

Problems Faced by English Teachers in Developing Practical Knowledge in Pre-service Teacher Education in China

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Abstract: *It is widely accepted that practical knowledge, which facilitates the development of teaching competence, lays a solid foundation for teaching competence and professionalization. However, it is underestimated and marginalized in the current arrangement of courses in teacher education in China. The theme of the paper is to reveal the problems faced by pre-service TEFL teachers in such a context and their expectations for a change in the future. Questionnaires were employed to explore the views of 64 randomly chosen participants among sophomore student teachers in China West Normal University in China. The results from the survey suggest that most students feel that they have a low level of competence in mastery of knowledge of language teaching, the strong influence from student teachers' former English teachers' instruction in secondary school, the lack of video-cases in developing student teachers' teaching competence, the lack of practice with guidance from the experts and the lack of intimate knowledge of students in primary school and secondary school. The findings illuminated the problems faced by TEFL teachers in pre-service teacher education and showed us the possibility and necessity to combine video-case observation with lesson study to form a new teacher training mode in which theory and practice are to be connected tightly.*

Keywords: problems; practical knowledge; preservice teacher education; countermeasures

1. Introduction

Practical knowledge is the first concern to strengthen the teachers' teaching competence in pre-service teacher education. Too many educators wrongly believe that effective teaching is primarily a matter of applying theories to practice (Lampert, 2010; Zeichner, 2010; Holland, Evans, & Hawksley, 2011). However, everyday teaching involves more complex and better decision making with consideration of multiple, competing demands and assessment of possibilities within the prevailing circumstances than the one-way action of applying theory to practice (Black and Halliwell, 2000). And this practical knowledge which derives from constant process of exploration, reflection, rectification and creation with the guidance of the correct theories through ones' teaching experiences or reflections on ones' own or others' teaching behaviors is the guarantee of the teaching efficiency (Freeman, 2016).

However, the courses related to English education (pedagogical content knowledge and teaching competence courses) in China are marginalized in normal universities (referring to teacher education institutes in China) and the practical knowledge is ignored or at least

neglected in the present courses arranged for College English Major. The emphasis is placed more on the training of English language knowledge and skills, arts, and general knowledge of education (Cheng, 2021).

According to the *National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Major* issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2018, the focus of cultivating English education talents (especially English teachers) is to develop comprehensive abilities with a good grasp of language knowledge, language skills, literary connoisseurship, pedagogical content knowledge, cross-cultural communicative abilities, critical thinking ability, research ability, creativity, IT application ability, autonomous learning ability and practical knowledge, among which the practical knowledge is the foundation for future teaching career.

Many scholars (Zou, 2009; He, 2015; Cheng, 2021) examined the curriculum of normal universities carefully and found that the language knowledge and skills are overemphasized and the development of practical knowledge is biased against. Although the research revealed the unproportionate arrangement of courses at normal universities, the attitudes of student teachers are not studied systematically to disclose the problems faced by them and their expectation in ideal teacher education program. Thus, it is significant to study the student teachers' views towards the courses which aim at the development of practical knowledge and their suggestion for the possible change in the future.

2. Literature review

2.1 Practical knowledge

Schwab (1970) was considered to be one of the earliest scholars who began to use the term "practical" in curriculum and teaching studies. He argued that the pure application of theory in the real world of teaching, where the real issues, real students, and real teachers are dealt with is a mistake. Based on this view, Elbaz (1981) attempted to use the term 'practical knowledge' to revalue teachers' own tacit and experiential knowledge. He thinks that teachers are not passive users of academic research findings but the key agents who can actively participate in generating legitimate and context sensitive knowledge through "participating in and reflecting on action and experience in specific contexts" (Chaharbashloo et al., 2020). It is Sun (2012) that revealed the dynamic nature of practical knowledge. He opines that practical knowledge is reflected in the individual teacher's prior knowledge, in the person's present mind and body formed by acknowledgement of other teachers' knowledge in situations and in the person's future plans and actions. Thus, this knowledge drives from one's experiences and exerts great impact on one's decision making in the teaching activities.

The reason why practical knowledge is as important as or even more important than pure theories is because of its contexts-related nature and problems pertinency. According to Meijer, Verloop, Beijaard (1999), the teacher education overemphasizes knowledge and beliefs behind teachers' classroom practice rather than their own behaviors perennially. This results in the incongruence between the theoretical knowledge they learn in the teacher education institutes and the knowledge of experienced teachers or acquired from their own practices, which is always proved to be of more value than mechanic inculcation of theories and principles. This knowledge that is generated by individual teachers through ones' teaching experiences, reflections on ones' own or others' teaching behaviors and guide their actions in the classroom is called practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is the "knowledge of the teachers" (Meijer,

et al., 1999) rather than “knowledge for the teachers”. Therefore, it is possible for the teachers to utilize to deal with context related practicalities efficiently.

