

Pre-service Training Prospects in the Algerian University: Between Achievements and Challenges

Naziha BEN OSMANE

Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Oran

Department of English

Email: n.benosmane@yahoo.fr

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Abstract

The mission of higher education all over the world is to produce responsible citizens with knowledge and more than that, a sense of a 'know- to- do'. In the Algerian context, education is facing a serious problem of low quality in teaching practices and professional development of teachers, from primary schools to secondary ones. The quality of pre-service training would be one originator of the cited issue. Indeed, when setting objectives, the growth of the new knowledge trainees get from university remains important, but the other crucial point is to provide those future teachers with the necessary readiness to enter the teaching world. In this sense, institutions are required to meet the trainees' needs and the professional requirements. Effective pre-service training in higher education addresses enhancing quality teaching (QT) and learning outcomes, and appeals a range of challenges at a time when the university sector needs to ensure good pedagogical practices. Hence, the present paper is an attempt to discuss the urgency to enhance the quality of pre-service training in our universities and institutions and relates the actual deficiencies felt by the trainers as well as trainees. Such account would be collected through a students' questionnaire, teachers' interview, and students' reflections. Implications would address both practitioners and decision-makers to remedy the deficiencies.

Key words:

Pre-service Training - Quality Training -Teacher Trainer - Curriculum.

آفاق التدريب قبل الخدمة: بين الإنجازات والتحديات

ملخص:

تتمثل مهمة التعليم العالي في جميع أنحاء العالم في تكوين مواطنين مسؤولين مجهزين بالمعرفة وأكثر من ذلك، الإحساس «بالبراعة».

في السياق الجزائري، يواجه التعليم مشكلة من حيث النوعية في ممارسات التدريس والتطوير المهني للمعلمين، من طور الابتدائي إلى الثانوي. تعد جودة التدريب قبل الخدمة أحد منسئي المشكلة المذكورة. في الواقع، عند تحديد الأهداف، يبقى النمو المعرفي للمتدربين الجدد في الجامعة مهمًا، ولكن النقطة الهامة الأخرى هي تزويد هؤلاء المعلمين المستقبليين بالجاهزية اللازمة لدخول عالم التدريس. وبهذا يطلب من المؤسسات تلبية احتياجات المتدربين والمتطلبات المهنية.

يتناول التدريب الفعال قبل الخدمة في التعليم العالي تحسين جودة التعليم ونتائج التعلم، ويطرح مجموعة من التحديات في وقت يحتاج فيه القطاع الجامعي إلى ضمان الممارسات التربوية الجيدة. ومن ثم، فإن هذه المداخلة هي محاولة لمناقشة الضرورة الملحة لتحسين جودة التدريب قبل الخدمة في جامعاتنا ومؤسساتنا وتربط أوجه القصور الفعلية التي يشعر بها كل من المدربين والمتدربين. ستتم هذه الدراسة من خلال استبيان الطلاب ومقابلة المعلمين وانعكاسات الطلاب. قد تعالج الاقتراحات كلا من الممارسين وصناع القرار لمعالجة أوجه القصور.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التدريب ما قبل الخدمة - الجودة التدريب - المعلم المدرب - المنهاج الدراسي.

Perspectives de formation initiale dans l'université algérienne: Entre acquis et défis

Résumé:

La mission de l'enseignement supérieur dans le monde entier consiste à former des citoyens responsables possédant des connaissances et, plus encore, le sens du «savoir-faire». Dans le contexte algérien, l'éducation est confrontée à un sérieux problème de faible qualité des pratiques pédagogiques et du développement professionnel des enseignants, du primaire au secondaire. La qualité de la formation initiale serait à l'origine du problème cité. En effet, lors de la définition des objectifs, la croissance des nouvelles connaissances acquises par les stagiaires à l'université reste importante, mais l'autre point crucial est de fournir à ces futurs enseignants la préparation nécessaire pour entrer dans le monde de l'enseignement. En ce sens, les établissements sont tenus de répondre aux besoins des stagiaires et aux exigences professionnelles. Une formation initiale efficace dans l'enseignement supérieur vise à améliorer la qualité de l'enseignement (QE) et les acquis de son apprentissage, et fait appel à une série de défis à une époque où le secteur universitaire doit garantir de bonnes pratiques pédagogiques. Par conséquent, le présent article tente de discuter de l'urgence d'améliorer la qualité de la formation initiale dans nos universités et institutions et décrit les déficiences réelles ressenties par les formateurs et les stagiaires. Ce compte rendu sera recueilli par le biais d'un questionnaire destiné aux étudiants, d'un entretien avec les enseignants et des réflexions des étudiants. Les implications s'adressent à la fois aux praticiens et aux décideurs pour remédier à ces déficiences.

