ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING IN AOTEAROA / NEW ZEALAND: THE PRACTICUM

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Abstract

There has been an unprecedented increase in English language learners and teachers over the past few decades. This surge in the industry also led to a need for more English language teacher (ELT) trainers. The current study utilized interviews and survey responses to take stock of core course content, delivery methods, current practices, assessment techniques and challenges as they relate to a small cohort of ELT trainers working in the tertiary education sector in Aotearoa / New Zealand. The findings shared in this article reveal that trainers' approaches to assessing trainees are diverse and their perceived challenges are similar. By researching the experiences of these trainers in Aotearoa / New Zealand, this study hopes to provide some current perspectives on the assessment and associated challenges of the teaching practicum component of ELT training and the decline in the inclusion of practicums in ELT programmes.

Introduction

For decades the irrefutable value of language teacher trainees doing a teaching practicum has been espoused by numerous researchers in the English language teacher (ELT) training sector (Hughes, 2015; Harmer, 2015, Cirocki et al., 2019). Adding to this notion of the key role of a teaching practicum, the vital focus on the practicum component for an ELT trainee is further advocated in popular industry coursebooks, (e.g., Gower et al., 2005; Thaine, 2010; Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2017). In these coursebooks, trainers and trainees are systematically provided with approaches and processes for several facets of classroom teaching and management practices. McLoughlin (2013, as cited in Cirocki et al., 2019, p. 2) suggests that "as novices, the practicum experience affords student teachers the opportunity to take part in an active and experiential process, through which knowledge is enacted, socially constructed and revised". Despite the huge push for a practicum in ELT training programmes, the challenges for trainees, teacher educators and participating schools and associated teachers should not be underestimated. When discussing the shaping of identity of teacher trainees on a practicum, Trent (2013, p. 426) reinforces the point that "The teaching practicum is one of the most challenging, difficult, and frustrating aspects of a teacher

education programme". Therefore, while the practicum can provide an unbelievably rich experience for trainees, it also has the potential to be riddled with triumphs as well as tribulations.

Notwithstanding the pressures associated with teaching practicums, linking the theoretical and practical knowledge gained on courses is of paramount importance for novice language teacher trainees on their journey to becoming language teachers (Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2008; Thaine, 2010). In addressing the vital link between theory and practice, Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008, p. 257) state that often it is the trainees "first hands-on experience with their chosen career" and that by engaging in classroom teaching, trainees can "put into practice their beliefs based on language learning theories they acquired in the course of their studies". Furthermore, Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008, p. 257) suggests that "a trainee's future in education may be determined by what happens during their training period"' Grigorian and Madyarov (2019, p. 21) concisely state that the purpose of their practicum courses it to "consolidate the theory and practice of teaching in EFL and engage students in reflective practice". In a summary of the findings related to case studies of practicums in 13 countries (no New Zealand case study is included), Cirocki et al. (2019, p. 8) highlight this theoretical connection, stating that "A central purpose for a practicum is to connect theory and practice". Nevertheless, many programmes still tend to place less prominence on the practice and more emphasis on the theory, as indicated by the amount of time trainees spend in the classroom. It is the practical experience that serves as a segue to managing the multi-faceted complexity of the real language classroom.

In defining the scope of a practicum, Gower et al. (2005, p. vi) suggests that it "can range from informal practice of a particular technique, perhaps with other trainees acting as students, to a formally assessed lesson" and "where the focus is on the teaching skills and techniques and the teacher is required to direct or orchestrate the learning activities of the class". The underlying message of these researchers appear to be that trainees can learn a lot about theory and content around teaching a language but until they teach language learners, they are probably not really learning it effectively. In addition, the inherent complexity of teaching any group of learners can never be underestimated.

