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**Pre-service teachers' views
on their general pedagogy practice:
An analysis of trainees' reflections¹**

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the reflections of pre-service teachers of English of their general pedagogy practice. Their views on different aspects of the practicum are content-analysed as well as the feasibility of the tasks assigned to them during the field experience is verified. The first part contains an overview of selected issues related to teaching practice, among others the theory-practice gap, competences of a modern foreign language teacher, with special focus on his or her role of an educator, emotions accompanying the trainees' field experience as well as relations between the university practicum coordinator, a school mentor and a trainee. There are also some considerations devoted to reflectivity, critical incidents and instruments supporting and monitoring effectiveness of the internship. The second part of the paper focuses on the small-scale qualitative study based on the reflections of first-year English philology students performing their general pedagogy practicum as part of their teaching specialisation. The article closes with some remarks related to the research findings.

¹ This paper continues the discussion started in our paper entitled "On the value of general pedagogy practice in teacher education: A proposal of teaching practice tasks", in this issue of *Beyond Philology*.

Keywords

general pedagogy practice, reflections, trainees, foreign language teacher, tasks

Opinie na temat roli praktyki psychologiczno-pedagogicznej w przygotowaniu do pełnienia roli nauczyciela – analiza refleksji praktykantów**Abstrakt**

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie refleksji przyszłych nauczycieli języka angielskiego na temat ich praktyki psychologiczno-pedagogicznej. Ich opinie na temat różnych aspektów praktyki są analizowane pod względem treści, jak również wykonalności zadań przypisanych studentom podczas praktyki. Pierwsza część zawiera przegląd wybranych zagadnień związanych z praktyką nauczycielską, takimi jak rozbieżności między teorią a praktyką, kompetencje współczesnego nauczyciela języka obcego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jego roli wychowawczej i emocje odczuwane przez praktykantów, a także relacje między akademickim koordynatorem praktyk, szkolnym mentorem i praktykantem. Zawarto również rozważania poświęcone refleksyjności, incydentom krytycznym i narzędziom wspierającym i monitorującym efektywność praktyki. Druga część tekstu przedstawia krótkie badanie jakościowe oparte na refleksjach studentów pierwszego roku filologii angielskiej realizujących praktykę psychologiczno-pedagogiczną w ramach specjalizacji nauczycielskiej. Artykuł kończy się uwagami związanymi z uzyskanymi wynikami badania.

Słowa kluczowe

praktyka psychologiczno-pedagogiczna, refleksje, praktykant, nauczyciel języka obcego, zadania

1. Introduction

Teaching practice is an indispensable component of teacher education and requires constant attention and monitoring in

order to ensure its best quality. Apart from numerous personal traits and methodological competences expected of contemporary foreign language teachers, the role of an educator is becoming central in view of an increasing number of educationally challenging situations at school. According to the *Regulation by the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 17 January 2012 on Educational Standards in Preparation for the Teaching Profession* (2012), student teachers are obliged to complete a module of the practicum devoted entirely to the development of their psychological and pedagogical knowledge in a real school context. Rather formidable aims are established to be fulfilled during the trainees' internship, including for instance, familiarising with the functioning of the school, its administration, documentation, collaboration with external bodies, assisting mentor teachers in their role of an educator by dealing with learners with special educational needs, co-organising and participating in a variety of school celebrations, competitions, trips and designing and conducting period forms (tutor-led classes). To accomplish these noble aims trainees are granted the period of a minimum 30-hour general pedagogy practicum, which seems an alarmingly short time for highly intensive work. It is interesting then to examine how trainees cope with the realisation of tasks imposed on them during the internship and the complexity of their field experience makes the present authors' investigation into the issue of general pedagogy practice even more justified.