Mots clés:

Formation initiale - Formation de qualité - Enseignant Formateur - Curriculum

Introduction

The constant changes in the Algerian educational system and the emerging technological and socio-economic needs appeal teachers to line up with such challenges. Literally, a worldwide issue is on how to promote the quality of education. Hence, before stepping in the world of teaching, prospective teachers need to receive the adequate training to acquire the necessary knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and pedagogical skills. Indeed, the quality of education in any country is but the result of the quality of pre-service training and the teacher professional development. This is understandable, as teachers are committed to transmit knowledge and to prepare the young people for life. One measure to achieve a better quality of education is to reconsider training quality and practices within our universities, and to seek for practical solutions to bridge the gap between the actual pre-service prospective teachers are receiving and the real realm of teaching. As such, this paper is an attempt to shed light on the nature of pre-service training in an Algerian context. It is assumed that through the study, the result would reveal the main issues and challenges felt by trainers as well as trainees. And finally, to advance some suggestions related to the components of an effective training.

1. Literature review

1.1 Pre-service training

Classroom teachers are expected to be right models in the field of education; indeed, good teachers must deliver high quality teaching, supervise students' learning progress, adapt lessons in accordance to the variety of learners and their learning styles, and manage the learners' behaviours (Stronge, 2007; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). This implies a number of qualities and skills to be acquired by future teachers at the level of their academic training institutions.

In fact, active engagement in learning is significantly related to academic success (Gest & Gest, 2005); yet, the ability to effectively teach relies to a great extent on the teacher's ability to manage different concerns in the classroom including his own behaviour. Nevertheless, many teachers mainly novice ones confess that they are unprepared to enter the profession of teaching and do not feel ready to manage students' behaviours in their classroom because they did not receive the appropriate training for that. (Chesley & Jordan, 2012). Indeed, poor quality in teaching practices and deficient teacher training cannot lead to a prosperous education. Hence, to improve education, two important aspects need to be seriously taken into consideration; namely, pre-service training and teacher

professional development. Pre-service training is concerned with the university programme delivered during the university journey before stepping in the world of teaching; and professional development is achieved throughout teaching career. In this respect, Carnoy (2007) stated:

“Improving the quality of education necessarily requires improving the quality of teaching [and] the quality of educational management ... [and these] require a major financial and political effort, ... significant upgrading in the pre-service and in-service training of teachers, radical changes in the concept of educational management, an overhaul in supervising the delivery of the school curriculum, a new strategy for recruiting the teachers who can be trained to raise the level of student learning ...”

(Carnoy, 2007, pp. 3-4)

In the same realm, many scholars argued that the key element of improving the quality of education is building up the ability and engagement of future teachers. The emphasis is, then, on the quality of training of educators because the right to a good quality education involves having a good quality teacher. In this sense, Darling-Hammond and Prince (2007) claimed:

“Clearly, meeting the expectation that all students will learn to high standards will require a transformation in the ways in which our education system attracts, prepares, supports, and develops expert teachers ... An aspect of this transformation is developing means to evaluate and recognize teacher effectiveness throughout the career, for the purposes of licensing, hiring, and granting tenure; for providing needed professional development ...”

(Darling-Hammond & al., 2007, p. 3)

Accordingly, pre-service training aims at providing the necessary educational programmes designed to equip future teachers to properly enter the world of teaching. Making efforts to reform how teachers perform their roles adequately means also to focus on the structure and the policy issues. Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & Le Page (2005) argued that pre-service teacher education programmes aim to prepare graduates to become quality teachers with good pedagogical practices that will serve to meet the increasing demands associated with the teaching profession.

In the literature, an important number of researches has been directed to improve the training quality involving the teaching practices and the educational

objectives. Officially, being a teacher is completed through qualification and preparedness. Yet, this latter depends greatly on the way students went through their pre-service training. That is why, the importance of this training is given credit by many researchers focusing on good education quality to prepare future teachers for classroom practice (Freeman, 1989). Harmer (2001) emphasized the important components of 'a good teacher' including a set of competences and qualities teacher should possess. The importance of pre-service training is, then, based on knowledge and skills that should be developed for future teachers for their qualification. In short, such training aim to enhance their professional development, provide readiness for teaching practice, and ensure effectiveness for classroom management.

