Making Sense of Pre-Service English Teachers' Practicum Experiences: Perspectives on Teacher Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explicitly articulate how one learns how to teach English. Guided by sociocultural perspectives on teacher learning (Johnson, 2009), pre-service English teachers' practicum experiences were examined to gain insights into how they come to know what they know about language teaching. Ten pre-service English teachers recalled and reflected on their practicum experiences through a semi-structured interview and reflection logs. Their teaching practices were also documented through audio/video recorded classroom observations with a follow-up stimulated recall interview. Making sense of learning experiences during practicum revealed that teacher learning was enabled by the guidance of cooperating teachers, the use of symbolic mediation tools for teaching, and challenges in the teaching-learning environment. Recognizing these aspects of teacher learning can support teacher preparation. Teacher education practices should explicitly integrate them into learning experiences that can prepare pre-service English teachers for the complex realities of practice.

Keywords: *second language teacher education (SLTE), teacher learning, human mediation, mediation tools, mediation space*

Listening to the narratives of those who are learning how to teach language can inform Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE). Perspectives of pre-service English teachers provide a lens on the cumulative process of teacher learning. Recognizing these views informs teacher preparation in developing adaptive teachers who can thrive in the challenging contexts of practice. Moreover, giving voice to those learning how to teach can yield insights on relevant realizations and future directions of SLTE programs. This is a practicable step to strengthen teacher preparation and inform policy amendments toward improving teacher quality.

Interest in articulating the process of learning how to teach has been furthered by sociocultural perspectives in SLTE, particularly on teacher learning. Johnson (2009) stresses that "when we turn our attention to how teachers come to know what they

know, how certain concepts in teachers' consciousness develop over time, and how their learning processes transform them and the activities of L2 teaching, we put ourselves in a much better position to support learning and development in the broader enterprise of L2 teacher education" (p. 17). Insights on teacher learning logically inform how pre-service teachers can be taught efficiently to prepare them for the realities of practice.

Sociocultural perspectives in SLTE argue for a shift from traditional models of teacher preparation. These perspectives cover areas of epistemology (positivist to interpretive), teaching practice (theory and technique application to reflective practice), and research (science models application to interpretive research and teacher cognition). Johnson (2009) elaborates on these with five points of view. First, teachers are viewed as learners of teaching; thus, there is value in understanding how teacher learning happens to logically inform how teacher learners can be prepared efficiently. Second, language is viewed as a social practice where meaning and use are situated in social and cultural contexts. Third, language teaching is viewed as dialogic mediation where concept development is critical to teacher learning and professional development. Emergence and internalization of concepts are seen to help teachers make informed instructional decisions. Fourth, second language teaching is situated in the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. Johnson (2006) calls for a located L2 teacher education which "will entail recognizing how changing sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts affect the ways in which L2 teachers are positioned, how they enact their teaching practices, and, most importantly, the kinds of learning environments they are willing and able to create for their L2 students" (p. 247). Finally, the sociocultural perspective in SLTE promotes an inquiry-based approach to professional development which encourages language teachers to reflect on their practice.

Sociocultural perspectives in SLTE look into teachers' ways of knowing. In this aspect, examining important areas of teachers' mental lives adopts an interpretive research paradigm to analyze the complexities of language teacher education. Teacher learning is seen to be shaped by one's experiences. How one learns, what is learned, and how it is used can be attributed to his/her social interactions. Foreign research in SLTE has explored these perspectives by documenting authentic learning experiences of teacher-learners. Findings highlight the transformative nature of teacher learning where different knowledge sources, social interactions, and contextual factors contribute to development (Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Herrmann, 2015; Singh & Richards, 2006). However, Johnson (2006) argues that "despite this sociocultural turn and the challenges it has created for L2 teacher education, it has yet to infiltrate the positivistic paradigm that continues to dominate the public discourse surrounding the professional activities of L2 teachers" (p. 237).

