the end the practicum course. To get the participant describe their practicum experience they were asked to reflect on their experiences. They were asked to write a range of 1000 words. They were guided by the following questions.

1. Which aspects of this practicum course were the most useful for you?
2. How do you perceive your professional growth as a result of the practicum course?
3. What suggestions do you have for improving this course?

Every student wrote about three pages. They sent the reflections to my email. The total number of the dataset was 9950 words.

Once the data set is ready, the coding process begins. This process offers researchers opportunities to identify topics, issues, similarities, and differences under relevant themes and revealed through the participants' narratives. The coding process helps researchers embark on interpreting the world from each participant's perspective (Sutton & Austin, 2015). All the data were analyzed according to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method and it is known for its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), theme addresses something significant about the data in relation to the research question and portrays some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set. They clarify that "the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (p. 10). In this study, reflective journals were read and analyzed using open coding procedure to categorize the recurrent themes that appeared in the reflective journals (Saldaña, 2009). The qualitative analysis of the reflective journals was conducted through the emerging themes. This procedure allowed me to find the themes that corresponded to my aims for investigating how the participants make sense of their experiences. The researcher deeply read the reflective journals and deeply explored and analyzed their content employing several extensive steps.

1. Categorizing the reflective journals into three parts every part answering a certain question based on the three research questions of the study.
2. Identifying the emerging themes in each part of the reflective journal. Similar and interrelated ideas or concepts are highlighted.
3. Categorizing and organizing the themes that were evident in each part of the reflective journal.

As I implemented these steps, the content was coded and categorized. The process helped me to interpret the data and to make inferences in the discussion and draw conclusions. I made the codes based on repetition of words and thoughts (Creswell, 2003). Coding involved of highlighting repeated words throughout the journals. Merriam (2009) recommended making codes as a way to create themes. I reviewed the codes and organized the data into concise themes with corresponding subthemes as to make sense of the reported experiences, eventually answering the research questions of the study (Creswell, 2011). The emerging themes were successively organized around six major categories micro-teaching, class observation, lesson planning, reflective practice, class management and collaborative work, practical and communicative teaching methods.

Ethical considerations

Regarding the ethical considerations for this study, it is important to clarify that we do not have Institutional Research Board (IRB) for the approval process. However, the Deanship of Academic Research in Hebron University, Palestine encourages the faculty members to conduct research and observe the ethical issues while conducting research. I informed the

participants about the aims of this research and that if some were not interested to be involved in the study, they have the right to do so. Accordingly, in this study, I followed the ethical research practices to protect the confidentiality of the collected information as well as the participants' identities.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings for the research question. After reading, rereading, identifying, categorizing, and comparing participants' responses, the researcher identified key areas that were in response to the research question of the study and are reflected in the three parts of the reflective journals. The research question, results and findings were aimed at contributing to an understanding of how the MA students perceived the MA TEFL Practicum course. The author categorized the findings from data analysis into two main parts. First, how the participants perceived the contribution of the practicum course to their professional development. Second, the recommendations that the participants suggested for improving the practicum experience.

First Part: Contribution of the practicum course professional development

A number of concepts were developed and identified by the students in their reflections upon their experience in the practicum course. The students expressed a number of aspects on how the course contributed to their professional development: a) micro-teaching, b) class observation, c) lesson planning, d) reflective practice, e) class management and collaborative work. The researcher will present them one by one starting with those that mentioned repeatedly:

a. Micro-teaching

The most effective aspect as perceived by the participants is *micro teaching*. All of the participants without exception mentioned micro teaching as one of the most valuable elements in the course. This finding is in the same vein of other studies (Akyel, 2015; Dada, 2012; Ferber & Nillas, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, 2015; Numrich, 1996) that emphasized the importance of integrating theory with practice to develop students' identities as teachers and to prepare them to practice in real-world contexts.