Related literature appears to be largely underpinned by an agreed sense that the practicum also provides trainees, particularly novice trainees, with experimental technique opportunities while getting the support and feedback from more experienced teachers and trainers (Ur, 2012, p. 23). It encourages the evaluation of teachers and their socialisation into the profession in a safe way, where they can explore techniques and procedures to hone their teaching. This socialisation aspect is addressed by Cirocki et al. (2019, pp. 3-4), who maintain that teacher learning "is underpinned by social constructivism", which is perceived to be a

"dynamic social activity" arbitrated through the context, language and interaction of the practicum.

Also pertinent to this study and the findings reported here, is the description of the key assessments and feedback challenges evident in Cirocki et al. (2019). Globally, several techniques for assessing the teaching practicum are popular as evidenced by the work of Cirocki et al. (2019, p. 11) and supported by the statement that to evaluate student teachers during their practicum it is common to engage a range of tools. These can be summative or formative assessments and supporting evidence is mainly gathered during class teaching and observations, lesson plans and materials designed. In addition to the above-mentioned popular areas where evidence is assessed, in the case studies presented in Cirocki et al. (2019), globally, there are also other less frequently used assessment evidence types or tools that trainers could consider as alternatives. Some of these include the following:

- overtly assessing professional capabilities based on collaboration and having a professional attitude (Filipi & Turner, 2019, p. 53) in Australia,
- showing accountability is directly graded (Grigorian & Madyarov, 2019, p. 34) in Armenia,
- delivering written feedback to your peers (Filipi & Turner, 2019, p. 57) in Australia,
- trainees recording their teaching and then keeping a journal after watching and evaluating their teaching (Lara-Diaz, 2019, p. 76) in Chile,
- trainees showing how they can solve problems, like in the class, towards autonomy (Lara-Diaz, 2019, p. 76) in Chile, and
- working with one learner and providing a report related to the learner's progress, challenges and strengths (Filipi & Turner, 2019, p. 58) in Australia.

Added to the above-mentioned common assessment types, is the essential and undisputed valuable place of reflection in all its guises in teacher education and development. All practicums would potentially have a built-in element of reflection for trainees. Farrell (2015) promotes the use of reflection for all teachers including novice trainees in their teaching practicums as well as for ongoing reflection for experienced teachers. Other common reflection aspects which are promoted in the industry include reflections after observing peers, post-lesson delivery verbal reflections and dialogue journals, to name a few (Wragg, 1999; Richards & Farrell, 2013; Grigorian & Madyarov, 2019). The important role that reflection has in the development and growth of teachers at different

stages of their careers is further reinforced by Parrish (2019) who addresses the assessment of effective teaching and continuous teacher development and makes suggestions about the important role processes for reflection can play, including self-observation, peer observation, communities of practice, journals, learning logs and mentoring.

Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008, p. 258) provide a summary of common sources of assessment tools used for teaching practicum courses. These include the following: "reflective journals, portfolios, observations of lessons, tests, self-assessment, peer assessment, co-operating teacher assessment, and pedagogical counsellor assessment". The pedagogical counsellor is defined as the ELT trainer who provides feedback and grading, whereas the co-operating teacher is defined as a teacher that tends to be based at the host school and is an experienced English teacher whom the trainees observe and who provides informal feedback to the trainees on their teaching. Related to assessment and feedback, Hughes (2015) covers the use of suitable post-observation feedback language for both trainer-to-trainee as well as trainee-to-trainee and reinforces the value of supportive feedback in a teaching practicum.

The New Zealand context

An online search revealed that, on their public websites, seven of the eight universities in New Zealand and three of the 15 Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs), offer ELT training programmes. There are also privately run language centres, but at the time the research data was collected for this study, the one participant who worked in the private sector stated that theirs was the only language school offering a New Zealand Certificate in Language Teaching ((NZCELT) program. The universities and ITPs offer a variety of ELT training programmes ranging from minors in Bachelor's degrees to Master's level (See Table 1).

Students studying any of the programmes in Table 1 may be a mix of novice trainees and experienced teachers, mostly domestic students with some international students. The experienced teachers often take these qualifications to upskill or for career progression and promotion purposes. In addition, some teachers wish to change teaching direction, for example science teachers becoming ESL teachers.