Considering the limited format of the paper, only selected issues closely related to teaching practice will be briefly reviewed with reference to the subject literature. The major part of the paper, however, will be focused on a description of a small-scale preliminary study of qualitative character, analysis of the findings and some final remarks aimed at improving the quality of general pedagogy practice and amending the task design. It was interesting for us to identify the trainees' attitudes to the obligatory general pedagogy practicum tasks as well as to define the role of general pedagogy practice at the start of their teaching career. In

addition, we were hoping to discover the suitability of the tasks designed for this part of teaching practice and use the obtained results to monitor the system of organising general pedagogy practice at the university.

2. Common issues, themes and challenges in teaching practice

One of the issues that is frequently mentioned in the professional literature related to the teaching practicum is the divide between theory and practice. We also expect this problem to reappear in the conducted study described in the subsequent part of the paper. The problem of the gap between what student teachers know about the didactics, methodology, pedagogy and psychology from their university classes and the actual implementation of this knowledge in the school reality was identified, for instance, in the studies conducted by Gabryś-Barker (2012) and Blaszk (2015). Also, Zawadzka refers to this dichotomy and in her book on foreign language teachers in the era of changes, she devotes a whole chapter to the mutual relations of teacher education and professional practice (2004). She argues, for instance, that

The opinion about the little usefulness of theory in teacher practice results -in my opinion-primarily from mistaken assumptions and expectations regarding theory and ambiguity of the concept of theory in the teaching profession. [...] and a false assumption that theories and academic research reflect an objective educational reality and that they provide confirmed and reliable rules for didactic action [...].

(Zawadzka 2004: 100; translation mine, OA)

Undoubtedly, it seems unreasonable to assume that it is sufficient to know in order to be able to act in an effective way. Permanent practice and exposing oneself to numerous situations confronting theory with practice might reveal the possible connections as well as discrepancies. Therefore, student teachers should be taught during their academic

courses to approach their teaching practicum with appropriate sense of distance. Trainees should be educated to permanently question their received theoretical knowledge and need to be shown how to modify their personal assumptions, subjective theories and views to the changing school realities. They need to be aware of high unpredictability of pedagogical situations and able to restructure their existing knowledge. University lectures and classes on pedagogy, psychology and didactics should provide the trainee with a tool to create new solutions on the basis of the possessed intellectual resources.

As previously explained in the introductory part, prospective teachers should also be prepared for a difficult role of an educator which requires from them a number of vital personal characteristics such as maturity, sensitivity, empathy, respect for human beings and high moral and ethical competences. Zawadzka (2004: 183) enumerates, for instance, the following desirable attributes of a good educator: "kindness, understanding, a sense of humour, fairness, setting high demands, calmness and composure, an ability to cooperate and interact, a wide interdisciplinary knowledge and an ability to impart it, knowledge of youth problems, propriety and being an authority" (translation mine, OA). This list of expected features can probably be extended, which makes the preparation of trainees to become proper educators a more challenging process. It can only be hoped, then, that candidates for the teaching profession already possess the mentioned qualities and that they may later be able to enhance them during the student practicum. Enabling trainees to participate in a variety of classes, extracurricular activities, school celebrations, trips and other formal and less formal pedagogical events, undoubtedly, provides them with a number of opportunities to have contact with children and young people and verify their predispositions for the teacher's job.

Closely related to the responsibilities of teachers as educators is the issue of time and classroom management as well as handling educational problems. As discussed in Szymańska-Tworek and Turzańska (2016), and Zawadzka

(2004), a large number of student teachers find it difficult to manage time in the school environment. Trainees are also generally reported to fail in coping with conflict situations and maintaining discipline. Similar observations will be shared by us in the study findings section.

Another interesting aspect of the internship found in academic papers relates to the emotions felt by trainees as well as some social phenomena encountered during teaching practice. Some student teachers are reported to be overwhelmed with positive emotions (satisfaction, self-assurance etc.), while others display stress, anxiety and hesitation (Murray-Harvey 2000). As revealed in the studies, they witness either enjoyable moments, for instance, when their pupils achieve successes because of their intervention or frustration, dissatisfaction and disappointment when they face negative phenomena, such as racism and sexism (Menter 1989). Our study findings will also refer to this aspect of the student practicum, revealing a wide spectrum of emotions experienced by trainees and confirming the impact the field experience exerts on the trainees' affective side.