As indicated by RJA5a "the microteaching classes were purely beneficial and helped me to improve my own understanding of methods of teaching English and their applications in EFL context." RJA11a summarized why Micro-Teaching lessons were perceived by her as the most useful aspect by saying:

Micro-Teaching lessons gave me a lot of experience in how to manage a class, whether by grouping the students, using different games, having the full attention of the students in different ways, motivating them, and how to encourage them to participate in the class. Every single Micro-Teaching gave me a different experience, especially that there was diversity in the skills that each Micro-Teaching lesson focused on. Not only the way it was introduced, but also talking about the positives and the negatives of each one helped me in knowing what may be good for a real class and what may not.

Moreover, the participants indicated that micro teaching developed effective classroom strategies as well as developing appropriate resources for teaching as expressed by RJA6a and RJA7a, respectively:

RJA6a: Micro teaching exposed me to novel class management strategies.

RJA7a: Micro teaching is one of the most helpful and valuable activities. It gave me real experience to look for the most appropriate resources.

When the participants emphasized that micro-teaching contributed to their professional growth, they clarified that it added to their experience, knowledge, confidence, and qualifications as expressed by RJB1a, RJB2a RJB3a RJB4a

As indicated by RJB5a: “I improved my questioning and discussion techniques. I incorporated my knowledge of English language teaching to real teaching experience. Generally speaking, my professional growth had evidenced through task accomplishment, micro teaching that includes different strategies.”

Moreover, students in RJB6a and RJB7a and RJB9a indicated that micro teaching contributed to shaping their identity and professional growth:

RJB6a: I apply differentiated didactic methodologies and adopt adjustable teaching methods that address all students in an integrative teaching framework that comprises different methods and strategies.

RJB7a: Micro teaching helped me to grow professionally in many ways. Nowadays, I critically examine the methods that I use as a teacher, and to reflect on my teaching techniques by asking, exploring, reading, watching and acting. Thus, I constantly evaluate my teaching practices and beliefs.

RJB7a: I was finally able to step into the shoes of a professional teacher as the course took me from theory to practice where my identity is transformed from being just passive student towards that of being a responsible teacher.

RJB11a summarized why Micro-Teaching lessons were perceived by her to contribute to her professional growth:

I used to learn theories of teaching but without applying them in real classes especially that I have no practical experience. I didn't know what to expect when applying these theories. Nowadays I am in much a better position as I was able to build some expectations about each theory with taking in consideration what I might face from different students. I became familiar with the current Palestinian curriculum and that it is built on the communicative approach. In other words, the practices that took place during the course were really beneficial, and helped me in figuring how real teaching situation might be.

As for micro-teaching, in the literature, micro-teaching is reported to have an influential role that facilitates learning (Akyel, 2015; Dada, 2012; Ferber & Nillas, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, 2015; Numrich, 1996). The participants of the study also held positive views. They considered micro-teaching as an important means to shape their identities as teachers and to prepare them to practice in real-world contexts. Through micro-teaching, the participants

were exposed to effective teaching methods and strategies, classroom management strategies, means of motivating students, and strategies for dealing with unexpected situations or disruptive behavior. Thus, the participants found greater meaning in micro-teaching, an aspect that added to their professional growth.

b. Class observation

Regarding the class observation, there was high degree of agreement about the effectiveness of this task. They reflected on the classes they visited at school, observing their classmates and writing the observational reports. Class observation offered the participants with opportunities to observe experienced teachers in real classroom settings, handle behaviour problems, writing observational reports, and means of engaging students in appealing activities as indicated by RJA4b RJA5b RJA6b, respectively:

RJA4b: Class and observation led to suggestions about how to handle behavior problems, as well as opportunities to share successful teaching approaches with colleagues.

RJA5b: Observing actual language classes to in their settings was very beneficial as it helped me to write observational reports as well as achieving better teaching performance.

RJA6b: Class observation taught me that teachers should engage students in class in appealing activities to reduce chaos.

