# Perceived Problems of Pre-Service English Teachers In Planning, Implementing, And Reflecting on their Lessons

Hanadi S. Mirza

(Ph.D. Candidate in Education at EDLS)
English Instructor & Trainer
Lebanese University, Faculty of Pedagogy
hanadym@hotmail.com

#### **Abstract**

This study attempts to understand the problems pre-service teachers encountered when planning an English lesson, implementing it, and reflecting on their teaching performance afterwards. Pre-service teachers (N=17) were asked to fill a survey after their second teaching trial in the hosting schools containing open-ended and closed questions. beginning, the senior participants majoring in elementary English education claimed that they had well prepared their lessons. Various controllable and uncontrollable factors affected their lesson delivery. When reflecting on their lesson implementation, most student-teachers could identify some strengths and weaknesses in their plans. Some sample lesson plans were also analyzed. Findings showed that participants were not trained enough to write reflections on their implemented lessons. Moreover, the problems they mentioned when planning their lessons were related to their inadequate choice of activities, their poor students' English proficiency, and their poor time and classroom management skills. The paper ends with some recommendations.

## Résumé

Cette étude vise à comprendre les problèmes rencontrés par les stagiaires durant la préparation d'une leçon d'Anglais, son application et l'évaluation de leur performance. Les participants (N = 17) sont invités à remplir un questionnaire concernant leur deuxième leçon dans les écoles d'accueil contenant des questions ouvertes et fermées. Les stagiaires spécialisés dans l'enseignement primaire ont affirmé qu'elles avaient bien préparé leurs leçons. Divers facteurs ont affecté leur cours. Durant l'application, elles pouvaient identifier quelques points forts et faibles. Certaines leçons ont été analysées. Les résultats ont montré que les participants n'étaient pas suffisamment formés pour écrire des réflexions. En outre, les problèmes qu'elles ont mentionnés lors de la conception de leurs leçons étaient liés à leur choix inadéquat d'activités, à la faible maîtrise de l'Anglais de leurs élèves et à leur faible capacité de gestion du temps et de la classe. La recherche propose des recommandations pour améliorer la pratique dans la formation.

#### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فهم المشاكل التي تواجه الطلاب المتدربيّن عند تحضيرهم درساً باللغة الإنكليزية ثم تعليمه للتلامذة ولاحقاً تقييم أدائهم تحضيراً وتنفيذاً. طلب من جميع متدرّبي السنة الثالثة (وعددهم ۱۷) ملء استمارة عن تحضيرهم وتعليمهم الدرس الثاني من الفصل الخامس في المدارس المضيفة، وهي تضم أسئلة عن كيفية التحضير والتعليم والمصاعب التي واجهتهم، وجاءت الاجابات بأنهم قاموا بالتحضير بشكل جيد، لكن هنالك عوامل مختلفة أثرّت على الأداء في مرحلة التعليم، كما تضمّنت الإجابات تعداداً لبعض نقاط القوة والضعف في مرحلتي تحضير الدرس وتعليمه. بعدها تم تحليل ما حوته الاستمارات وتحليل خطة بعض الدروس التي نفذها المتدربون سابقاً. أظهرت النتائج أنهم لم يكونوا مدّربين بما فيه الكفاية للقيام بالممارسة التفكّرية في تحضير الدروس وتعليمها، بالإضافة إلى المشاكل التي اعترضتهم عند تحضير الدروس لجهة الخيار الملائم للأنشطة اللغّوية ولضعف مهاراتهم في حسن إدارة الوقت والصف، فضلاً عن عدم اتقان التلامذة اللغة الإنكليزية بشكل مقبول، وتنتهي الدراسة ببعض التوصيات.

## **Key words:**

pre-service English teachers, teacher preparation program, lesson planning, lesson implementation, reflective thinking

#### 1- Introduction

Learning how to plan a lesson would help student-teachers reflect on what they should achieve and what teaching skills to use in order to ensure a successful delivery. Preparing lessons provides teachers with a framework to design and deliver instruction (Ozogul & Sullivan, 2009). Several examples from international literature regard lesson planning as important for instructional effectiveness (Gall & Acheson, 2003). Moreover, lesson planning is important for the teachers to become professional (Ruys, Van Keer, & AelteErman, 2012). However, poorly developed lesson plans can lead pre-service teachers to haphazardly choose inadequate teaching strategies, waste class time, and face various management problems (Criticos, Long, Moletsane, Mthiyane, & Mays, 2009) in addition to affecting teaching negatively and ultimately students' achievement (Allwright, 2005; Panasuk & Todd, 2005). Therefore, teachers need to plan their lessons to ensure effective classroom performance (Rusznyak & Walton, 2011).