Practical knowledge was not paid enough attention in 20th century in China. Aiming to meet the booming of market-based economy since 1980s, expansion of enrollment of higher education was the inexorable choice to develop more talents in different trades and professions. Thus, the universities and colleges affiliated to Ministry and provincial universities and colleges were given more freedom by the governments to reassess and readjust the educational goal and avoid the simple repetition of cultivation of the same talents at different levels of colleges and universities to meet the demand of talents in personnel market. Therefore, more and more colleges want to upgrade themselves into universities and normal universities want to denormalize (or weaken teacher education) to transform themselves into comprehensive universities. In the process of denormalization, the status of teacher education was weakened or marginalized. The education courses and time allocated for practicum were reduced sharply.

According to *the Suggestion of Ministry of Education about Reformation of Curriculum of Teacher education* (Ministry of Education, 2011), simulated classroom, authentic classroom practice teaching, situational teaching and case analysis are recommended to increase would-be teachers’ interest, promote teaching efficiency and focus on the development of normal university students’ learning ability, practical ability and creativity. In *the Suggestion of Ministry of Education about Strengthening Normal University Students Practicum* (Ministry of Education, 2016), all universities that have the majors of teacher education are required to embed practice teaching in different phases of the process of teacher training to facilitate students to participate in various kinds of practice activities, e.g., educational observation, simulated practice teaching, special teaching skill training, educational research and centralized practicum to strengthen the student teachers’ practical knowledge. Although practical knowledge receives an adequate attention from the government and educational institutes, the implementation and the effects are to be studied to know the achievement and the potential problems for educational reformation in the future.

2.2 Previous studies

As is mentioned above, the value of practical knowledge of normal university students in China was underestimated and removed from the core competences because of the change of school mission and the requirement of educational policies since 1980s. Thus, the courses arranged for student teachers were centered more on the language, literature and general education. Since 2011, Ministry of education of the people’s Republic of China and normal universities began to realize the importance of practical knowledge. In 2018, *National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Major* was issued by the Ministry of Education, in which practical knowledge is regarded as one of eleven most important skills of normal universities. However, the development of practical knowledge has not been one of the major focuses in the present courses of English major in normal universities until now. The typical research on the issue of practical knowledge are listed below to illustrate the existence of this problem.

He (2015) investigated the curriculum of two most famous normal universities (Sichuan Normal University and China West Normal University) in Sichuan province in China and found that the general education courses and language courses constitutes almost more than 78%, while teacher education courses and educational practice courses account only 11% and 12% respectively. The data suggest that the courses arranged for normal university students are not aimed at the development of practical knowledge but on language skills.

Zhu (2016) used questionnaire, classroom observation and reflective journals to investigate the effect of educational observation on student teachers' development of practical knowledge. And she found that 1+7 model (one week of centralized educational observation and 7 weeks of self-directed educational observation is beneficial to the development of student teachers' practical knowledge.

Cheng (2021) also found that the practical knowledge is ignored or at least neglected in the present courses arranged for College English Major. The emphasis is placed more on the training of English language knowledge and skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and literature, etc., 65 % in the total courses) and arts and general knowledge of education (31% in the total courses). Thus, the courses arranged for English language teaching are very few.

In a word, the researches mentioned above aimed at finding the problems of teacher education from aspects of the curriculum stipulation, courses arrangement and university teachers' ability. However, these research only focused on the macro aspect of teacher education and neglected student teachers' own views and expectations, which is the micro aspect and the center of teacher education. The present research is intended to study this gap and hope to provide university teachers and researchers with more insight into teacher education from a different perspective.

3. Methodology

In order to find out the problems of developing student teachers' practical knowledge in normal Universities in China, a questionnaire survey is used to investigate into 64 sophomore students' views. These students are from class 13 and 14 (Class 8 to class 15 are majoring in English education) from the 278 students majoring in English Education in their fourth semester of undergraduate study in grade 2020 in China West Normal University. Among these student teachers, 4 students are male and 60 students are female. There is no bias against male students, for the total number of male students are 22 in grade 2020. The questionnaire adopted in the present research is composed of 9 close-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions to explore the student teachers' attitudes in the aspects of their mastery of language teaching theories, the source of influence on their conception of language teaching, their ability to teach language knowledge and language skills, the attitudes towards the use of video-cases and practice opportunities and their attitudes towards the experts' guidance in the practice teaching. The open-ended questions are employed to supplement the data that cannot be covered in the close-ended questions. The data includes both quantitative data and qualitative data collected from 64 valid questionnaires.