Moreover, the mutual relations between the three major participants of the teacher training process, i.e. a trainee, a school mentor and an academic supervisor, are subject to academic discussion and analysis (Blaszczak 2015, Mizel 2017). Blaszczak (2015: 20-21) analyses the impact of the school mentor's methodological competence on his or her trainees and reports different types of relations: some based on "the authoritarian position of the mentor", while others causing conflicts with a student being "at odds with his mentor" due to opposing views on didactic solutions applied at lessons. Mizel, on the other hand, discusses the teacher mentors' needs and points to some complaints they claim to have about their mentoring, enumerating a host of problems caused by the trainees, such as their coming late for the practicum, their inability to listen to their advice, and other organisational obstacles – "onerous workload" or "the short recess periods" preventing them from giving the trainees "effective instruction".

He cites one mentor's complaint about the trainee who "contribute[d] nothing to the classroom" and instead of helping, they constituted a "disturbing influence" (Mizel 2017: 124). There are some positive effects of the mentor-trainee relations mentioned there too, such as mentors benefitting from learning the new methods of class work applied by their trainees, "a feeling of partnership" and "belonging" (Mizel 2017: 124) and their "feeling of being esteemed" by trainees (Mizel 2017: 125).

Of pivotal importance is also the issue of reflectivity developed during the student practicum. Numerous studies have been conducted on the power of reflection and its impact on trainees' development (Schön 1987, Wallace 1991). There is general consensus among researchers that it is highly beneficial to promote and pursue reflective teaching as well as to engage teacher trainees in different reflective exercises. Richards (1990: 5), for instance, claims that "self-inquire and critical thinking can help teachers move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking." Another evidence that the student practicum can impact the development of trainees' reflectivity comes from Derenowski (2015). The results of the survey and interviews conducted by him with a group of student teachers reveal that their participation in the internship has influenced their perception of the teaching profession. The impact was established owing to the numerous occasions the trainees had to reflect upon the actions they had undertaken. Derenowski (2015: 37) reports that "testing and school documentation were not the topics requiring reflection" and that "the students did their reflection on the specificity of the teaching profession as well as, and also equally importantly, on their personality features and the course of school lessons" (translation mine, OA). He concludes that undoubtedly, the practicum increases student teachers' ability to make conscious decisions related to the choice of their future profession and their ability to engage in self-reflection.

Critical incidents are another common issue explored when tackling the issue of the student practice and the topic of reflection in teacher education. A critical incident is defined by Trif (1993: 8) as “an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgment we make, and the basis of that judgment is a significance we attach to the meaning of the incident”. It has become a valid element of successful teacher professional development due to its power to trigger in teachers and trainees some important insights into various areas of education. Richards and Farrell (2010) enumerate a noticeable number of benefits of using critical incidents in developing teachers’ professionalism, among others their positive effect on increased self-awareness, improved critical approach to pedagogical situations, enhanced evaluations skills, favourable conditions for action research. They claim that recorded and shared critical incidents can help to build more permanent output such as a network of critical practitioners and a useful learning resource for other teachers.

Finally, it is worth noting that different tools are employed by educators to assist trainees in the realisation of their practicum, empowering them to become reflective practitioners, and simultaneously verifying the effectiveness of their internship. The subject literature mentions, for instance, using *The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (Newby et al. 2011), writing a diary (Tripp et al. 2013), a blog (Luik et al. 2011), a portfolio or a journal (Chu et al. 2012; Leslie and Camargo-Borges 2017) or participation of trainees in a blog group discussion (Insuasty and Castillo 2010) in order to record the trainees’ impressions, observations, reflections at various stages of the practicum (*reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*). The data obtained from such sources provides an invaluable feedback on different aspects of teaching practice.