Teacher educators should be supportive of the student-teachers to help them through a smooth transition from a designed lesson plan to its implementation. According to Clement (2000), the lesson plans which are student-centered ensured a better quality delivery than those which are teacher oriented. Quality lesson plan and quality delivery are positively correlated though good quality lessons do not necessarily guarantee a successful delivery (Dorovolomo, Phan, & Maebuta, 2010).

A well written lesson plan should be universally designed as suggested by Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2011). That is, it uses a template including alternative activities which lead students with a wide range of abilities to achieve the learning outcomes of a given lesson. In Lederman and Niess' study (2000), some student-teachers complained about the long time they spend on planning for lessons while writing extensive and unnecessary details. They would have preferred to spend

more time thinking of how to answer their students' questions or thinking of what should be done in class during the implementation of the lesson.

During lesson delivery, the most challenging concern for pre-service teachers was the undisciplined pupils and their poor English proficiency (Gao & Benson, 2012). Moreover, the new teachers find themselves struggling with lesson planning, classroom management, lesson delivery, and identity development (Farrell, 2012).

Planning helps trainees to know the required steps to follow in class while implementing a lesson and to be ready for unexpected or critical incidences, which improve their self-confidence during their lesson implementation (Criticos, et al., 2009). Critical incidences are unexpected events that can happen during teaching. Therefore, teacher educators should encourage student-teachers to reflect on their own teaching activities/experiments and on their students' learning such as unexpected things pupils say or do and questions that trainees couldn't answer (Nott & Wellington, 1995 in Nilsson, 2009). Moreover, reflecting on critical incidences had a positive impact on the growth of the student-teachers and on the development of their inquiry skills (Griffin, 2003).

To help student-teachers reflect on their lesson plans, trainees have to answer some guided questions after each lesson. In Rusznyak (2009), although trainees were given guidelines to help them in the planning process, they had the tendency to describe classroom procedures in their lessons considering the daily routines as basics of teaching performance. In Gunn's (2010) study, student-teachers presented descriptive reports instead of reflective ones. Also, the student-teachers (Amobi, 2005) mainly answered the descriptive questions in their reflection journals (What did I intend to do in this lesson?) and (What did I do?). However, trainees were unable to answer the reflective question (What would I do differently if I were to teach this lesson again?).

## 1.1 Purpose of the Study

As a trainer since 2000, the researcher has noticed that graduating pre-service English teachers had underdeveloped skills in lesson planning and classroom management and mainly wrote descriptive reports on their field experience. Some of these trainees were informally interviewed, and the problems they mentioned were related to designing their English lesson plans, implementing them, and managing pupils' misbehaviors in addition to their poor reflection skills. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the problems pre-service English teachers faced before/during, implementation of and reflection on their second lesson they taught in the hosting school during the fall of 2012-13.

### 1.2 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Does the pre-service English program equip trainees with the needed skills to plan their lessons and implement them in the hosting schools?
- (2) Does the pre-service English program equip trainees with the needed skills to reflect on their taught lessons in the hosting schools?

# 2- Methodology

To explore the perceived problems the pre-service teachers faced while preparing, implementing, and reflecting on their taught lessons, the qualitative approach was adopted. This approach serves this study because its theoretical foundations focus on meaning making that participants (student-teachers) draw from their social interaction in the classroom.

This study was conducted in a School of Education in a well-established university in Lebanon during the academic year 2012-2013. Participants aimed at graduating as teachers of English for the elementary cycles. They were enrolled in the 5<sup>th</sup> semester in their 3-year BA education program. All the 17 senior student-teachers taking Practicum II course were asked to take part in the present research. They were females between 21 and 24 years old.

Two tools were used to collect data: a survey and some student-teachers' portfolios. The reflection survey developed by the researcher was filled by the 17 participants based on their second lesson to be taught

in the hosting school. The survey includes open-ended and closed questions related to planning and implementing their second lesson and reflecting on their teaching performance. Also, some trainees' lesson plans were collected from 2 randomly selected portfolios. Data resulting from the reflection survey was read and re-read in order to generate categories to code the information then analyze it. Data analysis also included the objectives and procedures of 3 lesson plans (reading, grammar, and writing).