The quantitative data were keyed into the computer and analyzed through SPSS 27. The qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions were stored as a small corpus in computer and were dealt via thematic analysis. Based on the data analysis, the following two questions are to be answered in the present research:

- 1) What are the problems of developing student teachers' practical knowledge in normal universities in China?
- 2) What are student teachers' expectations in innovating the teacher education program in developing their practical knowledge?

4. Findings

4.1 The problem of developing student teachers' practical knowledge

Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data, the problems are mainly the low level of competence in mastery of knowledge of language teaching, the strong influence from student teachers' former English teachers' instruction in secondary school, the lack of video-cases in developing student teachers' teaching competence, the lack of practice with guidance from the experts (see table 1) and the lack of knowledge of students in primary school and secondary school.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of students' views towards the courses in English language teaching

	N	Minimum	maximum	mean	Std. Deviation
TK	64	2.00	4.00	2.8438	.56957
IFETS	64	1.00	5.00	3.5781	1.06614
ITU	64	1.00	5.00	3.3906	.88402
ATT	64	2.00	4.00	3.0313	.64164
EKT	64	2.00	4.00	2.8437	.64780
EST	64	1.00	4.00	2.8125	.70991
LVC	64	1.00	5.00	3.1094	.89296
LP	64	1.00	5.00	3.9531	.78538
LG	64	2.00	5.00	3.4688	.90797
N of cases	64				

TK= Knowledge of teaching; IFETS=Influence from former English teachers in secondary school; ITU= Influence from teachers at university; ATT= Application of teaching theories; EKT= English Knowledge Teaching; EST= English Skills Teaching; LVC= lack of video-case; LP= Lack of practice; LG= Lack of guidance from experts.

4.1.1 The low level of competence in mastery of knowledge of language teaching

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of students' knowledge of language teaching

	Frequency	percent	Cumulative percent
disagree	16	25	25.0
neutral	42	65.6	90.6
agree	6	9.4	100.0
Total	64	100	

From Table 1, it is easy to notice that the mean of Knowledge of Language Teaching is low (2.8438), which indicates that students are still incompetent in mastery of knowledge of language teaching and diffident in conducting language teaching independently at present. Thus, to learn more courses pertaining to language teaching and get more training in practical knowledge is essential for student teachers at normal universities. However, they still feel optimistic and hopeful to be a good teacher, because only 25% (see table 2) feel that they have a poor knowledge of language teaching and cannot conduct English teaching independently. Most of them (65.6%, see table 2) claim that they don't know whether they have a deep understanding of language teaching or not because they report that there is a lack of opportunities for them to do practice teaching to check whether their cognition of language teaching is correct or not in the open-ended questions. Thus, it is these students who can be

changed and become confident and competent teachers once they get more opportunities to practice.

4.1.2 The strong influence from student teachers' former English teachers' instruction

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of students' report of the influence from former English teachers in secondary school

		Frequency	percent	Cumulative percent
	strongly disagree	1	1.6	1.6
	disagree	15	23.4	25.0
	neutral	4	6.3	31.3
	agree	34	53.1	84.4
	strongly agree	10	15.6	100.0
	Total	64	100.0	

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of students' report of Influence from teachers at university

		Frequency	percent	Cumulative percent
	strongly disagree	1	1.6	1.6
	disagree	9	14.1	15.6
	neutral	23	35.9	51.6
	agree	26	40.6	92.2
	strongly agree	5	7.8	100.0

From table 1, it is found that the mean of IFETS is higher than ITU. It suggests that student teachers feel that they are influenced mainly by their former secondary English teachers. This can be confirmed by the percentage of the students who show agreement about their attitudes towards two kinds of influences (68.7% and 48.4%, see table 3 and table 4). Because a substantial portion of students come from rural areas, the influence from their former secondary schools might be negative and impede them from accepting new theories which are inconsistent with the teaching ideology of their former secondary school English teachers.

