

Chapter 36

Taking the TESOL Practicum Abroad: Opportunities for Critical Awareness and Community-Building Among Preservice Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the experiences of four native English-speaking preservice teachers in a faculty-led study abroad program in South Korea. It elucidates the ways in which these preservice teachers experienced personal and professional growth with an increasing critical awareness of the power imbalance embedded in English language teaching in the global context. Data were collected via students' weekly online discussion posts, electronic portfolio artifacts, and focus group interviews. Findings indicate personal and professional growth in participants' self-perceptions as a result of at least two fundamental aspects of the program: 1) the intentionality with which participants were exposed to a critique of English language teaching in the Korean context and 2) the residential nature of the experience, which provided intensive peer collaboration among practicum participants. The chapter concludes with recommendations for implementing a TESOL practicum abroad as a meaningful and consciousness-raising opportunity for preservice teachers' professional development.

INTRODUCTION

The neoliberalization of English language teaching (ELT) in Korea has prompted the marketization of English learning through intensified competition among students, teachers, schools and districts (Byean,

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2015; Park, 2013). What this means in a practical sense is not something that many teachers of English as a foreign language worry about on a regular basis, nor are ELT student teaching courses, or ‘practicums,’ generally geared to expose preservice teachers to the sociopolitics of English language teaching. And yet, we argue, good ELT pedagogy is not founded merely on good theoretical and practical knowledge; rather, truly transformative teaching, in Giroux’s (1988) sense, demands an understanding of the social and political impact of what we do, which can be arrived at only with reference to language policies and ideologies within a given geo-political context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We situate this study within the broader context of two interrelated bodies of literature: the nature of the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) practicum, and the experiences of native English-speaking student teachers in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. The first part of what follows examines both benefits and challenges of a TESOL practicum; the latter reviews scholarship on how a practicum abroad influences native English-speaking preservice teachers’ knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs about classroom practice.

TESOL Practicum

A practicum in TESOL has long been recognized as one of the most important aspects of preparing prospective teachers to work with diverse language learners (Canh, 2014; Crookes, 2003; Farrell, 2008; Gebhard, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Richards & Crookes, 1988; Trent, 2011; Williams, 2009). During the practicum, student teachers are socialized into various aspects of the teaching profession both in and outside the classroom. The main purpose of the practicum is to provide student teachers with an opportunity to have a meaningful field experience so that they can become effective teachers in their future career (Crookes, 2003; Gebhard, 2009; Richards & Crookes, 1988; Williams, 2009). Practicum courses help student teachers develop their pragmatic and reflective skills in the actual classroom, such as problem-solving, interacting with students, and implementing a lesson plan while creating and re-creating themselves as “cultural boundary crossers” (Crookes, 2003, p. 7).

Despite multiple benefits of a TESOL practicum, however, it does not guarantee personal and professional growth for preservice teachers, for a number of reasons. Farrell (2008) reported in his study of Singaporean EFL student teachers’ experience in Singapore that they received little support, sometimes even conflicting feedback, from their cooperating teachers during their practicum. He observed that the cooperating teachers saw their mentoring role as an interruption of their teaching and, due to their heavy workload and lack of knowledge about mentoring, were too strained to give constructive feedback to student teachers. Farrell’s findings argued for more quality collaboration within the triad of the university supervisor, the cooperating teacher, and the student teacher. In spite of those findings, Cahn’s (2014) investigation of five Vietnamese EFL student teachers during a six-week practicum period indicated that these student teachers were strongly inclined toward the cooperating teachers’ teaching practice, more so than the theories they had acquired in their courses.

Besides the influence—or lack thereof—of cooperating teachers or university courses on student teachers’ experiences, Nguyen and Baldauf (2010) found that feelings of isolation among the preservice practicum participants have a negative influence on their socialization into the profession. Their study of

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