To sum up, the high number of themes and topics related to teaching practice can only indicate the complexity of the issue of teaching practice and points to the need to explore the

functioning of the practicum in one's own teacher training institution. The second part of the paper deals with the study based on pre-service teachers' reflections of their practicum and will show the connection between some of the topics reviewed above and the field experience of our trainees.

3. The study² – description, results and discussion

3.1. Research description

The present section aims to describe the research methodology, population, data, tools and main study procedures as well as to present the findings. The discussed research reveals the perceptions of general pedagogy practice among the prospective teachers of English. The small-scale study places itself within the qualitative research paradigm and makes use of document analysis as a research method. It appears warranted to add that the present study was based on the trainees' portfolios whose design and content were thoroughly described in another paper in this volume.

The research was conducted among first-year students of English Philology, teaching specialisation, at the 3-year licentiate studies at the University of Gdańsk in the period of 2012/2013 and 2013/2014. The participants consisted of 65 trainees at the start of their teacher training programme – completing merely the second semester of the first year of their studies. It can be assumed that at the time the student teachers' reflections were studied, they possessed little previous methodological input and had no or little experience of language teaching. The major goals of the study were two-fold:

² The document analysis described in the present paper constitutes a small part of a larger research project carried out at the Institute of English and American Studies, the University of Gdańsk, in the period of 2012-2019, whose main goal is to raise the effectiveness of the teaching practices programme.

- (1) to identify the trainees' views of their general pedagogy practice;
- (2) to monitor the system of organising general pedagogy practice at the university, specifically examine the choice of tasks assigned to trainees, their usefulness and feasibility.

In order to explore the students' opinions about the completed general pedagogy practice, the researchers gathered a corpus of 65 student teachers' portfolios for the purpose of analysis. The written assignments were submitted to their academic supervisors after completing their internship in primary schools of the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The data was collected through analysing the portfolio written by each trainee during the period of their 30-hour general pedagogy practicum completed in the second term of their first year of undergraduate studies. The obtained data was content analysed. The qualitative content analysis was performed in two steps: firstly, the content of the reflections' section was examined in search for the information regarding specific aspects of the practicum, and secondly, it was interpreted with a view to drawing conclusions and gaining a deeper understanding of the trainees' perception of the field-experience. The trainees' reflections included in the portfolios were read three times by two researchers. During the first reading, important themes and problems were identified and noted down, during the second reading the issues addressed by the trainees were grouped and categorised, and during the third reading some emerging themes were examined by the researchers again.

3.2. Analysis of the reflections

In the reflection section of the portfolio, the examined students documented events and situations taking place in their school of teaching practice and presented their thoughts and impressions of their practicum at school. Several sources supported the documentation of the students' reflections, for instance, their conversations with the head teacher, school

mentor, other teachers and non-pedagogical workers, the trainees' observations of the school space, the knowledge gained from reviewing school documentation and their active and passive participation in various educational events.

The analysis of the trainees' written assignments yielded several vital themes, such as pedagogical and psychological knowledge, self awareness, self-ability to perform educational tasks, recommendations for self-improvement and realities in schools. Some of these issues i.e. the trainees' ability to perform selected educational tasks during the practicum as well as their perception of these tasks are explored in this paper at greater length.

Due to the limited volume of this publication, however, only two issues included in the trainees' reflection will be explored, with reference to both goals of the study. The analysis and discussion of the remaining points is hoped to appear in another publication. In the researchers' opinion, the student teachers' responses to the two selected subpoints – 2 a) and 2 b) have provided ample valuable feedback and deserve to be presented foremost. Examples of tasks done with ease/pleasure or some difficulty will be provided. The student teachers' answers will be discussed and interpreted. In addition, quotes from selected student comments will illustrate the issues raised more succinctly.

3.2.1. Tasks performed by the trainees with ease and/or pleasure

As emerges from the analysis of the reflections, the activities most frequently mentioned by the trainees as carried out "with ease and/or pleasure" include:

- assisting in conducting extracurricular activities (competitions, festivities, assemblies, performances, retreats, activities for talented youth);
- help in organising exits from school (e.g. for workshops);
- an individual lesson with a student;

- watching mentoring in action (especially of a successful type);
- familiarisation with the school's infrastructure;
- participation in meetings of the subject teams;
- getting acquainted with well-organised documentation.

