

ATTITUDES OF EFL PRE-SERVICE TRAINEES TOWARDS LANGUAGE TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

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Abstract

The way teachers perceive their profession and their attitudes towards teaching play an important role in the formation of teachers' personality. Teaching practice as a first-hand teaching experience provides pre-service trainees with an opportunity to shift from the role of a student and become a teacher. What pre-service trainees think about the profession and their attitudes in the initial phase may have considerable impact on how they will perceive teaching as a profession. Therefore, this paper seeks to provide new insights into the problematics by exploring EFL pre-service teachers' opinions and attitudes towards language teaching as a profession. It intends to discuss the following aspects: most satisfying aspects of being a language teacher, difficulties and challenges of being a language teacher and the difference between language teaching at primary and secondary school. The study uses a qualitative approach, with data being gathered via interviews on a sample of pre-service trainees of English language and literature in combination. The paper begins by providing a brief theoretical background to the topic, followed by the data collection, data analysis and discussion of research findings.

Key Words: attitude, EFL pre-service trainee, profession, teaching

Abstrakt

Percepcia učiteľov a ich postoje k vyučovaniu zohrávajú dôležitú úlohu vo formovaní osobnosti učiteľa. Pedagogická prax ako prvá priama skúsenosť poskytuje praktikantom príležitosť prejsť z roly študenta do role učiteľa. To, čo si praktikanti myslia o profesii učiteľa a ich postoje v iniciálnej fáze môže mať značný dopad na to, ako budú celkovo vnímať učiteľstvo ako profesiu. Zámerom tejto práce je preto poskytnúť nový pohľad do problematiky skúmaním názorov a postojov praktikantov ku vyučovaniu jazyka ako profesii. Objektom skúmania sú nasledujúce oblasti: najviac uspokojivé aspekty vyučovania jazyka, prekážky a výzvy pri vyučovaní jazyka a rozdiely medzi vyučovaním na základnej a strednej škole. V štúdiu je uplatnený kvalitatívny prístup, pričom dáta boli zhromaždené využitím metódy rozhovoru na vzorke pregraduálnych študentov učiteľského programu anglický jazyk a literatúra v kombinácii. Práca najskôr predstavuje stručné teoretické pozadie témy. Nasledovne prezentuje zber dát, analýzu dát a výsledky výskumu. Práca by mala prispieť k hlbšiemu porozumeniu učiteľského presvedčenia a postojov k učiteľstvu ako profesie z pohľadu pregraduálnych študentov učiteľského programu.

Kľúčové slová: postoj, praktikant, profesia, vyučovanie

Introduction

Attitudes, opinions and perceptions of pre-service trainees towards teaching play an important role not only in the context of ELT and EFL, but teaching in general. There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of the issue.

How pre-service trainees perceive this profession may have an impact on their teaching once they become teachers. Factors found to be influencing what teachers think about teaching and learning have been explored in several studies. Further discussion of attitude formation, teacher beliefs and the factors affecting teaching philosophy lies beyond the scope of this study; therefore, the paper only provides a brief theoretical background and offers some useful insights into the topic by providing EFL pre-service trainees' opinions, attitudes and perceptions with regards to language teaching.

The first section of this paper provides a brief theoretical background and literature overview of the topic, it will then go on to the methodological part where data collection, data analysis and further discussion of the research findings will be provided.

1 Literature Overview

A number of scholars have investigated the issue of attitudes of pre-service trainees towards teaching profession in general (Bhargava – Pathy, 2014; Htang, 2017; Alkhateeb, 2013; Andronache – Bocoşa - Bocoşa - Macrib 2014) and in the context of ELT and EFL (Agcam – Babanoglu, 2016; Oz - Kiris, 2018). The notion *attitude* may be defined in many ways. According to Hogg and Vaughan (2011), an attitude is “a relatively enduring organisation of beliefs, feelings and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” or “a general feeling or evaluation - positive or negative - about some person, object or issue” (p. 148).

Based on the research conducted on the sample of English teachers in Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi, 2013, pp. 6-7), the following aspects of their motivation emerged: “student performance and success (46%), being with students (21%), motivated students (14%), recognition and appreciation by students (12%), students' positive attitude towards English (4%)”. On the other hand, demotivators related to teaching from the perspective of English language teachers in Sri Lanka were as follows: “limited facilities (25%), overcrowded classes (20%), school-based assessments (17%), colleagues who don't work (10%), inappropriate textbooks (7%), teaching methodology (7%), frequent changes of syllabus and textbooks (5%), teaching other subjects (5%), poor knowledge in teaching methods (2%)”. The graphs below (figures 1 and 2) present an illustration of the aspects previously mentioned.