1.2 Elements of teacher education training

As stated earlier, pre-service teacher education programmes are structured to equip student-teachers with theoretical knowledge and practical readiness to step in the profession of teaching. Actually, these programmes involve a combination of theoretical notions about teaching and a field-based practice called *practicum* to develop and reinforce awareness and skills about the field of education. The quality of training offered by pre-service teacher education programmes affects teachers' practice, effectiveness, and career commitment (Eren& Tezel, 2010).

Hence, one of the directions of the twenty first century in the educational reforms is to develop programmes for professionalizing the teaching profession, and a continuing professional development; a number of different teaching programmes emerged, and they nearly converge to some key components of an effective training; namely, disciplinary knowledge, theoretical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and a continuum of teacher learning.

First, according to Willingham (2009), teachers need to ensure that their subject knowledge is broad as well as deep. Research advocates that continuing professional development programmes should grant both subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy and support teachers with developing subject expertise (Cordingley et al., 2015). In this respect, disciplinary knowledge in an EFL teacher training is comprised of the subject matter including the language, the cultures it bears, literature, and the related language subjects such as syntax, phonology, discourse analysis, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and second-language acquisition. Furthermore, Tardiff (2001) emphasized the relevance of including awareness of societal changes and multiculturalism in teacher training as the world is constantly changing. Such training aims to enrich the pre-service trainees pre-requisites related to the language teaching.

Second, pre-service training needs to provide the necessary awareness of the theoretical notions related to the learning/teaching process. This type of knowledge constitutes key teaching elements including instruction, curriculum, assessment, classroom management and related concerns. In this sense, it involves (a) knowledge of the existing cognitive, social, and developmental learning/ teaching theories; (b) understanding of the EFL teaching approaches, methods, and techniques and their implementation in the classroom; (c) a comprehensive knowledge of the main factors related to language acquisition and language learning such as age, personality factors, affective and social influences; and (d) insight of classroom management, lesson plan development, and student assessment.

The third element concerns the pedagogical skills required for efficient teaching; it is of vital importance and is tightly linked to the two previous aspects. Pre-service trainees need to acquire pedagogical skills mainly for their teaching practicum as Richards & Farrell (2005) claimed: "*Pre-service training involves direct instruction and modeling of these skills and opportunities for practice and mastery.*"(p.6). Teaching practice or practicum is one major aspect of teaching readiness through which prospective teachers can acquire basic skills to become effective in their instruction; it represents the ability to transmit their theoretical knowledge into practice, also to review their assumptions and adapt their teaching for a good quality of instruction. Hence, these basic skills involve reflecting, flexibility, adaptability, self-regulation, innovation, classroom management, setting objectives, designing teaching strategies, designing evaluation and assessment tools, and creating appropriate environment for learning to meet the variety of learners and their needs. (Harmer, 2009; Mergler & Spooner, 2012)

Finally, the last aspect of teacher training is the continuum of teacher learning, it is an important component for professional development. In fact, for an effective teacher professional development, all the elements of teacher education programme need to be considered in a mutual way. In this sense, Villegas-Reimers (2003) argued: "*the professional development of teachers is a lifelong process which begins with the initial preparation that teachers receive and continues until retirement.*" (p.8). Actually, the first step in the continuum of teacher learning starts from the period when he is still a student observing his teachers known as *apprenticeship of observation*; then this learning goes on through years of teaching practices. However, in most developing countries, teacher education programmes are designed and implemented by institutions accredited by the ministry of higher education for certification of teachers as

it is the case in Algeria; the continuing training is in fact through seminars or workshops supervised by inspectors.

“One of the main stakes is that teacher education is not perceived, by policy designers and teacher education providers, but even by the teachers themselves, as being a continuum, and the linkages that should be weaved between initial education and continuing training are often missing, which means that the different parts of teacher education are not articulated to each other.”

(Musset, 2010, p. 12)

Accordingly, teacher education has always been constraint to initial teacher education, identified as *“a phase of specialized institutions with an expectation of full-time engagement by the learning teachers.”* (Schwille et Dembélé, 2007, p. 33). It seems that the teacher education programmes are aligned with the policies and norms typical to a country. The content, the duration of the programme as well as the teaching practice differ from a country to another.

In a nutshell, teacher professional development remains a primary national concern in order to develop a quality education. Training programmes are intended to encourage pre-service teachers to experience situations which favour their individual and professional development for a germane teaching commitment. Especially, aspects of leadership, empathy, collaboration, community, knowledge and skills are to be developed (Kaye, 2004). A minute preparation for the teacher education training programme is essential to enhance the teaching quality in the Algerian Higher Educational context.

