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# Connecting theory and practice in teacher education: English-as-a-foreign-language pre-service teachers' perceptions of practicum experience

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## Abstract

The present study explores the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their experiences in the university teacher-training course during the practicum. In particular, the study focuses on how the pre-service teachers perceived the effects of the university course, as they tried to connect theory and practice during the practicum. A total of 15 participants enrolled in the methodology course for teaching speaking attended a 4-week practicum in secondary schools. They recorded their reflections on their teaching experiences in their reflective journals and they were interviewed after the practicum. The results of the study showed that the university course prepared them the fundamental skills to prepare for lessons and reflect on their teaching practice. However, the course failed to prepare them adequately to cope with the realities of the classroom context, as the university course only provided them with an idealistic view of the classroom. The implication of the study suggests ways to better connect university courses with the actual classroom practices to provide pre-service teachers the maximum support to practicalize their knowledge during the practicum.

**Keywords:** Theory and practice, Pre-service teachers, Practicum, Professional development

## Introduction

The process of pre-service teachers' path to professionalism requires active construction and reconstruction of knowledge from diverse sources (Borger and Tillema 1996). As noted by Woodward (1991), training needs to include both knowledge and skills. In this regard, the objective of the teacher education program is to allow pre-service teachers to gain the fundamental knowledge of teaching theories by means of which they can observe and analyze practice in ways that can aid their actual teaching (Bobrakov 2014). As for practice, the practicum period provides pre-service teachers' opportunities to act out their theoretical knowledge and connect theory and practice (Meijer et al. 2002). Despite such effort of the

teacher-training program, there have been continuous indications of pre-service teachers experiencing difficulties bridging the gap between theory and practice. The causes of their inability to make such a connection have been discussed extensively in related studies (Hennissen et al. 2017; Korthagen and Wibbels 2001; Mattsson et al. 2011; Wubbels 1992). In particular, the pre-service teachers seem to struggle with the gap between expectations and reality regardless of the amount of preparation before the practicum (Cole and Knowles 1993).

While similar difficulties have been pointed out in numerous studies in Korea (Chang et al. 2008; Lee 2011; Kim 2009), there is a lack of in-depth view of the pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding the factors that cause such difficulties. Since there are constant revisions of educational policies in Korea, it seems pertinent to investigate whether the university training courses are adequately preparing pre-service teachers to deal with

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such changes. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the strengths of connection between the pre-service teachers' methodology course and their practicum experience. Specifically, this study aims to find out in what sense the course is effective in terms of allowing students to bridge the gap and what areas need improvement. To address these issues, the following research questions are considered:

1. What factors from the university course did the pre-service teachers consider useful when applying their theoretical knowledge during the practicum?
2. What factors did the pre-service teachers notice during the practicum which they had not been prepared for?
3. What improvements in the teacher-training program do the pre-service teachers suggest to bridge the gap?

## Literature review

### Pre-service teacher education

Teacher training consists of providing knowledge of the content and skills or techniques to teach the students adequately (Woodward 1991). However, there are limits, since the university setting does not reflect the real classroom context (Zeichner 1992). In this regard, the practicum connects theoretical knowledge gained from university training courses with actual practice in the classroom context (Meijer et al. 2002; Wilkinson 1996; Zeichner 1992) and allow pre-service teachers to integrate theory and practice (Cheng et al. 2012; Farrell 2008; Meijer et al. 2002; Zeichner 2010) by means of providing opportunities to apply practical pedagogical knowledge (Leshem and Bar-Hama 2007; Bezzina and Michalack 2008) and learn by doing (Schön 1987).

While such valuable experiences are expected from the practicum period, simply participating in the practicum will not yield such an outcome for it requires effective planning (Handal and Lauvas 1987). Studies have shown that pre-service teachers experience difficulties connecting theory and practice during their practicum period. The cause of the problem has been discussed widely. In terms of the teacher-training program, in general, many have argued that lack of communication between the academic program in the university and the practicum (Zeichner 1990; Hobson et al. 2008; Yan and He 2010) is a major barrier in teacher training. Others have pointed out that the differences between the type of information processing required in the university course and the one demanded during actual practice (Korthagen and Wibbels 2001), and not having enough time to put the theoretical knowledge to practice (Mattsson et al. 2011) also make it difficult for pre-service teachers to integrate

theory and practice. In addition to the gaps in the program, the pre-service teachers have been found to have difficulties in linking their preconceptions of teaching and their practices during the practicum (Hennissen et al. 2017; Wubbels 1992).

