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## Challenges for preservice EFL teachers entering practicum

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### Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has been of concern throughout the world and has prompted calls for reform to preservice EFL teachers' practices in order to raise the standard of teaching and learning (Aiken & Day, 1999; Cook, 1996; Vélez-Rendón, 2006). This requires preservice teachers in countries where English is a foreign language to be prepared to meet the challenges and standards for EFL teaching (Lu, 2002; Wertheimer & Honigsfeld, 2000). However, preservice EFL teachers have additional challenges as they attempt to teach English while using this language as the mode of instruction. Field experiences or practicum have long been a central part of preservice EFL teacher development in many countries and is crucial for implementing EFL education reform (Anderson, 2004; Stewart, 2004). These field experiences allow preservice teachers to make the connection between current theoretical knowledge and school practices; yet understanding how to teach EFL effectively requires further investigation (Liu, 2005). Ninety-seven Vietnamese preservice teachers, completing a four-year undergraduate course, will finalize their education with a six-week field experience in upper secondary schools in Hanoi. An open-ended questionnaire was designed to gather data from these preservice EFL teachers at the beginning of their last field experience (i.e., practicum, professional experience). Ten open-ended questions aimed to investigate preservice EFL teachers' thoughts and expectations before entering their practicum, and as a means of understanding respondents' views. These questions also focused on their perceptions of potential difficulties related to learning about teaching EFL writing in their practicum. The completed responses (93 female; 4 male) provided descriptors of the participants (preservice EFL teachers). Most of these mentees (67%) were 22 years of age, 16% were at the age of 21 and the rest were between 22 and 24 years of age. In the data analysis, themes and categories were coded for each of the questions, and descriptive statistics were used to quantify the data (Hittleman & Simon, 2002). The preservice teachers were asked about challenges they perceived for learning how to teach EFL writing during their practicum. Expectedly, 41% of these preservice EFL teachers indicated they lacked confidence and knowledge for teaching writing at secondary schools. About 22% of respondents thought they would have difficulties in learning to teach writing due to the mixed-ability levels of students, boring writing topics at secondary schools. Differences in writing styles were listed as one of the challenges by 13% of respondents; however only 2% believed they would not have enough opportunities or time to practice the teaching

of writing. These preservice EFL teachers appeared to underestimate the challenges they will face during their practicum. There was a gap between their knowledge of classroom practices from their university education and the reality of the classroom. Teaching materials and classroom issues related to teaching writing such as writing genres, writing topics, how to motivate students to learn writing need to be incorporated in preservice teacher coursework. Reform in preservice EFL teacher education must focus on facilitating practical university coursework and providing mentoring experiences that address the potential challenges preservice EFL teachers face.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has been of concern throughout the world and has prompted calls for reform to preservice EFL teachers' practices in order to raise the standard of teaching and learning (Aiken & Day, 1999; Cook, 1996; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Luo, 2003; Richards, 1998; Vélez-Rendón, 2006). This requires preservice teachers in countries where English is a foreign language to be prepared to meet the challenges and standards for EFL teaching (Lu, 2002; Smith, Basmadjian, Kirell, & Koziol, 2003; Vibulphol, 2004; Wertheimer & Honigsfeld, 2000). However, preservice EFL teachers have additional challenges as they attempt to teach English while using this language as the mode of instruction. Field experiences or practicum have long been a central part of preservice EFL teacher development in many countries and is crucial for implementing EFL education reform (Anderson, 2004; Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Ewell, 2004; Schulz, 2005; Stewart, 2004). These field experiences allow preservice teachers to make the connection between current theoretical knowledge and school practices; yet understanding how to teach EFL effectively requires further investigation (Clift, Meng, & Eggerding, 1994; Johnson, 1996; Liu, 2005).