2. The study

The research scheme was undertaken under the principles of the action research and the study is qualitative in nature. First, a descriptive method of research has been carried out; the objective is to relate the experiences of pre-service teachers and then to describe the nature of the programme in a master course in the Department of English at the University of Mostaganem. It then seeks to explore the trainees' needs and challenges; and accordingly, proposes the relevant suggestions to achieve better training programmes favourable for a more effective preparedness to the world of teaching. The study's findings in such qualitative research aim to reach transferability rather than generalization as they can reflect the nature of pre-service training in many institutions in the Algerian context. Indeed, while this study will focus on one master class, we do not intend that the cases will be common to the standards; rather, the prevailing

perceptions will be showcased with a view that these experiences would provide an appropriate understanding to suggest elements for enhancing pre-service teacher education.

2.1 Research questions

The current paper addresses the following central questions:

- To what extent are students prepared to become future teachers during their university journey?
- What are the actual challenges and needs of prospective teachers?

2.2 The context

The present study took place at the University of Mostaganem, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of English. In terms of the second cycle of the LMD system, the department offers six master courses; namely, Literature and Civilisation, Literature and Interdisciplinary Approaches, Science of Language, Linguistics, Didactics of Foreign languages, Didactics and Applied Linguistics.

To investigate into the direction of the current study, the investigation was carried out with students from the master of ‘Didactics and Applied Linguistics’ as the master course includes subjects related to teaching namely Didactics of EFL, Psycholinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Child and Teenage Psychology, Educational Psychology, Cognitive Sciences, Intercultural Studies, Methodology, Writing Techniques, French, and ICT.

2.3 The Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 33 Master 2 students of ‘Didactics and applied linguistics’. They were 26 females and 7 males ranging from 23 to 25 years old. In addition, two teachers who were in charge of some modules in the cited Master course were part of this study; they both held a Ph. D degree in English option Didactics and Educational Psychology. Their teaching experience exceeds 20 years.

In fact, the choice of the educational context and the respondents of the investigation has been done in the convenience of the researcher as she has been an English teacher in the cited Master course. This could be beneficial to get honest answers mainly in terms of students’ reflections related to their personal and emotional aspects.

2.4 Procedure

The nature of the current paper is qualitative. It aims first to describe the nature of pre-service training for prospective teachers, and further to explore

the needs and challenges felt by both trainers and trainees during their Master training. Respectively, three research tools were used in order to gather the data for this investigation; a students' questionnaire; students' reflections, and a teachers' interview.

The questionnaire aimed to probe the attitude of the trainees and their actual perceptions of the master course training. In addition, their reflections would be on their conceptualizations of their course curriculum, and mainly how they reflect upon their practice in the classrooms and to express their needs as prospective teachers. Lastly, the teachers' interview was conducted to explore the trainers' judgment on the course training and curriculum, and the deficiencies felt during their teaching practice.

3. Findings

Based on the gathered data and its cross analysis, findings revealed three thematic conclusions; namely, students' perceptions towards their training, trainers' attitudes to the training they provide, and the main challenges felt by both trainers and trainees.

Students' perceptions

In fact, all students considered their master course as the most interesting one in terms of the subjects it involves. As they all intend to enter the profession of teaching, most of them chose it as they perceived it was the most suitable course compared with the other masters; few students doubted their choice and did not intend teaching or had no idea about their future job but they changed their minds throughout their master journey and *'gained a better self-confidence towards teaching.'*

In addition, all students recognised that their actual training is beneficial and helpful for their social life in general and for their future career in particular. It raises their awarenesses in terms of social and cultural insight and understanding. Furthermore, through the practices inside the classroom they could apply to some extent their theoretical knowledge, and through presentations they were trained to 'speak in front of an audience', it was beneficial mainly when teachers' feedback followed. Some claimed that such practices were valuable to decrease their anxiety of public speaking; although it was not always the case of introvert cases. Finally, students were satisfied to have specialist and experienced teachers.

Trainers' attitudes

All teachers agreed that through the master course students would be able to step in the world of teaching as the course is directly linked to the teaching profession. This was sustained by the existence of *rich* and *interesting* subjects which offer basic theoretical notions about the learning/ teaching process. Some teachers claimed that some modules offer some practice and students are given constructive feedback; however, all trainers perceived that students need practicum in real schools. Although most teachers perceive the modules interesting, yet they expressed a need to reconsider the content of the curriculum and even the coefficients of some modules – students remain much more concerned with the grades.

Issues and concerns

As stated above, both trainers and trainees respondents in the current study were globally satisfied with the provided training in terms of the theoretical aspects; yet, they both felt some necessary elements to make it much more effective for the prospective teachers in the real world of teaching. The common and prevailing concern in the pre-service training is practicum. Students claimed that their actual classroom practice was for the sake of grades (TD marks); so, even if it was beneficial to practice and apply the notions they received, but test anxiety was dominant; the only benefit was the kind of teachers' feedback which was constructive. They needed practicum with real classes where they would discover the real issues of teaching such as self-regulation and classroom management.