#### 3- Results

The data resulting from the written lesson plans and the reflection survey are detailed in the section below.

#### 3.1 Written Lesson Plans

By analyzing two randomly selected portfolios, the researcher found that the lesson plans were mainly teacher centred for the reasons below. Three different lesson plans were chosen to be analyzed: 1 reading, 1 grammar, and 1 writing lesson. The student-teachers mainly listed what they themselves had to do and say in class without stressing the strategies to improve pupils' English language skills and subskills. Below are a few examples.

Reading lesson plan. The following behavioral objectives were mentioned. "By the end of the lesson, the students will be able to: "read a nonfiction story and respond to it" and "actively listen to the story". Here the student-teachers was not aware that "read" and "listen" are not measurable objectives. In the procedures section, the following was mentioned: "All the information received from students will be written in words phrases on the blackboard" and "I ask students to listen while I read a part of the story out loud for the first time". The trainee also mentioned "I read the second/third part of the story and the students listen". Here the student-teacher requested the pupils to be listeners although it is not a listening lesson plan. As mentioned in grade 3 curriculum, students need to read silently by themselves to comprehend written texts and respond to related questions.

**Grammar lesson plan.** In this lesson on action verbs, the trainee mentioned the following procedures: "Teacher greets the students" and "Teacher gives examples on the action verbs". Instead of helping students deduce the usage and rule of action verbs, the trainee explained the lesson by giving herself examples on action verbs.

Writing lesson plan. In the warm-up, the trainee wrote "I tell students that we're going to play a game", "I will show them a chart of emotion words that will help them in their writing", and "I will write their answers on the board". That was not an interactive activity because every time the trainee asked a student to give her an emotion then moved to asking another one.

In addition, no re-written lesson plans showing improvements of the taught lessons were found.

#### 3.2 Reflection Survey

The participants' answers to the questions in the reflection survey are briefly detailed here after.

1-If you were to plan a perfect lesson, what would it include? All participants agreed on the lesson plan which integrates various language skills as well as other disciplines such as Science and arts. It has to suit and the students' levels interests and include objectives, challenging/problem-solving activities relevant to students' realistic timing for various tasks, and necessary materials. According to the 17 trainees, the lesson plan should be implemented in a studentcentred classroom where students are active, make most of the class talk and participate well individually and in groups. Extra activities for different students' levels and educational games should be always ready to make learning fun. 29.41% of participants (5/17) insisted on the necessity to always have a plan B for unexpected events. Most complaints were related to the time consuming lesson plan about 4 pages at the faculty while it is one page at school.

2- What were the problems you faced while planning your second lesson to be taught in the hosting school? The 17 participants'

lessons were as follows: 5 reading, 1 writing, and 11 grammar lessons. Some trainees mentioned the following problems:

**Activities.** 4 students (23.53%) mentioned problems related to finding activities that match all students' needs, or to preparing simple activities. Another student had a problem in choosing from a variety of activities. A fourth student faced a problem with the logistics of the activities because she was teaching in a public school where electricity and technology were scarce resources. This has limited her choice to activities that do not need electricity or technology.

Cooperating teacher. One student faced problems with the teacher who was not cooperative at all by not willing to help the trainee in anyway.

**3-What were some obstacles you faced while teaching your lesson?** Some problems faced by trainees during lesson delivery were uncontrollable while others are due to mismanagement or a lack of experience (see Table 1). Student-teachers' answers are summarized below:

**External problems.** Problems were related to the absence of electricity, technical problems with the interactive board as stated by one student "the active inspire board did not work, so I could not use it to continue the exercise". Other problems were related to interruptions from other teachers who forgot to write their agendas before leaving.