The positivist perspective relates to the prescriptive tradition in teacher learning where apprenticeship of observation is evident. Stefanski, Leitze, and Fife-Demski (2018) note this as an obstacle in teacher learning. Deeper learning is impeded when

pre-service teachers apply instructional strategies as observed in course work but fail to critically make sense of connections between concepts and practice. McMahan and Garza (2017) captured a similar observation in documenting how pre-service teachers described their learning in a structured field experience before practicum. The participants' responses exhibited a superficial grasp of pedagogy evidenced by the failure to articulate a deeper understanding of teaching and learning. Teacher learning was at a surface level limited to describing what was observed. There is a need for similar local studies that examine the implicit process of teacher learning. Articulating what happens when one learns how to teach guides informed interventions in teacher preparation. It is in this regard that the current study tackles the sensemaking process in teacher learning while taking the lens of sociocultural perspectives in SLTE.

Examining teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective entails a view of mediation. Childs (2011) defines mediation as "the process of connecting and relating our social and mental worlds through physical and symbolic tools in activity" (p. 70). Mediation is transformative as it moves from external to internal processes. Reflecting on practice leads to the internalization of knowledge and skills. Therefore, teacher learning is manifested by a "transformation" or a "cognitive change" as teacher-learners own their learning and appropriate it to the context of teaching practice.

With the view of teacher learning as mediation, this study examined three aspects of pre-service English teachers' learning. These are human mediation, mediation tools, and mediation space. First, human mediation refers to social relations that contribute to the learning process. Interactions with experts and peers are considered enabling opportunities for teacher-learners to make connections between and among received knowledge and learning experiences. The right assistance from human mediation, also termed "scaffolding," is expected to lead to the internalization of concepts. Eventually, teacher-learners transform with an ability to reconstruct received knowledge. Examining human mediation within the learning spaces of the practicum provides relevant insights on how pre-service English teachers learn what they learn, and how they use what they have learned. Second, mediation tools refer to instructional tools which can be physical or symbolic. Physical tools (i.e., physical cultural artifacts) may include instructional materials, lesson plans, textbooks, videos, course handouts, or recorded teacher narratives which are enabling materials that inform teaching. Symbolic tools, on the other hand, refer to psychological tools that may include teaching techniques, teaching philosophy, upheld beliefs, and academic concepts that mediate teacher-learners' mental processes. Teacher learning can be described based on the kind of tools teacher-learners use and how they utilize them. Finally, the third aspect of teacher learning that this study examined is the mediation space which refers to social structures that support participation and interaction for teacher learning. Mediation spaces are complex environments that can present tensions between upheld beliefs and realities. Both human mediation and use of mediation tools are situated in mediation spaces that afford opportunities for learning.

The identified aspects of teacher learning that relate to mediation processes have been explored by studies that involved second language teachers. Learning experiences of pre-service English teachers were documented to describe external processes involving human mediation where teacher-learners interact with experienced teachers who support their learning (Engin, 2014; Gan, 2014; Kolman et al., 2016; Molina, 2015). Learning experiences also comprised of use of mediation tools, both physical and symbolic, that become instrumental in making sense of experiences (Childs, 2011; Chung & van Es, 2014). Mediation spaces also proved to be a significant factor in teacher learning as discussed in SLTE studies that raised issues and highlighted gaps linked to contextual factors (Farrell, 2014; 2018; Harvey et al., 2016; Khourey-Bowers, 2005; Young et al., 2016; Zeichner & Liston, 2014).

Examining the implicit process of teacher learning is a relatively unexplored research area in local studies in SLTE; thus, this study intends to stir discussions on teacher learning by examining pre-service English teachers' practicum experiences. The practicum stage is a practicable context since this is where teacher-learners engage in their early teaching experiences. Moreover, the practicum school is a place where pre-service teachers experience moments of tension or conflict which can prompt sensemaking. Documenting the participants' practicum experiences may yield information on how teacher-learners come to understand concepts about teaching and learning language. Making sense of relevant learning experiences will reveal insights into factors that enable and further teacher learning.