The aim of the initial data gathering tool, the survey, mentioned in this study was to do a stocktake of the current positions of, and what factors impact on, ELT training in New Zealand. Recently, the term language teacher educator has been widely used in the literature (Barkhuizen, 2021), but the term ELT trainer is used in this research project. The researcher worked as an ELT trainer in a tertiary

institution in New Zealand for many years and recognised that trainers or institutions tended to work in silos and there was not a general shared understanding of similarities or differences in practices. Essentially, therefore, no shared community of practice notion around ELT trainers *per se*. At Applied Linguistics and ESOL presentations, conferences, and symposia we learn about small aspects of our practices, but we arguably do not seem to have a big picture view of our industry in New Zealand. In addition to the survey, interviews were conducted with a focus on the teaching practicum. The views of a small sample of ELT trainers working in the tertiary sector in New Zealand are shared in this article, including two who have English as an additional language.

Table 1. ELT training programmes offered at New Zealand tertiary institutions

ELT training programmes	Number of institutions
Universities:	
Masters of TESOL / Applied Linguistics / Professional Language Studies	4
Postgraduate Diploma in TESOL	3
Postgraduate Certificate in TESOL / Applied Linguistics	3
Bachelor of Arts with a minor in Language Teaching or TESOL	2
ITPs	
New Zealand Certificate in Language Teaching	2
Both Universities & ITPs	
Graduate Diploma in Arts / Second Language Teaching / TESOL	3
Graduate Certificates in TESOL	2

Interview Participant details

Of the five participants, three worked at universities in New Zealand (Participants T3, T4 and T5), one worked at an ITP (Participant T2), and one worked at a private language centre (Participant T1). As the New Zealand ELT training tertiary sector is quite small, it would be remiss of the researcher to directly name the institutions as this could potentially compromise the anonymity and confidentiality agreements with the participants. The participants taught on ESOL qualifications at different levels ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate. Below is a list of the qualifications and number of teaching hours for trainees in each programme as shared by each of the five participants:

- New Zealand Certificate in Language Teaching, a minimum of six but up to ten hours over the 15-week course (T1)
- Graduate Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages, six hours over a six-week period (T2)

- Graduate Certificate in English, six hours over a six-week period (T3)
- Undergraduate BA with a TESOL minor, over the eight weeks, four weeks of teaching (hours not directly indicated) (T4)
- Graduate Certificate in TESOL, six hours over a six-week period (T5)

Research Question

The specific sub-set question of the broader research question addressed in this article relates to teaching practicum assessment, feedback and challenges:

> How are teacher trainees evaluated and assessed on the teaching practicum and what are challenges linked to providing feedback?

Methodology and data gathering

The first data gathering tool was the online questionnaire / survey, administered via a Google Form, which was deemed easier for participants to complete and would get better traction than hardcopy distribution. The questionnaire stated that the aim was to do a stocktake of current perspectives and practices of ELT trainers in New Zealand. Therefore, those who identified as ELT trainers would have chosen to complete the survey. Some of these participants, however, would not necessarily be teaching directly on the teaching practicum courses. They may be teaching other content such as curriculum design, methodology, linguistics, second language acquisition and language assessment courses.

The online survey was disseminated through key professional bodies, including TESOLANZ (Teachers of English as a Second Language in Aotearoa / New Zealand) and ALANZ (Applied Linguistics Association in Aotearoa / New Zealand). The researcher also sent the survey and interview participant request forms to heads of programmes at tertiary institutions that offered qualifications for teaching English as another language. The survey was completed by 24 participants who identified as ELT trainers in the tertiary sector across New Zealand. Data was collected from universities, ITPs and a couple of privately run language centres.