**Problems** Description Absence of electricity; technical problem with the active board: External Interruptions from other school teachers, sickness of a trainee Students' misbehaviors; lack of cooperation from students; students not following some rules set by Class trainees; repetition of rules and instruction; sometimes management chaos Poor English proficiency; learned to memorize instead of Students' think; trainees sometimes speak in Arabic and had background troubles asking and explaining in English Waste of time due to repeating and re-explaining the lesson to low English proficient students; inability to Time issues implement all the prepared activities; poor allocation of time to various activities from start

Table 1. Problems encountered during lesson implementation

Students' background.\_Students' background was another factor independent from teacher's will that was difficult to work with. This problem was a major cause leading to misbehavior in class. In fact, the poor level of English language of students made them find difficulties in following the class or understanding vocabulary words, hence they lost focus. This is why it was declared that some student-teachers started to speak in Arabic. Another problem faced was related to an inherited problem coming from the way students were taught so far. Participants declared that students do not listen to the question before they answer. They are used to rote memorization during class so they get lost if the teacher changes the structure of the question. This has created a frustration to the student teacher who intended to make students think and understand the lesson instead of just memorizing it.

In fact the majority of participants i.e. 12 persons mentioned problems related to poor English. Students had problems in speaking,

reading, writing, and listening or even participating in the lesson. Their English level was in most of the cases way below their current grade level. Students were not able to understand simple warm-up questions or to produce complete sentences so they were prone to switch to Arabic. Speaking in Arabic was a behavior which participants were finally forced to adopt in some cases to convey the lesson's message to their students.

**Time issues.**\_Time management was an issue mentioned by 3 student-teachers. This was due to uncontrollable or controllable factors. One of the uncontrollable factors was the students' poor English level which forced the student-teachers to repeat their questions many times and in different ways or to re-explain the lesson to reach understanding. As a consequence, trainees needed more time to perform the activities and not all the planned lesson was delivered. Students' poor level of comprehension of the English language made grammar lessons or activities with adjectives difficult to the point that one participant complained about being tired of using her body language excessively during explanations. One student teacher faced another problem related to the previous learning habits of students such as not being able to read silently. She noticed that students were looking at the book but they were not reading, so she had to continue reading aloud.

Another problem with timing came from controllable factors related to participants' skills. For example one participant mentioned that her already planned lesson was too long and needed more than the initially allocated time for it. Similarly, the lesson of another student teacher was affected by students' very weak knowledge of language. This has hindered the prepared activities and the student teacher could not implement them. As a consequence this respondent declared needing more time to explain and to implement activities.

Thirteen (13) participants complained that time was also wasted due to the following interruptions by:

- Trainees' classmates: 2 respondents mentioned several interruptions by university classmates who were searching for the faculty instructor who came to school to evaluate their performance.

- Pupils: Some students were for example asking irrelevant questions which made 2 student-teachers repeat their explanations.
- School supervisor: 3 participants mentioned having faced interruptions from the supervisor to take the attendance, or to talk to the class teacher, or even to complain about the way students were seated during the group activities. One student-teacher said: "The supervisor came and said that students have to go early to the recess because of some celebration so I had to stop when I was through the post activities". Another supervisor came to class to solve a problem that happened in the recess and he complained about the way the students were seated and said that it was a mess and noisy though it was a group work activity.
- Faculty supervisor/Trainer: Interruptions did not occur all the time because some participants said "Good thing there was no interruption from classroom teacher or trainer; this made students focus only on one teacher rather than constantly shifting attention from one teacher to another". However, in 4 other cases, the faculty supervisor made frequent interruptions to provide some explanations to students or to give comments about classroom management. For some, the trainer's interruption was not too bothersome.

Class management. It seems that managing the classroom was not always an easy task as declared by 64.71% of participants (11/17). Students' misbehavior and lack of cooperation was a recurrent problem mentioned by 4 student teachers. Other problems were related to managing the activities while being implemented. Some of those activities turned-out unintentionally into chaos. 2 student teachers mentioned also problems related to informing students about the rules to follow such as "raise your hand before answering". It was sometimes difficult for students to understand those rules which forced the student teacher to repeat the explanation.

Six respondents mentioned problems related to students behavior. This was the most frequent type of disturbance encountered while teaching. It was manifested in many aspects such as students not obeying the rules, talking or asking questions without permission while the trainee was explaining, and sometimes disrespecting the student-teacher. One

participant mentioned that a student was pointing a laser light on the board. In general many students had a rude behavior.

In addition, the participants were required to make a self-assessment according to a provided list of statements (see Table 2). Respondents had to rate these statements on a 3 point Lickert scale (Yes, No, or Sometimes) to find out the most recurrent problems in classroom management.