It is remarkable that a high number of students emphasise the support they received from various individuals supervising their practicum, including the head teacher, school mentor and school pedagogue during the implementation of their tasks:

(S1) *During the realisation of most of the tasks, the school management and the mentor showed interest and helped me when it was needed. (...) The atmosphere prevailing in this school was extremely friendly and conducive to work, especially students who could approach the work entrusted to them without stress.*

(S2) *I had serious concerns about starting the practice when I realized that I had to go back to the school where I was studying, but thanks to my mentor it was a great experience. My practice supervisor made my practice both a pleasant personal and didactic experience.*

(S3) *The most interesting task that I did during my internship was a meeting with a school mentor. The teacher allowed me to get acquainted with the documentation related to the work of the school pedagogue. The mentor gave me very detailed explanations. I did not realize how serious problems the teachers are facing and what tools they can use to solve these problems together with parents. Meetings with my school mentor were very informative and interesting for me.*

The trainees expressed their enthusiasm about the tasks that required their active involvement in the organization of school events. Their enjoyment is reflected, for example, in the following students' statements:

(S4) *My task was to prepare a quiz about Great Britain. The quiz was constructed in such a way that the students could test their knowledge not only of English, but also geography and history in an interesting and funny way. In my opinion, such competitions should be organized more often, as they give us [teachers] the opportunity to look at the pupils from a completely different perspective.*

(S5) *The task that gave me the greatest pleasure was a family picnic organized by the school. The most satisfying for me was making decorations with my students and talking to them during the picnic, when they did not feel intimidated by the presence of the teacher and talked freely about their interests.*

One of the tasks that the trainees found interesting or useful, referred to their participation in meetings of subject teams and teacher meetings, as well as observation of lessons:

(S6) *The second task that I found interesting was the meeting of the subject team. In my case it was the meeting of English teachers, of whom there are several in this school. During one of the meetings I was able to participate in the discussion about the new textbook, which was offered by one of the publishing houses. Teachers expressed their opinions about it and discussed the possibility of introducing it in the next school year. Listening to this conversation was extremely interesting to me, because I could find out what criteria are of importance to teachers when choosing a textbook, and how they view the possible changes to the textbooks they are currently using.*

(S7) *I was very happy to have the opportunity to attend different lessons because I had never been in the role of an observer before.*

(S8) *I never suspected that observing a lesson might be so interesting. It was amazing, first of all, to see the enthusiasm displayed by the children when they answered the teacher's questions.*

Another common element of almost all of the analysed reflections is the positive assessment of the school infrastructure by

students, as represented, for instance, by the following trainees' opinions:

(S9) *Getting acquainted with the school infrastructure and the classroom equipment seemed to be an easy task and nothing new, but actually when I completed the task I realized how many changes had taken place in my school since I was a student there. I was impressed by the equipment purchased for the library and regretted that it was not available in the time when I learned there.*

(S10) *I was shown around most of the school's classrooms, in which I had the opportunity to see the modern equipment that the school uses during the classes. Computers, projectors and multimedia boards are now available in almost every classroom, which makes conducting activities much more interesting and easier.*

The analysis of the above-mentioned statements shows that the trainees' have learned how important the teacher's active role is in organising school life. They are aware that some didactic and educational tasks do not cause undue hardship and that the teacher's work can be satisfying. The respondents express their satisfaction with the fact of expanding their pedagogical experience as well as the possibility of demonstrating their competences in school practice.

3.2.2. Tasks whose implementation the trainees found to be difficult

The following issues were assessed by the trainees as causing difficulty during the internship:

- cooperation with parents, meetings with parents;
- problems in relationships: teacher-student, teacher-parent, student-student, mentor-trainee;
- educational problems, such as maintaining discipline, dealing with pupil aggression;
- teacher's hallway duty;

- responsibility for the pupils' safety at school;
- lack of pupils' motivation to learn;
- difficulties in adapting requirements to students with special educational needs;
- knowledge of the educational law and the school documents;
- overwhelming multiplicity of documentation and administrative obligations;
- size of classes.