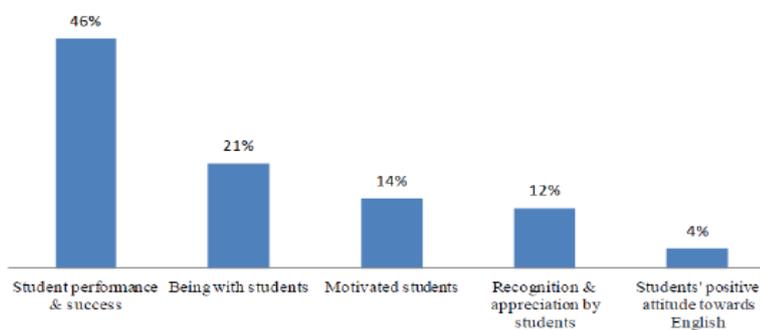


Figure 1: Students as a motivator

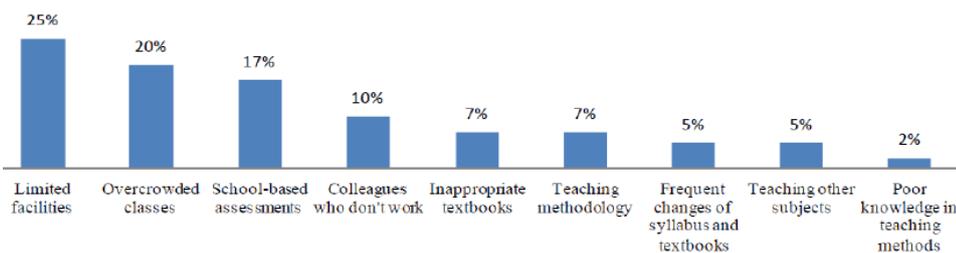


Figure 2: Demotivators related to teaching

Source (Figure 1 and Figure 2): Hettiarachchi S. (2013). English Language Teacher Motivation in Sri Lankan Public Schools ISSN 1798-4769. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 1-11, doi:10.4304/jltr.4.1.1-11

Being “a good teacher” can be perceived as one of the ultimate goals of pre-service trainees, however, the definition of the term might vary among teachers or students in general. As defined by Harmer (qtd. in Straková, 2013, p. 32), the following teacher qualities were collected with the help of teachers and students from various countries:

- “They should make their lessons interesting so you don’t fall asleep in them.
- A teacher must love her job. If she really enjoys her job that’ll make the lessons more interesting.
- A good teacher is an entertainer and I mean that in a positive sense, not a negative sense.
- It’s important that you can talk to the teacher when you have problems and you don’t get along with the subject.
- A good teacher should try to draw out the quiet ones and control the more talkative ones.
- A good teacher is ... someone who helps rather than shouts.
- A good teacher is ... somebody who has an affinity with the students that they’re teaching.
- I like a teacher who has lots of knowledge, not only of his subject.”

Teaching practice is usually the first teaching experience pre-service trainees go through. It serves as an opportunity for the trainees to apply all the theoretical knowledge (approaches,

methods, techniques) into practice and try out what it means for them to be “a good teacher”. During teaching practice, pre-service trainees have a chance to express themselves as teachers while their position of students still remains. A number of authors have discussed several aspects related to readiness of the trainees towards teaching practice (Basree - Abdul - Abdullah - Abd Rashid, 2018), the impact of EFL teacher education upon the trainees’ classroom teaching practices (Yook - Lee, 2016), the importance of meeting trainees’ needs on teaching practice (Kennedy, 1993), and international perspectives on developing teachers and teaching practice (Sugrue – Day, 2002).

2 Research Methodology

The following methodological part of the present paper begins by providing information about data collection (research methods, research sample and background of the study), and continues with data analysis and the research findings. Moreover, the section provides selected sample excerpts from the interviews in order to elucidate perceptions of pre-service trainees in more detail.

2.1 Data Collection

A qualitative research approach was used for the purpose of obtaining data in the study. As to the research methods, an interview was chosen in order to obtain qualitative data through in-depth analysis. Qualitative methods offer an effective way of providing detailed illustrations of trainees’ perceptions. Therefore, this method provides a deeper insight into the problematics and a deeper understanding of EFL pre-service trainees’ perception of and attitudes towards teaching as a profession. The study presents partial results obtained from the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the sample of ten pre-service trainees of English language and literature in combination.

2.2 Data Analysis and Research Findings

All the data obtained from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed. During the interview, EFL pre-service trainees were asked certain questions. For the purpose of this study, partial data obtained from the interview were analysed based on the responses of the EFL pre-service trainees to the following questions:

1. What do you consider as most satisfying with regards to teaching profession (as a future English language teacher)?
2. What do you consider as most difficult or challenging of being a language teacher?
3. How do you perceive teaching at primary and secondary school based on your teaching practice experience?