Learning to teach is a complex process that involves social interactions within a school context (e.g., Farrell, 2003; Gimbert, 2001; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 1999; Liou, 2001; Liu, 2005; Vélez-Rendón, 2006). Research on learning to teach has sought to mainly focus on teachers' beliefs and perceptions (Chiang, 2003; Fives, 2003; Johnson, 1994; Raths & McAninch, 2003), previous learning experiences (Vélez-Rendón, 2006), attitudes toward teaching and learning (Bae, 2003; Reber, 2001; Street, 2003), understanding of the subject matter, needs and challenges (Nelson & Harper, 2006), perceptions of initial teaching practice, mentoring processes (Street, 2004), and motivation to teach (Kyriacou & Koberi, 1998). For example, Johnson (1994) explores the inter-relationship between preservice EFL teachers' beliefs about second language teachers and teaching, and their perceptions of their instructional practice during the practicum. It appears that prior classroom experiences has an influence on developing preservice EFL teachers' images of themselves as teachers and their perceptions of their own instructional practices. This finding is consistent with several related studies (e.g., Pajares, 1992; Vélez-Rendón, 2006) highlighting the impact of prior experiences and beliefs for developing teaching practices.

Another example is Wang and Odell's (2003) investigation on "how preservice teachers learn to teach writing in reform-minded ways" (p.167). Although the study based on the data from only two preservice teachers and two mentors, it reveals that these preservice teachers' movement toward the reform-minded ways of teaching that mentors model did not occur because of the conflict between preservice teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching and that of their mentors. They advocate further advancements in preservice teacher education to capitalize on learning within specific school contexts. In addition, Velez-Rendon's (2006) interpretive, single-case study examines a German preservice teacher's prior learning experiences, beliefs, contextual and cognitive factors that affect teaching development. Results indicated that previous learning experiences, the knowledge of subject matter, level of commitment, and an effective mentoring relationship contribute to successful, meaningful, and productive experiences of learning to teach a foreign language. Wang and Odell (2003) also claim that "preservice teachers' initial beliefs, mentors' teaching and mentoring practices, and school contexts influenced preservice teachers' conceptual development" (p. 147).

The school context plays a pivotal role in developing EFL teaching practices. More specifically, the development and implementation of a school-wide curriculum can lead to more effective teaching practices and may be employed by mentors to enhance preservice teacher education. To illustrate, Heenan (2004) suggests that "the organization surrounding the implementation of teacher training opportunities plays a key role in the efficacy of professional development. Schools will experience the greatest success with professional development initiatives when seminars, discussions and schedules are carefully planned with teachers' preferences in mind" (p. ix). Preservice EFL teachers should be exposed to expertise within schools that consider their needs for learning how to teach. Indeed, preservice teachers require scaffolding on teaching the key strands of English (e.g., EFL writing) through well-constructed school-based programs.

Research on learning to teach has also sought to uncover the problems preservice teachers face during their field experiences. Wang and Odell (2002) identify three types of problems that can confront novices when learning to teach within school settings, that is: (1) emotional and psychological stress, (2) lack of support, and (3) conceptual struggles about teaching and learning. Emotional and psychological stress is "widely assumed to be the result of the relatively low professional status of teaching, the uncertainty of classroom life, and difficult working conditions" (p. 514). Preservice teachers can feel high levels of stress during their field experience because they face the challenges of carrying out two important tasks at the same time: teaching, and learning to teach. Many preservice teachers enter field experiences with hopes, inflated images, and expectations that are often "shattered by exposure to certain realities of schools, classroom, and teaching" (Knowles, Coles, & Presswood, 1994, p. 109). A lack of support can include a "lack of instruction routines, procedures, skills, and techniques that are related to the contexts of teaching" (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 515). Preservice teachers are unprepared for the demands of upper secondary English teaching and more effective models for preservice EFL teacher development are required (Butcher, 2003). Preservice teachers have:

inadequate knowledge of pupils and classroom procedures. They come instead with idealized views of pupils and an optimistic, oversimplified picture of

classroom practice. They are usually unprepared to deal with problems of class control and discipline. As a result, most novices become obsessed with class control, designing instruction, not to promote pupil learning, but to discourage disruptive behavior. (Kagan, 1992, pp.154-155)

Preservice teachers are challenged by the “conceptual struggle about teaching and learning” (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 515). What they believe about effective teaching and learning may conflict with the reality of teaching in the school context. Liu’s (2005) research indicates that preservice EFL teachers tend to follow their school-based mentors’ examination-oriented English teaching methods, which focuses on vocabulary and grammar. It appears that learning to teach within the school context does not match the preservice teachers’ university education and current advocated practices. The connection between theory and practice (i.e., praxis) needs to be more explicit in the school settings, which requires well-constructed mentoring programs.