### Challenges of pre-service English teacher education in Korea

In the recently revised English curriculum in Korea, there was a significant amount of expansion of speaking in the educational policy. In 2015 Revised National English Curriculum, there is an emphasis on the English-speaking performance assessment and to maximize the opportunities for students to speak English in class (Ministry of Education 2015). As the curriculum is geared toward enhancing communication skills, the need for developing adequate productive skills such as speaking and writing is on the rise (Kim and Kim 2017; Kim and Yi 2013).

While the curriculum is being updated, the classroom context remains dormant. According to the survey conducted in Lee (2018), almost half of the high schools did not offer English conversation courses. Even when speaking was taught, the tasks were not found to be meaningful or communication-focused (Kim and Kim 2017; Lee 2013). This lack of focus on speaking in high schools is mostly due to college entrance exam focused curriculum (Kim and Yi 2013; Lee 2018; Park 2016a, b). Although teachers can overcome challenges of limitations of educational setting by means of confidence and assurance gained from proper professional development and training (Koh 2015; Shih and Wang 2010), English teachers in Korea were not trained prior to the enactment of the policy. Park (2016a, b) found that teachers did not feel confident about teaching and assessing speaking, because they had no prior training. Since the policy was put into practice without prior training, the teachers are still struggling in their classrooms and are still requesting the government for professional development and systematic assessment tool in terms of teaching and assessing speaking (Park and Min 2019). This gap between the policy and the actual teaching practice makes it more challenging for pre-service teachers to integrate theory and practice during the practicum, since the classroom setting is unstable (Lee 2011; Kim 2009).

## Method

### Participants and settings

The participants in this study were 15 undergraduate juniors (five male and ten female students) in Korea who majored in English Education. The participants were enrolled in an intensive methodology course that focused on teaching English speaking in secondary schools. During the 15-week semester, the participants attend their

first practicum from weeks 6 to 10. The students then return to their regular courses and complete the semester. The focus of the course was to provide students general theories and approaches of teaching speaking and allow them to present their own lesson plans and teaching demonstrations. The 4-h course was offered once a week to allow students to complete the course materials, and get feedback regarding their lesson plan presentations and teaching demonstrations prior to their first practicum experience. Around two-to-three pre-service teachers were allocated to a school and one mentor teacher was in charge of coordinating the practicum program. The responsibilities of the pre-service teachers included writing the reflection journals daily, as they observe the class and a demo lesson during which the pre-service teachers teach an actual class and receive feedback from their mentor teachers regarding the lesson. The participants were particularly interested in connecting theories and practice in teaching speaking, since the recently revised national curriculum emphasized the importance of performance assessment, which is mostly conducted to assess students' speaking skills. The participants in this study are given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

#### Data collection and analysis

The data for the study were collected during the 15-week methodology undergraduate course. During the semester, the participants attended the class for 8 weeks, went on the practicum for 4 weeks, and then returned to finish the coursework for the remaining 3 weeks. The participants wrote their reflective journals during their practicum period focusing on their observations and experiences of teaching speaking in the classroom context and gave presentations about their experiences, particularly focusing on three questions: (1) how did the class help you during the practicum? (2) What gaps did you notice during the practicum? and (3) How can the course better prepare you for the practicum? Parts that were unclear or needed further explanation were identified and asked the participants to clarify them during the end of the semester. The data were collected from their reflective journal entries, presentations, and interview session. The reflective journal entries and the interview session were written and conducted in Korean. The entries and excerpts shown in this study have been translated by the researcher.