As can be noticed, several problematic areas can be distinguished, many of which are commonly found in the subject literature and outlined in the first part of the paper. The pre-service teachers report problems related to interaction and interpersonal relations with their own mentor, other teachers and parents. Another group of problems refers to educational issues such as maintaining discipline, ensuring pupil safety during classes, trips and a hall duty. Some trainees also admit to lacking sufficient knowledge of dealing with students with special educational needs and low-motivated learners. Furthermore, they, unsurprisingly, complain about their inability to deal with massive school documentation. Another concern voiced by a high number of trainees refers to the size of classes they were assigned to work with. They comment upon oversized classes (over 30 pupils) and perceived this as a serious obstacle to class management and provision of good quality education. Below several student statements are quoted to illustrate selected difficulties:

(S13) *As for the tasks that have caused me difficulties, it is certainly their planning and implementation of the form period [lesson with a form-master]. Admittedly, I did not teach such a lesson, however, I accompanied my teachers during their preparation, aimed at passing on some knowledge that is useful in everyday life. [...] The role of the teacher as an educator is to be a guide to such issues, which at first glance seem to be obvious, and yet it is not. The form period should be just such a lesson, during which all questions, doubts of students about the life issues should be resolved. In my opinion, this is not an easy task, as the teacher*

must have the knowledge of pedagogy, ethics or even psychology. Not to mention the fact that it should be up to date with all the new products that appear from time to time and which are important. The teacher has to take over the part of the parent's role here and take care to fill in the possible gaps in education in order to develop a proper moral attitude in the student, allowing for proper functioning in society. However, from my own experience I know that not all students treat such lessons seriously, often underestimating their role. This is quite demotivating, as the teacher makes every effort to bring this lesson to the greatest possible benefit, and yet the students cannot appreciate it.

Quite a noticeable number of pre-service teachers consider a teacher-parents meeting to be a big challenge due to the “communication difficulties in their mutual relations, parental claims and demanding attitudes as well as the amount of information to be conveyed at meetings”. As one of the trainees commented, the teacher-parents meeting he or she attended, turned out to be “a very physically and mentally exhausting experience” for him or her. The sense of anxiety experienced by some student teachers is also manifested in the following observation:

(S14) *The meeting concerned the grades, behavior, absences and other problems of students. The difficulty was that I felt uncomfortable during this meeting, as I was a stranger there, and my parents became acquainted with their children's problems in my presence. Some of these problems were quite serious, which is why I felt self-conscious.*

The trainees are aware of the role of the teacher as a person who cares for the safety of students (especially younger) and they care about it. As one of the student teachers put it – he felt a “paralyzing sense of responsibility” throughout his practice. The trainees also wrote that telling students off for their “naughty behavior, running, shouting and littering in the school hall” during school breaks is a “very tiring and annoying” task. Their statements clearly signal their fear of

situations, cases requiring the need to negotiate behavioral changes, their inability to deal with lack of discipline or aggression on the part of pupils.

The respondents wrote about their own feelings such as fear (and a sense of responsibility for pupils' safety at school), anger and frustration (felt while experiencing students' disobedience and chaos), shame (for pupils' misbehavior in public places), a sense of insecurity (during conversations with pupils and parents), stress (in conflict situations, arguments and fights between pupils while assisting their school mentor on duty), discouragement (a sense of helplessness in situations with "no way out"). Some of the trainees considered the act of reading the school documentation as "tedious and exhausting" – they commented that they were terrified by the "mass of information, formality of the language used and the constant 'growth' school documentation".