Research Aims

This study focused on the transformative process of teacher learning among pre-service English teachers. Informed by sociocultural perspectives on teacher learning (Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2016), this study examined the participants' lived experiences during the practicum to gain insights into how these lead to the internalization of concepts in teaching English. More specifically, this study aimed to answer the question: What do pre-service English teachers' experiences in the practicum reveal about teacher learning?

Methodology

The methods of this study aimed to articulate aspects of teacher learning as a process that moves from external or socially-mediated interactions to internal sensemaking of relevant experiences. This goal was guided by the epistemological stance of sociocultural perspectives in SLTE which claim that "knowledge that informs activity is not just abstracted from theory, codified in textbooks, and constructed through principled ways of examining phenomena, but also emerges out of a dialogic and transformative process of reconsidering and reorganizing lived experiences through the theoretical constructs and discourses that are publicly recognized and valued within the communities of practice that hold power" (Johnson, 2006, pp. 240-241).

Accordingly, studies informed by sociocultural views documented and made sense of teacher-learners' lived experiences through qualitative case studies that allowed the researchers to thoroughly tap into relevant experiences that contributed to teacher learning. Qualitative tools such as interviews, observations, stimulated recall, and reflective journals were utilized to engage participants in authentic dialogic interactions to make sense of naturally-occurring data (Albaba, 2017; Engin, 2014; Kolman et al., 2016; Molina, 2015; & Yagata, 2017). In the same way, this inquiry created opportunities for dialogue between the researcher and the pre-service teachers through classroom observations with stimulated recall, semi-structured interview, and reflective journals.

Research Design

This inquiry was a participant observation study that focused on making sense of relevant learning experiences during the practicum to gain insights on pre-service English teacher learning. Participant observation studies are narrower than ethnographies as these situate the researcher in a social setting for a specific research interest and entail less time in the field (Hatch, 2002). Data collection methods included interviewing, artifact collection, and direct observation. Data gathering procedures were conducted in natural settings with the use of analytic tools. Both researcher and participants engaged in co-constructing meanings of lived experiences which involved the participants' interactions with themselves and others.

Participants

Ten pre-service English teachers or teacher-learners in their senior year participated in the study. These pre-service teachers came from two teacher education institutions (TEIs) in the National Capital Region, Philippines. These institutions were purposefully chosen for their shared characteristics. Both contexts are established higher education institutions and centers for excellence in teacher education. There was no intent to make any comparison since the pre-service English teachers were considered homogenous samples who shared similar experiences.

The ten pre-service teachers were doing their practicum during the conduct of this study. Five participants (Carla, Monica, Stacey, Ice, and Ira) had a 10-week off-campus practicum course. This was taken after their completion of a prerequisite on-campus practicum course in their institution's laboratory school. The off-campus practicum in the cooperating public high school required class observations and actual classroom teaching that lasted for about eight (8) weeks. The pre-service teachers were assigned in two public high schools in the south of Metro Manila where they taught English classes at the junior high school level. Each was assigned to a cooperating teacher from the practicum school. They were also supervised by a practicum supervisor from their TEI who made at least two visits, with a four-week interval, in the cooperating school for classroom observation.

The other five participants (Arvin, James, Gela, Ben, and Albern) took their practicum course for one semester and spent about 18 weeks of student teaching in their institution's laboratory school. Arvin and Gela taught junior high school students and were individually assigned to a supervising teacher. On the other hand, James, Ben, and Albern taught Grade 6 classes and were assigned to a common supervising teacher. They were assigned to the same teacher due to the limited number of available teachers who were qualified to supervise student teachers at the time the study was conducted. The English department in the practicum school purposefully assigned supervising teachers selected on the basis of their teaching experience and other qualifications. These supervising teachers had responsibilities similar to those of the cooperating teachers in the earlier mentioned public high schools. They mentored and guided the pre-service teachers in their practicum experience. A teacher educator from their TEI served as the student teaching coordinator whose tasks were similar to those of a practicum supervisor. Apart from observing classes taught by student teachers in the laboratory school, the coordinator also met with the pre-service teachers once a week to monitor their performance and address practicum concerns. This weekly meeting was part of a seminar course that the pre-service teachers took concurrently with practicum. The course was intended for the integration of learning into the degree program.