After the analysis of the data, three main categories were recognized: most satisfying aspects of being a language teacher (i.e. what the pre-service trainees consider as most satisfying with regards to the profession of a language teacher), difficulties and challenges of being a language teacher (i.e.

what is perceived as most challenging and difficult in connection to language teaching) and primary vs. secondary school (i.e. how the trainees perceive teaching at primary and secondary school).

2.2.1 Most satisfying aspects of being a language teacher

With regards to the aspects which EFL pre-service trainees found to be most satisfying, students' progress towards learning and teacher's "popularity" among students were considered as important by the majority of participants. Interestingly, one interviewee argued that especially English language teachers are often perceived as friendly and cheerful by students. This may be caused by the nature of the language, as the interviewee continues. The comment below illustrates how the trainee thinks English teachers are perceived by students:

S2: "... maybe the kids like English teachers ... I feel like they kind of like English ... and they kind of like English teachers, yeah, because they are always cheerful and friendly, at least from my experience ... the nature of the language. English is friendly ... "

Most of the trainees feel that what they enjoy about teaching is when students are happy about the activities performed in the lesson, they are full of energy, interested, and thus quite satisfied. In addition, this goes hand in hand with creating a positive learning environment. Moreover, working with such a group is perceived by the trainees as very pleasant and satisfying. Another interviewee said:

S1: "... Maybe when I see the students ... that I I helped them with something ... when they understand something, it is satisfying for me. Or when I see how happy they are because of some activity, they are cheerful ... and they are satisfied with how they really understand something ... "

Other responses to this question included:

S9: "... When I see the students' progress ... that they are happy with attending the course, not tired or just demotivated, only to "survive" and leave ... that they are happy, they can participate, and they are learning something ... "

One interviewee argued that working with students itself is something enjoyable. Whole person learning was also pointed out, meaning students should not only be educated, but also good-mannered. For example, one interviewee said:

S8: "... When ... when I see that they have learnt something in the lesson, not only in the form of curriculum, but that they got interested in a way ... "

What is also considered as crucial is positive feedback from students. One participant commented:

S7: "... Maybe when I see that the kids are interested ... that the feedback from the kids is ... when it's positive ... "

By receiving feedback from the students, a teacher can see whether the approach / strategies used in the classroom are effective or they need a certain modification.

2.2.2 Difficulties and Challenges of being a language teacher

Speaking of difficulties and challenges of language teaching, what most of the trainees pointed out is preparation for lessons, especially in terms of meaningfulness of activities. Commenting on this, one of the interviewees claimed that one of the disadvantages is literally no free time. However, the trainees are aware of the fact that the more they teach, the easier it will probably be for them to prepare for the lessons. Commenting on this issue, one of the interviewees said:

S10: "... Preparation for a lesson ... correction of papers ... I think a teacher cannot come to a lesson just like, but always has to know what to do ... to prepare something for the lesson ... so the preparation ... at least at the beginning. Because I believe that later on ... after some time when the teachers get practice, it will be easier for them ... "

There were some suggestions that technology and school equipment play an important role in teaching and learning process. In other words, if a school is equipped with the latest technology, learning may be enhanced and promoted. As one interviewee said:

S2: "... The most difficult in the process? The most difficult for me is to ... when you want to put it somehow ... so that it is comprehensible ... you need like million tools or some technology ... it takes some time..."

There were some comments about how important it is to let the learners "do the work". In other words, how discovery learning (which might require more preparation) can promote learning process. Moreover, providing clear explanation and good examples were perceived as central to effective teaching. The participants on the whole demonstrated that catching students' attention can be one of the most challenging things. This view was echoed by another participant who emphasized the need for a teacher to be creative in their teaching as well as respected by the students. Teacher – student rapport was also perceived as crucial along with getting to know the students. As one interviewee said:

S6: "... The most difficult is to create a rapport with the students, so coming to a class I don't know. This is maybe the most difficult ... to get to know the classroom ... "

According to the participants, one of the biggest challenges in teaching is to learn how to work within mixed ability classes which requires individual approach from a teacher. Other responses to this question included:

S9: "... The most difficult is to be careful with ... with the students' level ... how to plan a lesson in a way that all of the students learn something and are interested and progress ... "

During teaching practice, the pre-service trainees may often come across mixed ability classrooms, which is perceived as one of the most challenging aspects of language teaching based on the data obtained. In her book *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classroom*, Tomlinson presents "the principles and strategies that can help teachers address a variety of learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels ... to make school comfortable for each learner

who comes their way” (2001, p. 8). Meeting students’ needs should be at the centre of teaching and learning, not only in the context of ELT, but in teaching and learning as such.