This study uses the qualitative data analysis method by identifying themes, developing concepts and propositions (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). The interview sessions and the presentations were transcribed by the researcher. The data (transcriptions and reflective journal entries) were coded using the open coding process

during which "concepts [were] identified and their properties and dimensions [were] discovered in data" (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 101). The interpretations of the data were guided by the comments that were identified and analyzed as critical in the journal entries and interview transcripts (Bogden and Biklen 2007). Themeing the data consisted of organizing "a group of repeating ideas" into an "implicit topic" (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003, p. 38). Finally, to ensure credibility of the analysis, data were collected from multiple sources including the participants' reflective journal entries, presentations, class observation notes, and interview sessions. Furthermore, member-checking sessions were held with the participants to share the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data.

## Results and discussion

### Connecting theory and practice: contributing factors

Most of the pre-service teachers commented that the university course helped them gain a holistic view of what a speaking class should include. In particular, their class activities including developing lesson plans and getting feedback were perceived as useful:

*If I hadn't taken the class, I wouldn't have any awareness of what I should consider when I plan the speaking class. Especially, I had a clear concept of what I need to include in the pre, during, and post activities. The process of developing lesson plans and getting feedback from my peers and the professor was very useful. (Yeongyu, Reflective Journal Entry)*

Some of the participants pointed out that they were able to obtain fundamental knowledge from the course, since they had not been taught speaking when they were in secondary school, thus, unable to use their educational background for support:

*Since I had never been taught how to speak in middle school or high school, the theories and methods I learned in the class were new to me. I think the knowledge from the class gave me confidence even though I didn't have any experience teaching or learning how to speak. (Hyunkyuu, Reflective Journal Entry)*

While Hennissen et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of helping students link their preconceptions of teaching and their practices during the practicum, the participants in this study showed that they had no preconceptions of teaching speaking, since they had never been taught. In this regard, the university course filled in this gap.

Some participants explained that they were able to reflect on significant factors involved in teaching

speaking, which they would not have done if it were not for the discussions during the university class:

*Researcher: You wrote in your journal that the coursework helped you think a bit more clearly about teaching speaking. Can you explain a little bit about that?*

*Saejin: What I was trying to say was that the topics we discussed during the class helped me notice things while I was observing the mentor teacher's classes and teaching my demo lesson. I guess I learned how to reflect about things, like what does teaching speaking mean in this class and how I need to provide feedback to help them progress rather than simply point out their errors. (Saejin, Interview excerpt)*

*While I was planning for my demo class, I thought about the topic we discussed during class, which was about what a competent speaker means to me. That discussion pushed me to consider how I can plan a lesson to allow students to become a competent speaker. (Hyunjoo, Reflective Journal Entry)*

As shown in the interview excerpt, this type of reflective thinking was made possible by the discussions carried out during the university coursework. The discussions allowed the participants to think critically about the current teaching practice and question whether they are appropriate in the English classrooms in Korea rather than simply follow the seniors. Furthermore, the discussion regarding "competent" speakers during which the students realized that everyone had a different definition of competency and how that reflects their teaching practice seemed to have helped Hyunjoo. Thus, reflective thinking is particularly essential for pre-service teachers, since it will equip them with the abilities to make professional decisions (Cho 2017) rather than simply follow along scripted lesson plans without improvising (Livingston and Borko 1989).

### Gaps between theory and practice

Despite the training during the university class, the participants experienced difficulties due to the gaps that existed between theory and practice. One of the major gaps was the discordance between the educational policies and the actual classroom practices:

*I saw that speaking was not taught but tested only. The test wasn't even the test we had made during the university class, like the ones we had to distinguish between fluency and accuracy assessments. All they had to do was memorize and were tested*

*on accuracy of their memorization. So, it made me wonder why we need to learn about tasks we will not use in the actual classroom. (Saejoon, Presentation Excerpt)*

Contrast to the General Guidelines in the 2015 Revised English Curriculum which highlights the importance of enhancing students' communication skills, the classroom situation lacked accordance with the policy. Furthermore, as Saejoon pointed out, while the activities during the university class focused on developing tasks that enhance students' fluency and accuracy to actualize the current policy, such activities were not used to teach or assess speaking in the real classroom. This discrepancy between policy and practice created the gap between the training course and the real classroom.