Mentoring programs should be devised for mentors to assist their mentees (preservice teachers) develop pedagogical knowledge and overcome context-specific difficulties. Researchers (Chow, Tang, & So, 2004; Forbes, 2004; Garnes, 2004; Hawkey, 1997; Street, 2004; Woullard & Coats, 2004) have shown that mentoring relationships in school-based programs can shape preservice teachers’ professional practice. Undoubtedly, preservice teachers in their formative stages of development require assistance from more experienced colleagues. More specifically, effective mentoring programs provide structure and support to promote the attainment of effective teaching skills and sound pedagogical knowledge (Arnold, 2006; Chow, Tang, & So, 2004; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Woullard & Coats, 2004). Conversely, research studies (e.g., Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Graham, 1997) have uncovered negative mentoring practices.

Negative mentoring experiences can hinder preservice teacher development (Sudzina & Coolican, 1994). For example, McLaughlin (1993), Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), and Long (1999) have found environments that stifle innovation and reinforce traditional practice. Tensions can exist between school mentors and preservice teachers caused by conflicting teaching philosophies (Graham, 1997). However, problems vary from preservice teacher to preservice teacher (Jonson, 2002). Broader concerns of mentees range from inadequate planning for mentoring to a lack of understanding of the mentoring process (Long, 1997). More specific concerns of mentees include: classroom management/discipline, student motivation, teaching techniques and catering for individual differences (e.g., Ellis, 2001). Puk and Haines (1999, as cited in Liu, 2005) argue that in many schools the mentor teacher “did not encourage student teachers to teach inquiry which was not prevalent in their school context” (p. 35). Any negative experiences can have implications for learning how to teach EFL successfully, and so clarity is required on “the definition of mentoring, the role of mentors, and the selection of mentors” (Giebelhaus & Bendixon-Noe, 1997, p. 22).

It is established that school mentors play important roles in effectively mentoring preservice teachers during their teaching practice (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Ewell, 2004).

A mentor may be defined “one who is more knowledgeable on teaching practices and through explicit mentoring processes develops pedagogical self-efficacy in the mentee towards autonomous teaching practices” (Hudson, 2004, pp. 216-217). Five factors for mentors’ facilitation of the mentoring process have been theoretically identified and statistically justified. These five factors are: personal attributes, system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modelling, and feedback (Hudson et al., 2005). Mentors need to display personal attributes that facilitate a collaborative working relationship (Ganser, 1991; Rippon & Martin, 2006; Sinclair, 2003). System requirements must be made explicit to preservice teachers in order to understand departmental directives for teaching (Lenton & Turner, 1999). A mentor’s articulation of pedagogical knowledge aims to enhance preservice teacher development (Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2003). Mentors need to display their expertise by modeling effective teaching practices (Klausmeier, 1994; Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999). Finally, feedback in both oral and written form can guide preservice teacher development with clear expectations for improving practices (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999; Zachary, 2002).

In summary, there are studies investigating the different aspects of preservice teachers’ learning to teach, nonetheless, little has been documented concerning how preservice EFL teachers prepare for their learning to teach (Gomez, 1990; Grossman et al., 2000; Kelley, 2005; Napoli, 2001; Street, 2003). Moreover, little of the inquiry into EFL preservice teacher education has been documented in the context of Vietnam. How do preservice teachers perceive their preparation for their initial teaching experiences? More specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine preservice EFL teachers’ perceptions about learning to teach writing in English before their field experience.