Although a high number of the examined pre-service teachers consider performing extra-curricular activities to be a pleasant task, some admitted to having difficulty with them, which can be illustrated by the following statement:

(S15) *Although this is not the most difficult task, it requires even more involvement from the teacher than during the lesson. He/she has to show a lot of creativity to encourage students to cooperate, and give them as many opportunities as possible to demonstrate and develop their skills.*

The above-mentioned problems experienced by the student teachers constitute at the same time an important signal for the academic mentors and teachers of didactic and psycho-pedagogical subjects as to what content knowledge should be taught to trainees before they actually enter the school practicum to minimise the number and scope of reported negative experiences.

4. Discussion of the findings

With reference to the study's major goal of exploring the student teachers' views of their general pedagogy practice, owing to the document analysis it was possible to identify their attitudes to different aspects of this part of the practicum. The researchers were able to establish the scope of knowledge and skills that the trainees acquired during the internship as well as to explore their way of thinking about schooling and their own field experience. As emerges from the analysed portfolio reflections, the student teachers enjoyed the chance to acquaint themselves with the functioning of school as an educational institution, the activities of the school canteen, the common room and the library. They seemed to have particularly appreciated the opportunity to observe and assist in conducting the form periods and extra-curricular activities, teacher-parent meetings, school competitions, celebrations and trips. The trainees also admitted that the internship allowed them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and to check if they have predispositions for becoming good teachers, which confirms Derenowski's (2015) and Andrzejczak's (2002) observations about the practicum's role in determining trainees' further professional plans.

Clearly, our teacher trainees' internship constituted a form of experiential learning (Kolb 1984) during which they confronted their received (university) knowledge with experiential knowledge gained during the internship. As the researchers rightly assumed prior to the study, the trainees expressed in their reports some words of disappointment at their inability to apply the theoretical knowledge obtained during the university education to the actual problematic situations at school that they encountered. It is commendable, however, that alongside these critical remarks, the trainees briefly described a potential solution to dealing with such difficulties. It implies they reflected upon the problems faced during the internship and drew reasonable conclusions enabling them to act differently should the same situation

appeared again. That also confirms their critical approach to their own actions and growth of their analytical skills to conceptualise the practicum experience.

It is worth reiterating that the trainees, whose reflections were studied, were in their first year of studies so their teaching practice took place after completing only one semester of their undergraduate studies. By the time they began their practice, they had attended only some of the lectures and classes devoted to the realisation of the pedagogical and psychological module. The other academic courses developing students' knowledge of pedagogy, psychology and didactics were planned for the subsequent semesters, so the trainees were, in fact, still at the beginning of their academic education. Quite predictably, therefore, the analysed student teachers' reflections were not very lengthy or lacking in in-depth analytical conclusions. The aim, however, of this first practical experience was merely to enhance trainees' awareness of the various dependencies, difficulties and possibilities of the teacher's work and from the analysis of the submitted reflections, it can certainly be inferred that this goal was achieved successfully. In addition, it needs to be emphasised that despite certain challenges met, all of the analysed trainees' reflections concluded with a positive final remark, confirming the usefulness of such practical pedagogical experience. It might, therefore, be safely assumed that their general pedagogy practice constituted an authentic and valuable learning experience.

As regards the second objective of the study, i.e. using the students' reflections as an evaluation tool for the way of organising the practice at the university, several useful conclusions were also reached. Firstly, the trainees' comments allowed the researchers to verify the usefulness and feasibility of the obligatory tasks designed by the team of university practicum coordinators. All of the trainees completed their "reflection task" and the reports were submitted as complete, which means the trainees gained sufficient information while fulfilling the tasks to expand their opinions on different

educational issues. Secondly, the trainees' statements generally contained positive remarks regarding the choice of tasks. Though there were a few reflections in which the trainees placed some critical comments as to the necessity to approach a certain task in the introduction to their reflection, they admitted they had changed their mind and came to the final conclusion that doing the task was, on the whole, useful for them and allowed them to restructure their subjective knowledge of a given aspect of the school's life.