A number of participants pointed out that the teaching demonstration during the university course was different when teaching the demo lesson during the practicum:

*My classmates during class are kind of like ideal audiences on a TV show, reacting positively to everything. Real students are not like that at all. (Guhyun, Interview Excerpt)*

Chang et al. (2008) stated that pre-service teachers need more chances to improve their microteaching during the methodology course in college, but the pre-service teachers in this study pointed out the importance of field experience with real students. Similar to the findings in Yin (2012), the pre-service teachers in this study did not have the chance to consider the student factor when considering the effectiveness of their lessons.

Some participants attributed their own low confidence in speaking English as the factor that made it challenging for them to motivate students to speak:

*I was confident about my coursework in the university so I was actually looking forward to teaching in a real classroom. But when I actually taught the students, it was really hard for me to motivate them. I thought about the reason and I realized that I wasn't confident in speaking English so I didn't know how to motivate them. (Joohyung, Interview Excerpt)*

As shown in the excerpt, the university training equipped the pre-service teachers theoretical and practical knowledge in teaching speaking; however, it failed to address internal issues, which is to support pre-service teachers in enhancing their own confidences in speaking English. Contrast to the findings in Park (2016a, b) and Kim (2013), which emphasized the need to train the pre-service teachers in using motivational skills and external factors such as the College Entrance Exam to motivate students, the participants in this study have shown that



their own confidence had to be strengthened prior to motivating their students. In other words, rather than training the pre-service teachers how to use external tactics to motivate the students, the pre-service teachers need to work on their own confidence.

Another problem the participants had in dealing with students was having students work effectively in groups:

*I tried out cooperative learning method when doing speaking activities, but they didn't carry out their roles. What was worse, it was their first time doing such an activity. They were more comfortable with pattern-drill practices since that's what they were mostly familiar with. (Sangwon, Presentation Excerpt)*

The participants did not know how to engineer participation since they lacked ability to improvise in accordance with the given context (Borko and Livingston 1989). This inflexibility was also caused by the participants lack of reinterpreting theories and methods in the Korean EFL (English-as-a-foreign language) context. The cooperative learning method cannot be applied to the English classrooms in Korea without proper revisions to be suitable for the students who are more familiar with pattern-drill practices.

The current practices in the classrooms that did not seem to be guided by current theories and methodologies were found to be affected by in-service teachers who were teaching and assessing without prior training:

*I observed my mentor teacher carry out speaking tasks in class today. The task consisted of memorization activities. She gave students some time to memorize the dialog with their partners and asked them to come to her and present the dialog when they have finished memorizing. She gave them stickers as a reward. I asked her what the focus of her speaking tasks were and she told me that she focused on reading aloud and clearly with accurate pronunciation. I also asked her if she had any training in teaching speaking and she said no. This was surprising for me because the way they were taught was not much different from how I was taught even though the curriculum has changed. (Hyunju, Reflective Journal Entry)*

Similar to the findings in Park (2016a, b), lack of training before the enactment of the policy seemed to have created such diverse definitions of "speaking." Moreover, there seems to be stagnation of in-service teachers' professional development as a result of not being informed of current methodologies. In this regard, the inconsistency between in-service and pre-service teachers' concept of teaching speaking made it difficult for pre-service

teachers to make a meaningful connection between theory and practice during the practicum.

#### **How to connect theory and practice: pre-service teachers' suggestions**

When asked about ways to improve the university teacher-training course, most of the participants pointed out the need to reinterpret English-as-a-second-language (ESL) theories to better suit English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) context:

*If I were to be tested on the theories and methodologies we learn in the class in the exam for public school employment, I wouldn't have trouble answering the questions. But, in the real classroom, I had trouble putting them into practice. I think I need to figure out what we actually need in the classroom in Korea first before applying the theories from the West. (Jinju, Presentation Excerpt)*

As pointed out by Jinju, a majority of the pre-service teachers study the theories and methods in the university to pass the exam for public school employment. As a result, their study skills mostly consist of memorizing the terms rather than interpreting them for teaching practice and they do not have a clear concept of the essential factors in the Korean EFL context. While passing the exam is, indeed, a major part of their coursework, training them to apply these methods in appropriate contexts should also be considered. The methodology course in the present study attempted to bridge the gap; however, one semester did not seem to have been enough time for them to carry out this process. Thus, there needs to be further support in allowing the pre-service teachers to fully understand what is needed in the Korean EFL context rather than simply memorizing the terms for assessment.