Instruments

Two research instruments were utilized to document the relevant practicum experiences of the pre-service teachers. First, the researcher-developed Classroom Observation Guide for Stimulated Recall was used to record relevant teaching events and interactions during the conduct of a lesson. Notable observations on instructional delivery included notes on classroom tasks, instructional materials, direct instruction and feedback, teacher-student interaction, student role/participation, and student-student interaction. These aspects of classroom teaching were key to identifying discussion points during stimulated recall. The interviews for stimulated recall prompted the participants to externalize how they put theories into practice and to where they attributed their use of instructional practices. During the stimulated recall, the video-recorded lesson was viewed and paused at significant teaching points noted during the observation. On the other hand, particular portions of audio-recorded lessons were transcribed and read to the participants. Questions were then asked to encourage participants to talk about their actions, thoughts, and feelings during the selected moments in the lesson.

The second instrument was the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol on Pre-Service English Teachers' Perspectives on Teacher Learning which engaged the participants in self-interaction as they drew insights from their experiences and thought processes. The interview questions extracted critical issues and insights through making sense of the lived experiences during practicum. The protocol had three main parts. Part I mined the pre-service teachers' upheld beliefs about English Language Teaching. Part II elicited recall of and reflection on relevant experiences in the practicum, while Part

III focused on pre-service teachers' reflections and realizations about how they learned how to teach.

In addition, the participants' reflective journals were examined to look into similar sensemaking. The weekly journals were written as part of the practicum requirements. In the journal entries, participants described relevant school experiences and/or wrote about realizations and insights not just on teaching and learning but also on themselves.

Data Gathering Procedure

This study engaged in naturalistic qualitative methods which involved direct interaction with the participants through classroom observation, stimulated recall, and semi-structured interview. Weekly reflective journals of the participants during the practicum were also collected and analyzed. These methods were used to describe teacher learning as pre-service English teachers made sense of their learning experiences. Data collection was conducted in an actual practicum school setting to give focus on participants' realities. The objective was to reflect both their introspective thought processes and observable actions to identify specific aspects of teacher learning.

Classroom observations were conducted in the practicum setting. All the participants signed a consent form allowing the researcher to gather data through recorded classroom observation with a follow-up stimulated recall. Consent from the practicum school was also secured. The practicum school that did not give permission to video record lessons allowed audio recording. Relevant portions of the recording were transcribed for stimulated recall.

Each of the 10 pre-service English teachers was observed twice with a gap period of two to three weeks. A total of 20 lessons were observed. Stimulated recall interviews were done within 48 hours after the classroom observation. Teaching events noted during the observations were viewed or read by the researcher and the participant during stimulated recall. These teaching events involved relevant interactions in the classroom. For the video-recorded lessons, the recording was paused at the pre-identified points to discuss what the pre-service teacher was doing, thinking, or feeling. Instructional decisions made prior to and while doing the lesson were also discussed. For the audio-recorded lessons, the researcher and the participant went through transcribed portions of the lesson together. These stimulated recall interviews were audio-recorded and lasted from 6 to 20 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews with the participants were also conducted. The researcher sought the participants' consent by first discussing the objectives of the study. It was made clear that the classroom observations, stimulated recall, and interviews were done for research purposes and were not part of the graded requirements. The interviews engaged the participants in self-interaction by reflecting

on past and contemporary experiences. The participants were encouraged to make sense of relevant experiences that contributed to their learning how to teach. Five of the participants were interviewed at the end of the term after the completion of their practicum. The other five were interviewed after the second classroom observation by which time they had already been doing practicum for three months.