Interestingly, *class observation* helped participants modify their teaching practices and beliefs. Class observation helped them to become familiar with the actual classroom setting. RJA3a elaborated on why observing lessons were perceived by her as the most useful aspect by saying:

Class observation enhanced my knowledge and understanding of the Palestinian English curriculum, language teaching methodology, and ways of testing and assessment. In addition, it allowed me to observe different lessons conducted by experienced teachers and colleagues during the semester as well as observing and analyzing foreign language teaching classes in the local schools the things that gave give me the opportunity to experience different teaching methodologies and to become familiar with major English language teaching approaches as well as relate these approaches and methods to L2 classroom experiences as it aids me to observe vivid classroom practices and grasp the essentials of the Communicative approach.

Clearly, class observation is considered as a major factor contributing to the participants' professional growth. It added to their experience, awareness, confidence-building, depth of understanding and thinking as expressed by RJB1a, RJB2a and RJB3a

RJB5b: As a result of class observation and observational reports, I am now equipped with a lot of ideas and varied methods that I can use in my classroom.

RJB7b: Observing classes helped me a lot to enhance my own teaching because the things that I noticed and evaluated in other teachers' classes made me adjust my own teaching techniques and methods.

RJB10b: In the past, I used to be hesitant to be observed, but now I believe that it is helpful to have someone who has experience in the field in your class to observe you and tell her opinion of how the lesson went. I have confidence inviting others to come and watch my lesson.

RJB12b: Observing and being observed enabled me provide and receive feedback on certain issues pertinent to the teaching practice and offered me meaningful learning opportunities.

As a matter of fact, most participants found class observation as a useful tool for professional development. This is in line with other studies (Cuenca, 2010; Day, 2013; Garber, 2014; Hennessy, 2014). It added to their experience, awareness, depth of understanding, and thinking. This means that the participants feel class observation as an essential tool for their professional development. In the same vein, class observation and opportunities for getting constructive feedback from classmates are professed to be essential issues that contributed to the participants' professional growth.

c. Lesson planning

A third aspect in the course that frequently appeared to contribute to the participants professional growth is lesson planning. 10 out of the 12 participants mentioned lesson planning.

The participants reported that lesson planning has a tremendous impact on the professional development of the participants. As they reported, lesson planning equipped them with new tools that exposed them to teaching strategies that transformed their lesson plans. Lesson planning made them well-prepared and ready to deliver their lessons effectively and with confidence and thus contributed to the growth of their profession. Lesson plans have the advantages of bringing out fully prepared teachers in terms of their material, methods, and activities. RJB5c stated that "she can deliver my class with great degree of confidence." Another student (RJB8c) reported that "discussing the elements that should be included in the lesson plan with my instructor and classmates contributed to my knowledge development and sense of writing effective lesson plans." Moreover, RJB11a described how lesson planning transformed her professionally.

I used to learn theories of teaching but without applying them in real classes especially that I have no practical experience. I didn't know what to expect when applying these theories. Nowadays I am in much a better position as I was able to build some expectations about each theory works, taking in consideration what I might face from different students. I became familiar with the current Palestinian curriculum that is built on the communicative approach. In other words, the practices that took place during the course were really beneficial, and helped me in figuring out how real teaching situation might be.

Other participants explained that lesson planning helped them to prepare effective and detailed lesson plans that match students' needs and achieve better learning outcomes.

RJA5c: Preparing a detailed lesson plan allowed me to think how to draw a guideline map for further classes and it enabled me to think deeply of each teaching step, before actual implementation in the classroom. I imagined how students would react during each step. So that, many changes and modifications emerged to suit the purposes of the teaching class and students' level and needs. It helped me to prepare effective English language materials as a real practice of developing lesson plan that includes different strategies.

RJA6c: The course was profoundly useful because each student endeavored to fulfill two roles; a teacher and a student. Tailoring comprehensive lesson plans, setting attainable objectives and applying differentiated teaching methods were the three aspects, I learned that lesson plans are the preliminary bricks that teachers should place well to achieve better learning outcomes.