After the survey data was analysed and it was noted that a third of participants in ELT training indicated that their taught qualifications did not include a teaching practicum, the researcher embarked on a further exploration to gain a deeper understanding and insight into the practicum components of ELT training programmes. To access potential participants who worked specifically on the

practicum courses, the researcher contacted programme co-ordinators / managers via email to ask them if they would distribute an interview participant request and an information form to ELT trainers who were working on the teaching practicum courses of their ESOL qualifications. The ELT trainers contacted the researcher if they agreed to be interviewed, and thus constituted a sample of convenience. Bar one of the interview participants (who was a new staff member on their ELT training programme), the other four had participated in the survey prior to the interview.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher, who was directly known to only one of the five participants. Having worked as an ELT trainer for many years in one of the NZ universities, the researcher is no longer a practising ELT trainer in any of the contexts covered in this research. Therefore, no conflict of interest was perceived to exist for the researcher. All participants were asked the same questions unless they inadvertently gave responses that covered more than one of the questions, in which case the interviewer did not ask the follow-up question because the participant had already covered the information in a previous question.

Otter transcription software was used to do interview transcribing (http://otter.ai). This software directly transcribes audio files on interviews including nuances such as laughter, affirmations and hesitations. An initial *Otter* transcription produces text that has approximately 85% to 90% accuracy, in the researcher's evaluation, depending on the speaker's accent. For the purposes of this study the software was deemed suitable as content was needed for thematic analysis only. Therefore, grammar accuracy, fluency, hesitations, and so on, were not necessary for the data needed as long as the messages were clearly communicated. In other words, it was the content that was important for the comparative analysis. After the initial *Otter* transcription, the researcher systematically listened to each transcription and corrected any errors in the transcribed text. Having corrected the transcripts, the Word documents were then checked by an objective research assistant. The thematic analysis was done around the question responses.

Despite the perceived value of the teaching practicum, when the researcher was recruiting participants for the interviews, managers or language teacher educators from five additional tertiary institutions emailed the researcher to say that they did not have an included teaching practicum in their language teacher-related qualifications. One said that they had ceased delivery of their language teacher training programme a few years ago, while two other co-ordinators said that due to staff retirement and a death, the teaching practicum paper was no longer offered. Another manager said that teachers who were qualified English language teachers came to do the postgraduate qualification in their school / centre to upskill (professional development) and so there was no need to include a teaching

practicum in the qualification. The final person indicated that they had part time students only, who were all practising teachers, and that the trainers worked with these teachers to reflect on their teaching and to incorporate different techniques into their teaching. Out of 10 contacts that were related to the teaching practicum, five informed the researcher that they did not have a practicum as a part of their ELT programmes, whilst the other five are participants T1 to T5, who were interviewed in this study.

Trainers' survey and interview

The survey included 25 closed questions and 22 open questions. Of these questions seven related directly to the teaching practicum component. The key topics covered in the survey that related to the teaching practicum *per se* were:

- structure, duration and trainee hours taught,
- assessment features, and
- trainers' and trainees' perceived challenges.

For this study it is the assessment features and challenges related to the assessment and evaluation that are pertinent. To retain participant anonymity each participant was given a code and that code was used for all transcriptions and for data reporting.

Findings

The literature over the years stresses the need and value of including a teaching practicum in courses that purport to be ELT training courses (see literature review above). However, in the survey eight (33.3%) out of the 24 participants indicated that they did not offer a teaching practicum component in their courses. Those who indicated that they included a teaching practicum in programmes, were asked whether the practicum was formally assessed and a third said that the practicum was not formally assessed. Participants who indicated that their ELT training programmes included a practicum were also asked what forms of assessments were used, with 14 out of the 16 participants responding. The survey findings showed the following common formative or summative assessment structures.

Formative assessments: Receiving oral and written feedback on a series of observed lessons from supervisors as well as peers, based on lesson management, teaching skills and lesson plans appears to be the most used for formative assessments. The written feedback tended to be in the form of pre-set teaching criteria. Based on feedback, trainees selected areas to work on in future lessons and these were connected to theory.