Reflective journals were also collected for document analysis. These journals were written by the pre-service teachers as part of their requirements in the practicum. The participants emailed a soft copy and/or scanned copy of their journal entries for the weeks when classroom observation was conducted.

Data Analysis

The study utilized typological analysis in examining data. "Typological strategies are generated from theory, common sense, and/or research objectives, and initial data processing happens within those typological groupings" (Hatch, 2002, p. 152). This type of qualitative analysis works for both interview data and document analysis given that the research objective clearly identified actors and social contexts. The steps in the typological analysis of qualitative data outlined by Hatch (2002) were adapted. The process began by identifying a typology and its sub-categories which were anchored to the research question.

The identified typology was Teacher Learning. Three sub-categories were determined based on sociocultural perspectives on teacher learning which was viewed as mediation and could be described through human mediation, mediation tools, and mediation space. Data were then read multiple times and coded using the identified sub-categories. Summary sheets for each participant were prepared for each data source: stimulated recall, semi-structured interview, and reflective journals. Similarities, differences, frequency, and causations were examined in finding patterns in the summary statements. These patterns of relationships led to themes that were used to re-examine the raw data. This entailed another round of analysis and coding to look for evidence that supported the identified themes. The process ended with the drawing of conclusions and writing of brief generalizations.

Results and Discussion

The pre-service English teachers' practicum experiences reflected how teacher learning was enabled through human mediation, the use of particular symbolic tools, and adapting to the mediation space. First, human mediation through relevant interactions with cooperating teachers supported teacher learning. However, tensions related to these interactions were also noted. Second, pre-service teachers identified symbolic mediation tools that informed their instructional decisions. These tools involved beliefs on language and language learning based on received knowledge and their own learning experience. Finally, the practicum context as a mediation space presented challenges that prompted the pre-service teachers to reflect on their experiences and explore ways to adapt to uncomfortable teaching-learning situations. These describe teacher learning which points

to implications for how pre-service teachers can be prepared for the unpredictable realities in the classroom.

Teacher Learning and Human Mediation Through Cooperating Teachers

Human mediation refers to the pre-service teachers' interactions with individuals and/or groups within the context of their learning. In the practicum context, the cooperating teachers proved to have supported teacher learning. The participants claimed to have learned teaching strategies from their cooperating teachers. They found it practicable to mirror what they perceived as their cooperating teachers' good practices in the classroom. They were also receptive to their cooperating teachers' feedback and suggestions. Supportive relationships were established through the encouraging and reassuring guidance of the cooperating teachers.

The support provided by cooperating teachers was evident in redirecting instructional planning. Gela, one of the pre-service teachers, taught comparing and contrasting to a Grade 8 class. She highlighted the grammatical forms using sentences about important events in Philippine history. It was noticeable in her discussion that, apart from questions on the grammar form, she also asked a number of questions on the students' opinions about historical events. During the stimulated recall, Gela shared that she got it from the modeling of her cooperating teacher who asked opinion-based and affective questions in both literature and grammar lessons. She further explained:

> [Sir (Cooperating Teacher) always comments about that (asking questions on themes). I was used to covering the technicalities of grammar because that is the only training we have. So, when it comes to (teaching) literature, the questions I ask are all technical. Then he (Cooperating Teacher) said add affective questions. That is how discussion in his classes flow, always opinions-based. Even in grammar lessons, he would ask questions about content (lesson theme). Actually, his specific comment to (sic) my lesson plan is that I was focused on comparison contrast that I forgot to focus on the content itself because those topics are relevant to them (students). You have to know where they stand to clarify certain beliefs that they have.]

Gela viewed her cooperating teacher's practice as a model and adopted it in her own practice. The cooperating teacher's suggestion was evident in his own practice. What he prescribed was justified by showing how workable it was in his class. This characterized his mediation in Gela's teacher learning. These interactions showed how in-service teachers were considered sources of model practices which pre-service teachers tended to imitate. This apprenticeship character of human mediation resonates macro-scaffolding conventions where teacher-mentors model or demonstrate an approach or activity which they want teacher-learners to do in their classes (Engin, 2014). The cooperating teachers scaffolded teacher learning not only by showing model practices but also by providing a rationale behind the practice. Their feedback made more sense to the pre-service

teachers since it was provided in the context of actual classroom experiences. These scaffolds contributed to how teacher-learners made sense of the strategies modelled and recommended by their cooperating teachers.