As highlighted in the literature review (Gan, 2013; Henry, 1997; Johnson, 2015), the results of this study indicated that preparing effective detailed lesson plans that match students' needs helped them to be organized in their teaching strategies and classroom procedures. It helped them to handle behaviour problems, write observational reports, and to engage students in appealing activities and to achieve better learning outcomes. The effective lesson planning provided them with the needed self-confidence. Lesson plans have the advantages of bringing out fully prepared teachers in terms of their material, methods, and activities. This is in line with Johnson (2015) where the participants had a positive and encouraging experience. As a result, lesson planning made them well-prepared and ready to deliver their lessons effectively and with confidence and thus contributed to the growth of their profession. The lesson planning aspect gained its significant role at the teachers need to get acquainted with their students' needs, learning styles to motivate them and involve them in more realistic context for teaching. Therefore, lesson planning gained a great deal of acceptance that it leads to professional growth as it changed the participants significantly on the professional development level. Eventually, as indicated by the participants, lesson planning enhanced their confidence, maximized their efficiency and transformed their knowledge.

d. Reflective practice

The fourth aspect in the course that perceived to professional development is the reflective practice. Most participants highlighted that the reflective practice contributed to their professional development. They perceived it to be useful as it helps them to revise and develop their teaching methods and to constantly evaluate their practices and beliefs.

RJA5d Experiencing real reflective practice contributed to developing lesson plans, teaching language skills, reflecting upon my style and methods of teaching, and writing effective reflective reports.

RJA12d: The course was designed with activities and materials that enabled us to have more active role in reflecting about our learning and pursuing project of interest to us.

The participants perceived reflective practice to be important in their teaching career as it helped them to reflect analytically and critically to some methods and techniques and to choose what is suitable for their students.

RJB5d indicated that her analytical skills of self-reflection, assessment and evaluation of students teaching performance had been apparently improved. RJB6d added that, “I constantly reflect on my teaching practices in order to develop professionally”

RJA7d: I critically reflect on my lessons and the methods that I use as a teacher, by asking, exploring, reading, watching and acting. I’m grateful for this course because it helped me to do things not just to read. All this has reflected positively on my professional growth. Reflecting on my teaching techniques by asking, exploring, reading, watching and acting. Knowing the ways and tools that we do for reflective teaching helped me to begin constantly evaluating my teaching practices and beliefs.

RJA8d I became a reflective teacher. I reflect on all teaching aspects, lesson plans and the activities that went right or went wrong. Based on this reflection, I modify my plans and techniques or methods of teaching.

As evidenced from what is mentioned above, the participants found the reflective practices to be very valuable. Reflection made them reconsider their styles and teaching methods and develop better lesson plans. With this reflection, they were capable to solve problems and create more appropriate solutions. The participants expanded their prospect as they had opportunities to see and experience diverse means of being reflective. Thus, they were able to build successfully their professional growth. The positive findings they had regarding the reflective practice definitely increase awareness about reflective teaching methods, encourage professional development, and thus achieve better teaching outcomes. When teachers adopt the reflective practice, they can start their professional career more confidently and reflectively. The encouraging feelings and thoughts for applying reflective practice provide an indication for the impact of reflective practices on their professional growth. The positive thoughts suggest that the course contributed to professional development. This is in line with Farrell, (2013), Bobrakov (2014), Moen and Standal (2014), and Hennessy (2014). This indicates that reflection on performance is seen as a very helpful tool in the classroom as it contributed to the professional development of the participants in terms of their lesson plans, styles and methods of teaching, class management strategies, teaching language skills, reflecting upon their styles and methods of teaching, and writing effective reflective reports.

e. Class management and collaborative work

The fifth aspect in the course that perceived to promote professional growth is class management and collaborative work. Most of the participants highlighted the role of class management and collaborative activities of prompting their professional growth. They indicated that their professional growth is enhanced as they started to manage classes properly through group work and collaborative activities as a result of the experience that they gained from the course:

RJA3e: Learning about the importance of learning contexts, and learning about classroom managements as well as collaborative and cooperative teaching.