Summative assessments:

- Trainees writing self-evaluation reports,
- Trainees graded on set teaching criteria,
- Portfolio of assessments including lessons plans, resources used, lesson evaluations, and
- Reflective essays including some based on theory.

Having collated the data and identified the themes in the interviews, findings will be shared relating to the research subset question (mentioned above).

Assessing trainees in the teaching practicum

In the survey, respondents were asked if their practicums were formally assessed. Eighteen trainers responded *Yes, the practicum was assessed* and six responded *No, the practicums were not assessed*. In the interviews, taking the above-mentioned common assessment tools mentioned by Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) into account, the trainers' responses around assessment structures were analysed (see Table 2). All five trainers used some form of reflective journal.

In this study only one participant directly mentioned using portfolios (T1), stating that lesson plans and analysis of teaching context were included in the portfolio. Two trainers (T4 and T5) said that they used observation lessons as a tool for assessment, whilst none of the trainers said that they used written tests as a form of assessment. Furthermore, peer assessment was not used by any of the participants and self-assessments were only indirectly mentioned as they related to inclusion in reflections. Co-operating teacher assessment was not used by any of the trainers.

Table 2. Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) assessment tools used

Assessment tools	Number of interviewees using out of 5
Reflective journals	5
Portfolios	1
Observation lessons	2
Written tests	0
Peer assessments	0
Self- assessments	5 - used as inclusion in reflections
Co-operating teacher assessments	0

Three of the trainers said that the actual classroom teaching was not directly assessed. Of the remaining two trainers, T1 said that assessment of the teaching counted 50% of the Practicum course grading and T4 said it formed one of three

assignments. Other forms of assessment, shared by the participants, not directly included in Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) were:

- practicum assignments that included *theories* in the English language teaching sector (T1, T3 and T4),
- English language coursebook analysis (T1),
- Oral Presentations (T5), and
- Writing a report on lessons taught (T2).

Finally, only one ELT trainer (T1) said that the portfolio as the final assessment included teaching practice feedback from the trainers with reflections and observation notes, as well as an overall evaluation of the trainee's performance.

Perceived challenges related to feedback and assessments

In the interviews, trainers were asked to share their perceived challenges in the industry; of the six comments related to these challenges, three cited trainee-related challenges in managing feedback during formative assessments. T2 and T5 said that managing feedback was a challenge, although for different reasons. For T2, formative feedback from trainees to other trainees after they had taught was a challenge, as some trainees tended to be too abrasive with their feedback to their peers. This was, however, managed by the trainer directing the conversations regarding peer feedback. T5 said that providing feedback that was "constructive and specific, without being demoralising" was the biggest challenge. T1 and T2 added that overall teacher development time for trainees to meet assessment requirements was a challenge. While elaborating further, T1 raised the point that experienced teachers who were retraining and the fact that they often practiced traditional teaching approaches and did not shift these easily, also provided a challenge. One issue that was mentioned by two participants, was around recruiting and retaining free learners for trainees to teach when they were assessed.

Discussion and implications

The voices of the trainers in this study have shed light on some of the New Zealand ELT training assessment aspects in current times and raises interesting ideas around approaches and priorities that could lead to future exploration and reflection for those working in the industry.

The study confirmed several key points related to the assessment of the teaching practicum in ELT training programmes. Aligning with the case studies in Cirocki et al. (2019), there were certain common assessment tools typically used in the

teaching practicums. These include trainees observing more experienced teachers, trainees doing peer teaching, lesson planning and the development of a report or portfolio of evidence. The common underlying thread or tool linking them all is the constant use of reflection, for both summative and formative assessment. In addition, closely resembling the case studies in Cirocki et al. (2019) there was a diverse range of other tools used for assessment or variations such as, oral presentations, course book analysis and practicum-related assignments that included language teaching theory.