The cooperating teachers' support to teacher learning was not limited to providing suggestions on instructional practices. Pre-service teachers also shared how their cooperating teachers helped them in adjusting to the practicum environment. Stacey, who taught Grade 7 classes, admitted to being nervous during the first few days of her practicum. She was worried about establishing relationships with the teachers in the English Department. In the interview, she shared what worried her:

> Because they know so much more than I do. Obviously, I don't have anyone who is the same age as me. So, I was always so quiet that they thought I was timid. My heart was already raging, speak, speak. But it took only a few days to say "Ok, I'm ready for this" because my CT was very kind and cooperative and then she gave me a list of the things that I should do—her expectation. So, I actually knew where to go by that time. I still have the list.

Stacey quickly became comfortable with the other in-service teachers after overcoming the initial anxieties of being the only pre-service teacher in the English department. This was possible with the assistance from her cooperating teacher who specified her role in the school by giving her a list of duties and responsibilities. Evidently, the transition from course work to the practicum can be overwhelming; thus, emotional support from the cooperating teachers could help. This emotional support is a form of human mediation which goes beyond providing input on language teaching concepts. Affective factors in social interactions can support teacher learning. Addressing teacher-learners' emotional struggles is important to make the interaction between mentor and trainee more co-constructive (Yagata, 2017). Likewise, a "supportive" relationship is valuable in guiding teacher-learners' concept development (Childs, 2011).

The pre-service teachers generally described a supportive relationship with their cooperating teachers; however, this was not always the case. Among the participants, Ice was particularly consistent in sharing her struggles with her cooperating teacher. She admitted in one of her stimulated recall interviews that her confidence during practicum was "getting low." She explained that "...during practicum my confidence is getting low.... I wasn't able to hit my objective for the day and I get mostly improvement comments and suggestions from my CT (Cooperating Teacher)."

Ice detailed one instance where she admitted to taking her cooperating teacher's suggestions though she disagreed with them. In her observed lesson, she did a vocabulary exercise as suggested. Ice thought doing the vocabulary activity was not necessary and only consumed some class time. However, since she had been receiving criticism from her cooperating teacher, she had to follow her cooperating teacher's directive. This need to please the cooperating teacher may be attributed to the fact

that she is the one who gives the final rating for the pre-service teachers' practicum performance. The power dynamics in the established roles as mentor and student-teacher become evident. Though it was only Ice, among the participants, who shared struggles with her cooperating teacher, the tensions she described were realistic and relatable. This also affirms how a supportive relationship with the cooperating teacher evidently supports while tensions constrain learning. In a similar vein, sociocultural perspectives in SLTE recognize the value of dialogic interactions to support learning to teach language. Moreover, supportive human mediation contributes to developing one's teacher identity and own theory of pedagogy.

Teacher Learning Through Use of Mediation Tools for Teaching

Sociocultural perspectives claim that teacher learning is mediated by tools which can be physical or symbolic. Physical tools refer to concrete materials utilized in learning and practice while symbolic tools are the abstract tools used in the mediation process such as beliefs about language, language learning, and teaching.

One evident symbolic tool used by the pre-service teachers was their conceptual understanding of grammar concepts which informed how grammatical structures were explained to students. This was evident in Carla's Grade 8 lesson on transforming direct to indirect speech. Her discussion focused on pronouns and verb forms. In the stimulated recall interview, she shared that she believed it was important to highlight those structures as they were important in sentence transformation exercises. However, after going through the lesson, her students did not perform well in the exercise. Having realized that her students found it difficult to construct their own sentences, Carla thought that she could do better with contextualized sample sentences. She noted that "it is better to contextualize examples. You have a scene or situation, like a conversation, so they (students) can put themselves in the situation of the one reporting direct speech."