RJA11e: Managing large classes through group work and collaborative activities.

RJB3e: I deem that I became a better teacher in managing my classes. I am a motivator, evaluator, and I apply different management strategies that take into account learners needs, attitudes, level of proficiency, and grades.

RJA11e: The novel class management techniques that I was exposed to contributed to my professional growth and managing my real classes properly. I realized that management is a multilayered process that doesn't exclusively grant teachers control and authority to suppress disruptive students and behaviors; it entails constructive perspectives by which teachers develop positive behaviors that students may show to diminish negativity.

In short, the course is perceived to have an influential role in promoting the participants professional development as they became better equipped with teaching methods, appealing activities, and class management strategies. Additionally, they perceived the course to be useful as it helped them to in using strategies to manage classes properly through group work and collaborative activities. They consider classroom or behaviour management an essential part of their practicum experience that enabled them to be exposed to novel strategies to deal effectively with classroom and student challenges.

Additionally, the participants felt that the course was useful as it provided them with practical and communicative teaching methods such as inquiry-based learning/ task-based inquiry. They talked about teaching communicatively, putting the theoretical part into practice, and accomplishing real task-based activities. Accordingly, the course maximized their confidence and promoted their professional development in terms of the methods that they are employing. This is agreement with other studies (Akyel, 2015; Dada, 2012; Ferber & Nillas, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, 2015).

Second Part: Suggestions for improving the practicum experience

The students suggested a number of issues that can contribute to the improvement of the course. These areas are related to micro-teaching, class observation, lesson planning, and the reflection. The researcher will present them one by one starting with those that mentioned repeatedly:

a. Micro-teaching

Regarding micro-teaching the students have a number of suggestions to improve the course. When the participants were asked if they have any suggestions, some expressed some concerns about the timing and the number of the micro-teaching sessions. Some participants suggested increasing the number of the micro-teaching classes that are delivered by each student. Others suggested providing feedback about micro-teaching and commenting comprehensively on each micro-teaching session. Most of the suggestions are similar to each other. For example, one of the predominant suggestions is increasing the number of the micro-teaching classes that are delivered by each student as expressed by RJC1a, RJC7a, RJC9a, and RJC10a.

RJC1a: Students should deliver two micro-teaching classes instead of one because this will make students familiar with different teaching methods for different language skills.

This is in line with Johnson (2012, p. 22) who deemed that practicum programs should be “extended over multiple sessions, contain active learning” to be effective. Similarly, Sulistiyo et al. (2017, p. 722) reported that their participants complained about micro-teaching duration and considered it “inadequate for preparing the student teachers to have the skills they needed to teach in the practicum.”

RJC2a wished if she had the opportunity to comment on all the teaching aspects after every micro teaching class. RJC5a and RJC6a suggested not starting the micro teaching until they had full mastery of the theoretical part:

RJC5a I expected that we would embark our Microteaching classes after we had fully finished presentations of all theoretical issues which were recommended to this course. It was important to focus on all theoretical perspectives, before conducting practical classes to get ready enough for practicing teaching.

RJC6a explained “before being engaged in a micro-teaching session about certain linguistic domain, it is more fruitful to watch videos about other teachers targeting the same domain in order to get multiple options about the “how” of teaching. Despite the fact that the course’s practical, students should be introduced to extensive introductions about the foundations of teaching before getting involved in real experiences.