In the researcher's view, one of the key unanticipated findings was the number of ELT training programmes that did not have an imbedded teaching practicum, with reasons provided, such as retired staff and the programmes catering to professional development for in-service language teachers. Taking the literature into account, especially the array of case studies shared in Cirocki et al. (2019), which encompasses a cross section of countries where English is the main language (Australia, England) as well as where English is defined as a foreign language (Chile, Japan, Costa Rica, Armenia), there does not appear to be a global decline in the inclusion of a teaching practicum in ELT training programmes. In fact, there appears to be active engagement across the sector in sustaining teaching practicums and addressing challenges. Another unforeseen finding was that four of the five participants interviewed said that they did not grade the trainees' classroom teaching performance directly, with two trainers claiming that it put trainees under too much pressure. Instead, the focus was on written assignments, reports and oral presentations that embraced reflections, insights, theory, and analysis of the experience as well as observation notes. One participant cited avoiding assessing the classroom teaching directly to reduce stress as well as to improve the experience for the trainees. These insights echo the views of Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) and Cirocki et al. (2019) (see literature review) related to the stress and enormity of the teaching practicum from the trainees' perspective. By extension, if the training experience is stressful, trainees might associate those feelings with their future teaching career.

There is a wide selection of assessment choice options used globally, as shown in the case studies in Cirocki et.al (2019), that are not necessarily used by the interviewed participants in this study reported here and could potentially lead to some interesting shifts in approaches to practicum evaluations and assessments in the New Zealand context. For example, one of these choices could be to review and reflect on video recordings of trainees' lessons.

The most recent publication, Cirocki et.al (2019), which includes core aspects of the practicum in ELT training programmes in 10 countries, reveals an active effort to consolidate and further develop the teaching practicum course. By contrast, in New Zealand there appears to be a reduction in the amount of ELT

training programmes that include a teaching practicum, as revealed by the survey results in which eight out of the 24 ELT trainers indicated that their programmes do not have teaching practicums. The email feedback received from five of the larger tertiary institutions in New Zealand revealed that they no longer had a teaching practicum in their ELT training programmes.

Perhaps a review of global practices highlighting the value of the teaching practicum could be used to convince programme designers to re-embed or introduce a teaching practicum component into their New Zealand ELT training programmes. These teaching practicums can also be needs-based. Attention should also be given to the type of teaching that trainees may be expected to perform in different contexts, for example, skills-based lesson classes, general English lessons, teaching L1 low literacy learner lessons, and teaching for high stakes tests, such as for International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Future research

This study could lead to a greater stocktake of practices related to the teaching practicum, which is an invaluable part of training to become a language teacher in New Zealand. In Cirocki et al. (2019), ELT training programmes from around the world are described and analysed to get a better sense of the practicum structures, guidelines, supervision, assessment and aspects around trainee cohort. It would be interesting to get an overview of several programmes in these countries to see how they align with each other, whether they need to be standardised across national programme guidelines or whether various institutions operate independently.

One potential implication that can be drawn from this study could be to readdress the debate around the value of assessing trainees' classroom performance generally. Another could be the choices that trainers or education bodies in control of assessment types make around the value versus the stress for a trainee of having their classroom teaching directly evaluated. This study shows that some programmes that purport to be ELT training programmes or courses do not include a practicum at all levels of training and that some trainers do not directly assess trainees' classroom teaching.

Conclusion

This study highlights the range of assessment approaches, as well as differences in structure of the teaching practicum component of ELT training courses in New Zealand. In addition, challenges related to assessment and feedback shared by interview participant are discussed.

The inclusion of a teaching practicum in more ELT training programmes in New Zealand can better prepare trainee teachers for the reality of language teaching, with all its complexities, in the modern-day classroom. Also, to be fair to learners, it is perhaps necessary for language teachers to undergo training that includes a better balance of theory and practice. Also, to be fair to language learners, it is perhaps necessary for language teachers to undergo training that includes a better balance of theory and practice. ELT training programmes with a stronger emphasis on the teaching practicum may have the added benefit of New Zealand being more competitive in the global ELT training industry.

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