### **Research methods**

Ninety-seven Vietnamese preservice teachers, completing a four-year undergraduate course, will finalize their education with a six-week field experience in upper secondary schools in Hanoi. An open-ended questionnaire was designed to gather data from these preservice EFL teachers at the beginning of their last field experience (i.e., practicum, professional experience). The ten open-ended questions aimed to investigate preservice EFL teachers’ thoughts and expectations before entering their practicum, and as a means of understanding respondents’ views (Polonsky & Waller, 2005). These questions covered the following issues: perceptions and motivations for learning to teach EFL writing, expectations of their mentors and mentoring support for teaching EFL writing, and perceptions of potential difficulties related to learning about teaching EFL writing in their practicum. The completed responses (93 female; 4 male) provided descriptors of the participants (preservice EFL teachers). Most of these mentees (67%) were 22 years of age, 16% were at the age of 21 and the rest were between 22 and 24 years of age. In the data analysis, themes and categories were coded for each of the questions, and descriptive statistics were used to quantify the data (Hittleman & Simon, 2006).

### **Results and discussion**

The results and discussion are presented within the following sections on preservice EFL teachers’ expectations of their ideal mentors and mentoring processes, and challenges in learning to teach writing.

*Expectations of their ideal mentors and mentoring processes*

Many ideal mentor attributes were identified and grouped into several categories from the responses of the open-ended questionnaire. Not surprisingly, 54% of the preservice EFL teachers considered modeling of practice as an ideal mentor attribute (Table 1). Some of them further added that their mentor should “model effective teaching writing methodology”, particularly as the mentor should have “a wide knowledge of writing skills”, “a good command of English”, and significant “experience in teaching writing”. This is also supported by other studies advocating that mentors need to model effective teaching practices (Hans & Vonk, 1995; Hudson, 2005; Roberts, 2000).

Thirty-five percent of respondents regarded the mentor’s enthusiasm as another ideal quality with 34% indicating their ideal mentor should be “supportive, friendly, and helpful”. Providing constructive feedback was further added as an ideal mentor quality by 22% of respondents (Table 1). Three of them believed that their mentor’s feedback should be “constructively critical” in order to “improve their teaching practices”. Indeed, the mentor’s constructive feedback is an important factor in the mentoring process (Beattie, 2000; Hudson, 2005). About 15% of these preservice EFL teachers wrote that their ideal mentors needed experience in teaching writing and experiences in co-teaching, particularly in working with university students. When asked about the ideal mentor, three preservice EFL teachers said that they expected their mentors to be strict while 4% did not claim any attribute for their ideal mentor (Table 1). As these preservice teachers are also learning the English language, clarification of such outliers would be required. Modeling how to teach writing and learning how to be an effective teacher of English is what preservice EFL teachers expected most from their mentor.

Table 1  
*Preservice EFL Teachers’ Perceptions of their Ideal Mentors and Mentoring Processes*

<b>Ideal mentor</b>	<b>%*</b>	<b>Mentoring processes</b>	<b>%*</b>
Modeling practices	54	Mentor’s feedback	48
Enthusiasm	35	Model practice	38
Supportive/friendly/ helpful	34	Giving helpful guidelines	24
Constructive feedback	22	Sharing experiences	24
Experience and experience sharing	15	Providing them with materials,	13
No response	4	Observing their lesson	13
Allows teaching practice for mentees	3	No response	5
Be strict	3	Listening to them	1

\*Many preservice teachers recorded more than one response; hence the percentages indicated how many preservice teachers considered that item a reason.

Preservice EFL teachers were asked about their expectations of how mentors can support their process of learning to teach writing in English during their field experiences. About 48% of preservice EFL teachers believed their mentor’s feedback would help them learn to teach writing in English. Three of them further added that they expected their mentors would “correct their teaching mistakes” and “give advice to improve their teaching

practices”. Only two respondents expected their mentors to provide feedback on their writing lesson plan. About 38% considered their mentors’ modeling as a way to support their process of learning to teach writing. Other ways such as “giving helpful guidelines” and “sharing experiences” were equally mentioned by about 24% preservice EFL teachers. A small percentage of respondents (13%) claimed the mentor could support their learning-to-teach processes by providing them with materials and observing their lesson (Table 1).