Table 5: Independent samples descriptive statistics of student teachers from rural areas and urban areas

origin of students		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TK	rural areas	13	3.0000	.40825	.11323
	urban areas	51	2.8039	.60065	.08411
IFETS	rural areas	13	3.4615	1.19829	.33235
	urban areas	51	3.6078	1.04074	.14573
ITU	rural areas	13	3.7692	.72501	.20108
	urban areas	51	3.2941	.90098	.12616

Table 6: Results of Independent Samples T Test statistics of student teachers from rural areas and urban areas

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
TK	Equal variances assumed	7.852	.007	1.110	62	.271	.19608	.17664	-.15701	.54917
	Equal variances not assumed			1.390	26.929	.176	.19608	.14105	-.09337	.48552
IFETS	Equal variances assumed	1.198	.278	-.439	62	.662	-.14630	.33339	-.81274	.52013
	Equal variances not assumed			-.403	16.908	.692	-.14630	.36289	-.91226	.61965
ITU	Equal variances assumed	2.146	.148	1.758	62	.084	.47511	.27021	-.06503	1.01526
	Equal variances not assumed			2.001	22.471	.058	.47511	.23738	-.01659	.96682

From Table 5 and Table 6, it can be found that there are no significant differences between the means of TK, IFETS, ITU. The *P* values of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances of TK, IFETS, ITU are 0.007, 0.278, 0.148 respectively, all of which except the *P* value of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances of TK are bigger than 0.05. It suggests that the variances of the means of IFETS, ITU of student teachers from rural areas and urban areas are equal. And the variance of the means of TK is not equal. So we should check the results of IFETS, ITU in the row of "Equal variances assumed" and the result of TK in the row "Equal variances not assumed". The *P* values of t-test for Equality of Means are 0.176, 0.662, 0.084 respectively, all of which are bigger than .05. Thus, it can be concluded that there are no significant differences between student teachers from rural areas and urban areas in terms of the means of TK, IFETS and ITU. However, the statistics show us that the mean of ITU of student teachers from rural areas are obviously higher than that of student teachers from urban areas. And the *P* value t-test for Equality of Means is 0.084, which is very close to 0.05. The underlying reason may be the rural students' dissatisfaction with their former secondary school English teachers' instruction and they are more inclined to seek new teaching approaches, methods and techniques and more likely be influenced by teachers at universities.

4.1.3 The lack of video-cases in developing student teachers' teaching competence.

Table 7: Descriptive statistics of students' report of the lack of video-cases

	Frequency	percent	Cumulative percent
strongly disagree	1	1.6	1.6
disagree	17	26.6	28.1
neutral	22	34.4	62.5
agree	22	34.4	96.9
strongly agree	2	3.1	100.0
Total	64	100.0	

From table 1, it is discovered that the main obstacles for students are the lack of video-cases, the lack of practice and the lack of guidance from the experts (3.1094, 3.9531, 3.4688), especially the lack of practice and the lack of guidance from the experts. Actually, according to open-ended questions, students can have access to a lot of video lessons online nowadays. So only 37.5% (see table 7) of students report that the lack of the video-cases is the biggest barrier in the development of teaching competence.

4.1.4 The lack of practice with guidance from the experts

Table 8: Descriptive statistics of students' report of the lack of practice

		frequency	percent	Cumulative percent
	strongly disagree	1	1.6	1.6
	disagree	3	4.7	6.3
	neutral	6	9.4	15.6
	agree	42	65.6	81.3
	strongly agree	12	18.8	100.0
	Total	64	100.0	

Table 9: Descriptive statistics of students' report of the lack of guidance from the experts

		Frequency	percent	Cumulative percent
	disagree	10	15.6	15.6
	neutral	22	34.4	50.0
	agree	24	37.5	87.5
	strongly agree	8	12.5	100.0
	Total	64	100.0	

Table 8 shows that most students feel a lack of practice (84.4%) is the biggest impediment and the lack of guidance from the experts (50%, see table 9) to explain these video-cases or and the lack of their comment on their practice teaching also hinder the speedy improvement in student teachers' practical knowledge. Thus, it is not only urgent to enrich a variety of video-cases to meet student teachers' request to instantiate the theories and acquaint themselves with all kinds of context-related instructional problems, but also essential to offer student teachers detailed explanation of video-cases and connect the video-cases with practice teaching with the timely guidance from the teacher educators.

4.1.5 The lack of knowledge of students in primary school and secondary school

According to the data collected from open-ended questions in the questionnaire, the difficulties student teachers mainly face are the lack of systematic learning of theories, the lack of practice opportunities, inability to connect theories with practice and a lack of knowledge of students (see table 10).