The results summarized below show that repetition was a frequent problem leading to a loss of time by the student teacher. This shows a lack of classroom management skills probably due to a lack of teaching experience. Another problem is related to proper time management for the various activities. However, student teachers evaluate themselves rather highly on motivation, enthusiasm, providing clear directions for activities and giving feedback.

Table 2. Student-teachers' managerial problems

Management Tips/Techniques:	Yes	No	Sometimes
a- I succeeded in attracting students' attention.	13		4
b- I managed well the time for each activity by	10	5	2
checking the watch/clock.			
c- I explained clearly the directions for each	15		2
activity in my lesson.			
d- I managed students' misbehaviors.	12		5
e- I gave feedback to students after each	14		3
right/wrong answer.			
f- I often moved around the class.	10	1	6
g- I motivated <i>positively</i> students to participate.	16		1
(smile/good/nice idea/)			
h- I was enthusiastic throughout the lesson.	14		3
(smiling/kind/ energetic/)			
i- I saved time by asking <i>clear</i> questions (no	7	1	9
need to repeat Q's)			
j- I saved time by giving <i>clear</i> instructions for	14		3
each activity. (No need for repetition)			

4- How did you reflect on your field experience in general and on your taught lessons at schools in particular throughout your practicum courses? Participants mentioned they were mainly asked to write a reflection at the end of the practicum courses to pinpoint some weaknesses and strengths regarding their field experience.

As for their reflections, they are mainly descriptive narrating some strength in planning lessons and problems they still face while teaching mainly dealing with misbehaving kids. Participants added that their faculty supervisors gave them a brief feedback on their taught lessons without asking them to find ways to improve them, for instance. After such short conferences, the student-teachers start getting ready for their next lesson to be taught

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusion

The quality of the lesson plans the participants developed and delivered and their ability to reflect on the lessons they taught in the hosting schools are discussed here after.

The majority of the student-teachers taking part in this study complained about the long time they spend on planning for lessons (Lederman & Niess, 2000). Instead, trainees could use a universally designed template including alternative activities addressing students with a wide range of abilities (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2011). In addition, teacher educators need to assist student-teachers in planning their lessons in order to be able to deal with unexpected incidences during lesson delivery and consequently increase their self-confidence (Criticos, et al., 2009).

Well written lesson plans could lead to a successful delivery (Rusznyak & Walton, 2011; Dorovolomo et al., 2010). The participants mainly developed lesson plans in teacher-centered classrooms in which they wrote what they themselves would say and do in class. Therefore, pre-service teachers need to be trained to develop student-centered lessons which have a higher quality delivery than those which are teacher oriented (Clement, 2000).

While teaching at school, the most challenging concern facing the

17 pre-service English teachers was classroom management, namely the undisciplined pupils and their poor English proficiency (Gao & Benson, 2012). The trainees' inadequate choice of activities and teaching strategies, waste of class time, and the various management problems encountered were due to the poorly written lesson plans (Criticos et al., 2009). Consequently, their teaching and students' achievements were negatively affected (Allwright, 2005; Panasuk & Todd, 2005). The above section helped to answer research question one.

Throughout their field experience, the student-teachers mainly wrote descriptive reports instead of reflective ones (Gunn, 2010; Rusznyak, 2009). They were not asked to answer the reflective question: What would I do differently if I were to teach this lesson again? (Amobi, 2005). Instead, trainees received feedback while conferencing shortly with their faculty supervisors after each taught lesson. Moreover, these pre-service English teachers were not requested to re-write their taught lessons to improve them, nor were they asked to reflect on their managerial problems in order to avoid possible future trouble in class. This section helped to answer research question two.

As is the case in many teacher preparation programs, the pre-service English program in the School of Education under study did not help student-teachers develop fully their reflective skills. Therefore, it is highly recommended to train faculty supervisors in order to be able to encourage student-teachers to reflect on their own teaching activities and on their students' learning (Nott & Wellington, 1995 in Nilsson, 2009), seen the positive impact of reflection on the growth of the pre-service teachers and on the development of their inquiry skills (Griffin, 2003). In addition, teacher educators need to help trainees in writing lesson plans which are more student-oriented (Clement, 2000) to ensure a better quality delivery (Dorovolomo et al., 2010) in order to be able to develop professionally (Ruys, Van Keer, & AelteErman, 2012).

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