*Challenges in learning to teach EFL writing*

Table 2 highlights these preservice EFL teachers’ potential challenges for their practicum. Surprisingly, when asked about their needs for learning to teach EFL writing, 43% of these preservice EFL teachers could not identify their needs for their field experiences. About 22% claimed they wanted the school mentors to teach them how to teach writing. A very small number of respondents added that they needed to be provided with knowledge about different genres, writing materials, classroom management, and writing feedback and correction in their practicum. However, only 12% claimed they needed the school mentors to model their writing teaching (Table 2), yet 54% claimed this to be an ideal mentor attribute (Table 1).

Table 2

*Preservice Teachers’ Needs and Challenges in Learning to Teach EFL Writing*

<b>Needs for six-week practicum</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Difficulties for learning how to teach EFL writing</b>	<b>%</b>
No response	43	Not understand/lack of knowledge/confidence	41
Teaching writing	22	Students’ level and writing topics	22
Share with teachers/mentor help/model	12	Difference between English and Vietnamese style	13
Preparation	8	Making it meaningful	13
Range of writing skills (grammar)	6	Lack of practice	9
Student engagement	4	No response	7
Psychology /classroom management	2	Theory/practice connection	6
Materials	2	Lack of materials/ being up-to-date	5
Correcting mistakes	1	Feedback	4
Story telling	1	Lack of expression/articulation	2
Real life relevancies	1	Time	2

\*Many preservice teachers recorded more than one response; hence the percentages indicated how many preservice teachers considered that item a reason.

The preservice teachers were asked about the difficulties they perceived for learning how to teach writing during their practicum. They listed a wide range of challenges as shown in the Table 2. Expectedly, 41% of these preservice EFL teachers indicated they lacked confidence and knowledge for teaching writing at secondary schools. About 22% of respondents thought they would have difficulties in learning to teach writing due to the mixed-ability levels of students, boring writing topics at secondary schools (Table 2).

Differences in writing styles were listed as one of the challenges by 13% of respondents. Only 2% believed they would not have enough opportunities or time to practice the teaching of writing. One stated that writing was “not a targeted skill at secondary schools”, which is due to the grammar-oriented English education at secondary schools in Vietnam. Thirteen percent indicated they would have difficulty in making the EFL writing lesson “interesting and meaningful”. One preservice teacher believed EFL writing was “a difficult skill for secondary students” and writing lessons seemed “very boring” to them. The challenges identified related to their “emotional and psychological stress” with a need for context-related learning experiences (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 515).

### **Summary and conclusion**

This study examined preservice EFL teachers’ perceptions and potential challenges about learning to teach EFL writing before their practicum. Although the study does not show the common consensus on ideal mentor qualities, it seems that their perceptions about ideal mentor roles do not conflict with other studies related to effective mentoring. Not only do preservice EFL teachers require mentors to model effective teaching practices and share their teaching experiences, they also need their mentors to be enthusiastic, supportive, and constructive in their feedback. These findings can assist teacher educators and school mentors for providing feedback on preservice teachers’ writing lessons, particularly as mentors’ comments can motivate preservice EFL teachers learning to teach writing. This also emphasizes the need for educating mentors on effective mentoring skills, such as constructive and motivating feedback. Generally, these preservice teachers desired to be taught how to teach EFL writing with knowledge of different genres, classroom management techniques, and providing feedback to their students. A better theoretical framework needs to be developed based on preservice EFL teachers’ needs, as well as school and classroom context variables that influence learning to teach writing in English before their practicum.

These preservice EFL teachers may have underestimated the challenges they will face during their practicum. There appeared to be a gap between their knowledge of classroom practices from their university education and the reality of the classroom. Teaching materials and classroom issues related to teaching writing such as writing genres, writing topics, how to motivate students to learn writing, and how to deal with mixed-level of students at secondary schools need to be incorporated in preservice teacher coursework. Moreover, they need to be equipped with knowledge and skills to adapt to new teaching contexts with teacher educators creating opportunities for developing such practices before entering field experiences. Reform in preservice EFL teacher education must focus on facilitating practical university coursework and providing mentoring experiences that enhance the developmental processes on learning to teach English as a foreign language.

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