Nearly in a half (45%) of the 65 students' reflections, different events were added to the lists of activities in Task 2. That implies that some students found it difficult to undertake the indicated 9 types of activities. As inferred from some of the trainees' comments, they were unable to attend a meeting with parents because either the head teacher refused to give them consent or their school mentor considered their presence could be uncomfortable for some parents. In other cases, some unpredictable educational situations took place at school and the trainees decided to participate in them because they appealed to them more than the ones listed. It might, therefore, be concluded that generally, the activities in Task 2, were largely feasible as the majority of students performed the 9 suggested ones successfully. Furthermore, it is evident that the trainees also responded favourably to the possibility of carrying out an educational activity of their own choice. One conclusion is that it is worth providing students with a choice in order to meet their preferences and a sense of autonomy as it increases their level of genuine engagement. This seems to have exerted a motivating and encouraging effect upon their general perception of the internship. All in all, it appears reasonable to include two types of tasks for student teachers to accomplish during their practicum – tasks indicated by university practicum coordinators as obligatory and tasks to be selected from a list, depending on the trainee's own preferences or the circumstances at the practice school.

Another remark relates to the way of documenting the realisation of the required tasks. The trainee's portfolio

containing the documentation i.e. the two tasks and the reflections – was to be submitted to the academic supervisor after finalising the internship. The trainees handed over the cards containing the list of activities in Task 1 and Task 2 with a set of the school mentor's signatures next to each performed activity. However, it remains uncertain whether the mentor's signature constitutes a sufficient form of confirmation of the student's completion of the task. On the one hand, the existence of the school mentors' signatures indicates that the proposed tasks have proved to be feasible, and on the other, there is little information as to the quality of the student's engagement and the level of achievement. It cannot be ruled out that in some cases the performance of the task was achieved in a superficial manner, meeting only the minimum expected standards of achievement. To prevent this possibility, a system of more specific assessment criteria of the trainee's contribution to the practicum probably needs to be designed in the coming years.

Overall, the pre-service teachers' reflections in the form of observations, remarks and doubts have acted as a useful springboard for discussions to be carried out during their ELT classes and allowed the teachers of pedagogical and didactic subjects to include elements of particular students' interest in their syllabuses. Another crucial benefit resulting from the fact that the trainees shared their reflections with regard to their practice is an important feedback the academic supervisors of the practice gained on the realities of contemporary primary schools in Poland, their genuine areas of concern and success.

Finally, several limitations of the presented research need to be acknowledged and addressed. The first limitation concerns the choice of qualitative approach in the study. Further studies are needed which will allow for using a quantitative research paradigm in investigating similar topics. At best, triangulation i.e. a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of research might result in a more thorough analysis of the examined issues. The second limitation concerns the scale of the study as there were only 65 reflections analysed. It

is recommended that a larger population of students be subject to the study to arrive at more valid results. As explained earlier, however, other educators at the Institute of English and American Studies, Gdańsk University, have been involved in carrying out their own studies on various aspects of the teaching practice over the recent years. It is hoped that in the coming years, owing to the synergy of the joint practical efforts and the research findings obtained by all participants of the teaching practice team at the mentioned teacher training institution, the system of organisation of the teaching practicum will become considerably revitalised. Thirdly, the extent to which the obtained findings can be generalised is limited. Nonetheless, it is believed that the analysed material provides a basis for understanding the student teachers' views of their general pedagogy practice and of the level of feasibility of the tasks imposed on trainees during the internship.

5. Final remarks

Undeniably, further research is needed to explore various areas of the teaching practicum. In order to optimise the field experience and the quality of teacher education in general, better insights should, for instance, be gained into the student teachers' needs and perceptions of progress, their metaphors of teaching and learning, changes in their subjective theories, school mentors' preparation for mentoring, establishing partnerships between the school of the practicum and the university as well as defining the concept of effective teaching practice.

It is the hope of the authors that the brief overview of some practicum-related themes included in the first part of this paper and the small-scale study results outlined in the second part will appear of value to educators engaged in the process of training teachers of English.

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