Some participants suggested more training in practical skills such as revising the textbook activities and integrating speaking with other skills that they can practice before the practicum:

*If I had more practice in revising the textbook activities, I would have had time to focus on other things during the practicum. The students finished much quicker than I had expected because the textbook activities were too easy for them. I didn't know how to go beyond the textbook. (Saejoon, Presentation Excerpt)*

*I didn't get to teach speaking because the classes were mostly reading-based. The mentor teacher focused her classes on grammar and vocabulary. I wish I knew how to integrate speaking in such a reading-based class. (Yeji, Interview Excerpt)*

According to the participants, obtaining a clear concept of the needs of the EFL classroom and the flexibility in applying the current theories to meet such needs was perceived as necessary. As noted by Lee (2011), there is a need for integrating speaking with reading in the Korean EFL context, since the classes are reading-focused.

### Conclusion and implications

This study explored the perceptions of pre-service teachers in terms of the connection between the university training course and the practicum. The participants, who were in their 3rd year in the university and going on their first practicum, were asked to focus on three questions in their reflective journals, presentations, and the interview sessions: (1) how did the class help you during the practicum? (2) What gaps did you notice during the practicum? and (3) How can the course better prepare you for the practicum?

The findings from the study showed that the university coursework provided them fundamental knowledge such as current theories and methodologies as well as classroom activities in teaching English speaking in secondary schools. In addition, class discussions in the training course allowed them to reflect during the practicum, resulting in deeper awareness of essential factors and issues in the classroom setting. However, university training course did not prepare them for them to deal with the discrepancies between policy and practice in the real classroom. Furthermore, their lack of experience with secondary school students made it challenging for the pre-service teachers to put their knowledge into practice effectively. The participants in this study suggested further training in reinterpreting ESL theories in the EFL context and practical skills which they can put into immediate use when they go on the practicum.

The findings from this study indicate that there is an urgent need to connect class context and practicum experience by being informed of the realities and learn how to reinterpret the methodologies. As pointed out by the participants in this study, the theories and methods are memorized for the sake of answer the questions correctly on the exam for public school employment. As a result, they remain as idealistic concepts from ESL contexts that are not connected to real practice in the EFL classrooms. Accordingly, a reexamination of the current pre-service teacher-training curriculum is required to evaluate the balance between test preparation and teaching preparation. In particular, the courses that are offered immediate before and after the practicum need to consider what training and reflection are essential to help pre-service teachers to use their full

potential during the practicum. For example, the pre-service teachers can reinterpret the theories and methods that are developed in ESL contexts to be suitable for EFL classrooms by means of group discussions. This “reinterpreting” task can help the pre-service teachers to go through the necessary process to reflect on how to transform ESL theories for the EFL context. The process may include becoming aware of the gaps in their understanding of the theories and methods as well as questioning their knowledge of the current demands in the national curriculum (Yin 2018). This reflection can allow the pre-service teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts in addition to evaluating their applicability in the EFL classrooms. During the practicum, the pre-service teachers can conduct an action research to notice various factors and promote reflection. They can report their research when they return and share their experiences with others. This can enhance their experiences during the practicum and expand their perspectives.

In addition, the in-service teachers need training to guide the pre-service teachers to maximize the effects of the practicum. Most importantly, the findings call for an educational policy that can maximize pre-service teachers’ experience during the practicum. This movement toward expanding the pre-service teachers’ experiences should not simply be an increase in micro-teaching practices in the university course (Chang et al. 2008), but the effort needs to go beyond the university by collaborating with secondary schools as suggested by Bartholomew and Sandholts (2009), building a stronger connection between university courses and the practicum (Eom and Uhm 2010; Lee and Lee 2008; Park 2003), and the after-school program by Lee (2014) which provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to stay in touch with the classroom setting. Such partnerships will allow pre-service teachers to make a smooth transition from the university courses to the real classroom (Allsopp et al. 2006) and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

#### Abbreviations

EFL: English-as-a-foreign language; ESL: English-as-a-second language.

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The author was the instructor of the course who conducted the interview and analyzed the data. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Availability of data and materials**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests that might have influenced the presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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