Finally, RJC11a suggested hosting a teacher, who is not an MA student, as a guest in each class in order to be exposed to different experiences and points of views that enrich their knowledge.

b. Class observation

Another area that appeared frequently in their suggestions is class observation. Some participants preferred to observe experienced teachers as it entails developing their competences as a result of observing the practices of more experienced teachers. Moreover, they suggested observing university instructors to see how they plan, deliver lessons, and deal with students in class and to see how expert university instructors deal with high level students like university students. Similarly, they suggested observing and discussing model videos with each other in the classroom and observing well-known and proficient teachers and learning from each other’s values and beliefs about the teaching process. Moreover, before writing any class observation report, they suggested discussing multiple forms and components to do it professionally. Finally, they expected that all the students are going to present their observational reports to expand their knowledge and experiences.

c. Lesson planning

Lesson planning is an area that some participants touched upon. The participants highlighted the importance of visiting universities and observing how professors prepare their lesson plans. RJC1c suggested “arranging visits for university doctors to see how they explain lessons and plan for them and deal with students through class. This will give us the opportunity to see how expert teachers deal with high level students like university students.”

Additionally, the participants emphasized the importance of providing them with handouts of lesson plans of other students before embarking on their teaching. RJC11c

suggested that “each student should submit a handout of his or her to lesson plan to the students before presenting his/her micro-teaching.”

d. Reflective practice

Finally, the participants had some suggestion regarding the reflective practice. They suggested that university professors visit them in their schools to see them while teaching and offer them some feedback. As stated by RJC1d,

I think university teachers can arrange visits to us through the course and give us their reflections about their teaching careers and talk to us about the difficulties they face and how they overcome them. This will enable us to discuss reflections written by expert instructors and it will be have great benefits for students in this course.

Finally, other students suggested offering more training workshops: For example, RJC3d suggested conducting more training sessions and workshops to engage students in real activities and ask them to review lectures and reflect on them.

The findings indicated that the participants benefited from the various components of the practicum course during their practicum experience through micro-teaching, class observation, lesson planning, reflective practice, class management and collaborative work, practical and communicative teaching methods such as inquiry-based learning/task-based inquiry-based learning. The experience helped them reshape and reflect critically on their understandings of teaching and learning.

Specifically speaking, they felt that the micro-teaching was an important experience and therefore it helped them in their professional development. They stressed the authenticity of their practicum experience. To clarify, the participants emphasized the fact that the course took them from theory to practice and to the real world of the practicum where they transformed their identity from being just passive students towards that of being responsible teachers.

They also thought that class observation and lesson planning were beneficial for them in in developing their experience. This means that observation and planning are important tools for effective learning. It is a clear finding in this study that the participants liked both observing and being observed as they learn from each other and the process helps them to provide and receive feedback on precise aspects of their teaching performance, thus offering them meaningful learning opportunities. Similarly, designing of instructional activities was epitomized in their planning and preparation of lessons.

Another finding in this study is they felt that the experience helped them to become more reflective teachers. They were able to think critically about their teaching practices and contexts. They thought critically about the components of the practicum course and their own teaching performances. Holding regular reflective sessions with students should be encouraged as such reflection plays an important role in evaluating their practicum learning experiences.

Finally, using effective management strategies and varied communicative teaching methods contributed to the success of their practicum experience. At the same time, and based on the findings of the study, the experience can be improved, and the students can be assisted in the course of their profession by the following:

- increasing the time and number of the micro-teaching to achieve more meaningful learning opportunities.

- offering more time to extensively discuss and comment on the various teaching aspects.
- guiding the students to develop the appropriate observational skills and lesson plans.
- exposing students to different types of reflective practices and enabling them to discuss their reflections and experts' reflections inside the classroom.

Remarkably, one of the most significant lessons from this study entails that the more the students are offered with opportunities to practice in real contexts, the wider the scope to reshape their identity and develop their profession as teachers.

Limitations of the study

This research is limited to small number of participants (12 students). However, given that nature of this qualitative research that aims to elicit how participants understood their experience and this involves their reflective experiences, this is acceptable in research as the aim is to gain in-depth rather than breadth understanding. Another limitation is that the participants wrote their reflective journals as part of their assignments in the practicum course to their instructor (researcher). In this sense, some may be inclined to write positive experiences. However, the maturity of the participants (MA TEFL II students) and the nature of the guided questions which ask about strengths and weaknesses and means of improvement were expected to eliminate such inclinations and unveil implicit messages.

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