Accordingly, the main issues related to their pre-service training are summed up in the following points:

- Lack of practicum.
- Practice in the classroom is limited to presentations and classroom discussions.
- The kind of practice is graded so it enhances test anxiety.
- More subjects need to be implemented in relation with the teaching profession.
- Lack of emotional intelligence and social knowledge for real classes.
- Lack of knowledge of how to deal action research to reflect upon one's teaching practices.
- Need for techniques to use textbooks and materials.

4. Implications

In accordance with what has been found out in the current study, effective

suggestions need to be drawn from trainers but above all from the first concerned - the trainees. As already stated in the previous section, respondents advanced some beneficial propositions which need to be taken into consideration. Thus, concerns need to be made at three inter-connected levels; namely, at the institutional level, at the curriculum level, and at the individual level.

The institutional level

There is an urgency to have projects such as policy design, and assistance to higher educational institutions programmes and to ensure an internal quality assurance practice. To reach these objectives adequate infrastructure and resources need to be developed; for instance rich libraries and additional learning materials besides adequate human resources. In this respect, higher educational institution should promote the teachers trainers professional development by developing professional learning communities. This implies that teachers from different institutions should work collaboratively to promote their own learning and that of their trainees. They can coordinate lessons, share different pedagogical approaches, and exchange personal experiences and practices. In this way, teachers trainers can reflect upon their teaching and develop their practices.

The curriculum level

It includes actions to measure and increase the design, the content, as well as the delivery of the programmes in an institution or a department. First, effective pre-service training should be lined up with professional norms of teachers. Such norms should include pedagogical skills and knowledge about child development, cultural and socio-emotional learning; and most importantly, curriculum should be designed in accordance with the context where teaching is to be delivered based on local requirements.

Second, as the study findings revealed, pre-service training compels the inclusion of practicum, "*Effective teacher education programmes need to ensure that pre-service teachers have sufficient time to apply what they have learned*" (Darling-Hammond, 2006c). Practicum allows more practice and application of what prospective teachers have learnt along with their teachers. Applying their knowledge and skills in a real life context enables pre-service teachers to have authentic experiences that facilitate deep learning (Kolb, 1994). The practicum can be delivered into two forms: microteaching or school-based teaching. In the Algerian context, the school-based teaching is still challenging due to the large number of pre-service students but at least these students can be invited to observe real classrooms at schools to be aware of the nature of teaching and actual

issues encountered in real classrooms.

The individual level

This is tightly linked to the previous levels including actions and ambitions that help teachers fulfil their mission, and help them improve and innovate their practices in relation to their students' needs and focus. Teacher professional development is crucial to understand the ethics of being a teacher and to transmit such awareness to prospective teachers. In other words, some professional standards should exist at the teachers trainers and enhanced at trainees such as assessment practices, classroom management, and action research.

As such pre-service training needs to include the following standards for a better self-regulation mainly through practicum as to achieve:

- How to apply theoretical knowledge in the classroom.
- How to have learners' attention.
- How to engage and motivate learners.
- How to manage time appropriately.
- How to use positive reinforcement and constructive feedback.
- How to teach mixed ability classes.
- How to use textbooks effectively.
- How to manage noisy classes.
- How to assess formatively.

Conclusion

One may acknowledge that the challenges prospective teachers are facing is a national issue and not typical to one university. Thus, there is an urgent need to reconsider the training policy higher educational institutions are providing. As such, programmes for pre-service training require more efforts as well as honest willingness to be developed. The Ministry of Higher Education should provide the necessary infrastructure and materials to achieve a better quality and then to improve the educational system in general. The pillar of any nation is education.

Respectively, this study aimed to contribute to shed light on the new paradigms of a good pre-service training at three interconnected levels; namely, at the institution level, at the curriculum level, and at the individual level. At the institution level, it involves projects such as investigations, scientific events, and support internal quality assurance policy; at the curriculum level, focus would

be on actions to adapt and improve the conception and the content of the programmes within departments; finally, at the individual level including actions to help teachers trainers fulfil their job in providing the adequate training to support a learner-oriented aim through practical activities, self-evaluation of their training, peer-reviewing, and professional development. Accordingly, well-designed training needs to be an outcome of a collaborative reflection and practice on the quality of teaching and learning aligned up with universities missions and expectations. An effective training needs to be based on potent policies and adequate practices.

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