Table 10: The difficulties faced by student teachers in developing teaching competence

difficulty	Frequency	percent
Lack of knowledge of students	17	26.5%
Poor command of English	3	4.7%
Lack of practice opportunities	23	35.9%

Lack of systematic learning of theories	25	39%
Inability to connect theories with practice	20	31%
Lack of learning resources	2	3%

The difficulty of the lack of knowledge of students is unexpected compared with other difficulties, because no students reported in the process of learning and their practice teaching before. It is always taken for granted that student teachers can put themselves in the shoes of secondary school students because of their short span of age gap. However, 26.5% of the total feel difficult to presuppose the conditions of secondary school students and design lesson and implement it accordingly. The phenomenon can be explained by a larger proportion of students from urban areas and they don't have a whole picture of the status quo of language proficiency and cognitive levels of students from different schools at different levels in different regions in China. So the students feel difficult to deal with secondary students at different levels because of a lack of contact with rural schools students or even students from poor city residential areas. Some examples are listed below to illustrate the existence of this difficulty.

- (1) "I feel difficult to make students realize the importance of English learning and learn actively. It is also difficult to make students be involved in classroom activities with the useful resources and knowledge students need to intrigue them and draw their attention."
- (2) "I feel difficult to design the lesson that are suitable for different groups of students."
- (3) "It is hard to design a lesson according to students' situation because of the vague idea of students at different levels. It is also hard to prepare measures to deal with unexpected situations in classroom and organize activities to make students participate after the learning of materials in the course book."

4.2 The student teachers' expectations in innovating the teacher education program

Table 11: The descriptive statistics of the suggestions of on innovating teacher education courses

Suggestions on innovation of teacher education courses	Frequency	percent
The use of cases (especially video-cases)	26	40.6%
Practice	31	48%
IT technology	2	3%
Ethics and knowledge of law	1	1.5%
Lectures from expert teachers to share experiences	3	4.6%
Practical teaching methods in China	4	6%
Interactive activities in classroom	4	6%

From table 11, we can notice that there are mainly eight types of suggestions to innovate teacher education courses, among which the use of cases and practice are the most urgent ones for the large proportion of students who are demanding for the change. Two themes derive from these two kinds of suggestions are analyzed with examples in the following part.

Theme 1: Student teachers are longing for cases (especially video cases) to develop teaching competence

It seems that this is contradictory with the finding in the survey, in which 37.5% (See table 7) of students claim that the lack of the video-cases is the biggest barrier in the development of teaching competence. However, the video-case problem is not only the lack of video materials, but the lack of connection between video with theories and detailed explanation given by the teacher educators and the lack of guidance given to them about how to practice in their own teaching activities. Thus, this phenomenon can be demonstrated with the following examples.

(4) “I want to get some concrete examples of how English teachers deal with the problems of students at various levels successfully for reference and alert.”

(5) “I hope that teacher can demonstrate with richer supply of video-cases and I want to experience real teaching through practice.”

(6) “Teacher can increase the practice courses, e.g., play classic video-cases and discuss among student teachers.”

Theme 2: Practice is essential for the development of teaching competence

This is in consistence with student teachers’ concern mentioned above. Many students are bored with the pure language teaching theories inculcation. They prefer to practice and experience language teaching with the teacher’s explanation of theories and video case observation as a priori and teacher’s feedback and individualized guidance follows behind. It can be proved through the following examples.

(7) “It is better to analyze more real problems in details with the simple language rather than the pedantic style of language in the course book. Besides, more practice opportunities are badly in need.”

(8) “Theories are learnt for practice. Step 1, apply the theories to practice. Step 2, make improvement by oneself. Step 3, give comment by group members. Step 4, self-reflection and rectification. Besides, more experiences are needed and different contexts are to be set for student teachers.”

(9) “To give student teachers more opportunities to simulate the real classroom contexts. Student teachers do the lesson planning, implement the lesson and do the reflection after the lesson.”

5. Conclusion

In this research, the importance, the history and present situation of development of practical knowledge in China were introduced. Aiming to find out the problems of developing practical knowledge faced by pre-service TEFL teachers and their expectations for a change in the future, questionnaires were employed to explore the views of sophomore student teachers in China West Normal University in China. According to the qualitative and quantitative analysis, it is found that most students feel that they have a low level of competence in mastery of knowledge of language teaching, no enough opportunities to do practice teaching with guidance, a strong influence from former secondary school English teachers, a lack of video-cases and have a poor knowledge of students in primary school and secondary school. The

suggestions given by them to develop practical knowledge are mainly the use of video cases with detailed explanation and more practice opportunities given to them with guidance from the experts.

The findings illuminated the problems faced by TEFL teachers in pre-service teacher education and showed us the possibility and necessity to combine video-case observation with lesson study to form a new teacher training mode in which theory and practice are alloyed tightly. How to conduct this model and whether it is effective are to be studied in the future research.

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