Teaching practice often does not allow the trainees to get to know the classroom very much, since it usually lasts a few weeks whereas once the in-service teachers start teaching, they have much more time for developing teacher - student rapport.

2.2.3 Primary vs. Secondary school

The participants of the research have experienced teaching at both primary and secondary level in the form of teaching practice. In the interview, useful insights into differences of teaching English at primary and secondary school were provided from the perspective of EFL pre-service trainees. One of the differences that most of the trainees pointed out is the use of the target language during the lesson. While at primary school, mother tongue was claimed to be used more often, at secondary school it was the target language which was predominantly used.

In general, most of the students after first-hand teaching experience prefer teaching at secondary level. The reasons are as follows: advanced thinking is more present, as a teacher you can discuss various topics with students, a teacher does not (necessarily) have to lower their level of language in order for the learners to understand (taking into consideration students’ higher level of language in comparison to primary level learners). Consequently, this could be reflected in the trainees’ increased motivation to teach. On the other hand, what surprised one of the participants is the language level of some of the secondary level students (especially their pronunciation) given the fact that they are surrounded by English everywhere. One of the interviewees said:

S2: “... I enjoy secondary more ... because primary was too low, I mean the overall level, overallly the language ... and it can be a problem forme sometimes, when I cannot use the word because the kids won’t understand ...but maybe I am kind of surprised that I expected from secondary students that they would not make that kind of mistakes ... mostly pronunciation ... this is something which really surprised me ... “

Even though attention span was perceived by the trainees as shorter with primary level students, they emphasized the need for keeping the attention even with secondary level students, as the teacher can easily “lose their interest”. Another interviewee, when asked said:

S3: “... You have to be present all the time, I would say, because if you think for a moment, and how to keep their attention because they are like ... that everything can catch their attention. Not as much as it was at primary, even here ... it’s different that they perceive the teacher more, but ... it is very difficult, I think ... ”

Moreover, they showed great concern over the fact that English was often perceived by some of their secondary level students as a subject which they need to “survive” rather than enjoy. This could be caused by the lack of interest from the students. As one interviewee put it:

S4: ...” And they are not interested in English, to be honest, or most of them, they even told me this. I see now that not everybody is interested in English and they just have to “survive” ... “

Speaking of approaches, the trainees pointed out that different approaches are applied when teaching primary and secondary level students. As claimed by one of the interviewees, deciding on whether or not the students will work individually or in pairs might be difficult. Talking about this issue an interviewee said:

S9: "... At primary the kids were happy they could sit next to each other because they were separated, and they were happy they could talk to each other even though I had to make sure whether they were speaking English or not ..."

Another aspect which can be taken into consideration is the preparation time. Even though lesson preparation as such is generally essential, when teaching at primary level, one activity might take much longer with younger students than teenagers, as one of the interviewees mentioned.

S6: "... Not really, because I know for sure I want to teach at secondary, even though it was easier to teach at primary because when I conducted one activity it took ¾ hour ... now I need a lot ... but I would like to teach at secondary for sure ..."

EFL pre-service trainees provided useful insights into the problematics of attitudes towards teaching as a profession. As to the most satisfying aspects of being a language teacher, the trainees mentioned the following: students' progress, teacher's popularity among students, when the students are motivated, cheerful, interested, or when the trainees get positive feedback from their students. As mentioned previously, students' progress, their motivation and the teacher's popularity among students are the aspects which emerged as motivation aspects of English teachers in Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi, 2013, pp. 6-7). On the other hand, the challenges and difficulties mentioned by the EFL pre-service trainees were as follows: preparation for lessons, school equipment, clear explanation and providing good examples, catching students' attention, to be creative and respected by the students, letting the students "do the work", working within mixed ability classes, creating teachers – student rapport. With regards to teaching at primary and secondary school, different attention span was mentioned, the use of the target language in the classroom and the need for different teaching approaches and methods.

Conclusion

In this paper, the aim was to investigate the attitude of EFL pre-service trainees towards teaching after their teaching experience in the form of teaching practice at both primary and secondary school. This study has shown that the pre-service trainees are fully aware of the satisfying and challenging aspects of language teaching and their preferences of teaching at primary or secondary school. However, since teaching practice is often the first teaching experience for them, there is a probability of their attitudes to change in the future.

The scope of this study is limited in terms of the sample size, which makes the findings less generalizable. Therefore, these results need to be interpreted with caution. The findings of this research provide insights for further research. However, there are many unanswered questions about the background of the attitude formation. The issue that was not addressed in this study is the deeper investigation of the factors which could have had impact on the attitude formation of

the pre-service trainees towards language teaching. Future studies on the current topic are; therefore, recommended. This work contributes to existing knowledge of teacher attitudes by providing own data and their analysis.

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