Carla's experience prompted her to take control of a symbolic tool- her understanding of direct and indirect speech. Her initial focus on the grammar forms was mediated by the fact that her learners failed to understand the lesson. This prompted her to look into the meaning and use of the target grammar forms to improve her presentation. The received knowledge on direct and indirect speech was appropriated to the context of experience. This reflects linking received and experiential knowledge. In the same way, related studies reported how concept development emerges through authentic learning experiences that directly connect concepts to contexts (Batchelor, 2012; Griffith et al., 2016; Hermann, 2015; Ramanayake & Williams, 2017). Contextualized application of content understanding supports teacher learning. Accordingly, this informs teacher preparation that emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness of content, pedagogy, and context.

Another symbolic tool that the pre-service teachers utilized was their understanding of language learning. Language learning beliefs were considered in the lesson

presentation. This was evident in eliciting target grammar forms from students. An example was how James used his knowledge about language learning in his inductive presentation of the different classifications of nouns. To elicit examples of count and mass nouns from his Grade 6 students, he first asked them to count chairs and strands of hair and then determine the difference between objects that could and could not be counted. After distinguishing the different examples from each other, he asked the students to come up with definitions for each noun classification. During the stimulated recall, James was asked why he did not immediately present the grammar terms and slowly elicited them from the students instead. James shared:

> I feel like learning is best if students are able to understand rules on their own. So that, for example, when they see nouns while reading a book or reading a piece of literature or maybe the news, they know what kind of noun it is because they understand in themselves what the rule is, instead of just telling them that "Oh, you need to look for nouns with capital letters and that's a proper noun." If they know how to make rules on their own, they will be able to understand concepts better.

Expressing what he "felt" was "best" reflected James' belief in language learning. He believed that inferring the meaning of each noun classification could provide a better understanding of the grammar form. He further explained that this could eventually help students transfer their understanding to authentic language experiences like reading literature or the news. Upheld beliefs are symbolic tools that readily inform practice, and the pre-service teachers brought these beliefs with them. Beliefs in language learning guided decisions on what to attend to in presenting the concepts in the English class. These beliefs stressed that language learning should be made meaningful for students. Hence, the pre-service teachers' beliefs made more sense when these were situated in the context of practice. This also reflects that teacher learning involves reconceptualizing practice in classroom instruction.

Apart from considering beliefs on language learning, the pre-service teachers also drew from their own experiences as language learners. They chose particular activities that helped them learn a language with the idea that it would also have the same effect on their students. For example, when Ice did a Grade 8 lesson on subject-verb agreement, she repeatedly mentioned the rules. Her tasks primarily focused on remembering the statements on subject-verb agreement rules. During the stimulated recall, she explained that she had students recite and remember the rules. She explained, "Because of my personal experience when I was in high school, up until now, I still know the rules, the 21 rules my teacher taught me. And I think I want them to do the same way." This illustrates how the pre-service teachers' experiences as learners informed their teaching practice. These learning experiences served as mediation tools in learning how to teach. The pre-service teachers capitalized on their past experiences as learners. Given their limited pedagogical knowledge and lack of teaching experience, drawing from their own language learning proved to be useful. Therefore, if prior learning experiences are a knowledge source that informs practice,

externalizing learning histories and how these influence teaching practices are viewed as viable to support teacher learning.

Teacher Learning in a Challenging Mediation Space

Mediation spaces make up another construct that contributes to teacher learning. These spaces are complex environments that can present tensions between upheld beliefs and realities. It is important to determine the context of these learning environments that can also afford opportunities for strategic mediation. The practicum school as a mediation space presented notable challenges to the pre-service teachers. The concerns are particularly on the physical environment and students' language abilities.

First, the pre-service teachers dealt with limitations in the physical environment including physical layout, teaching equipment, and even students' noise. Second, learner factors, particularly learners' language abilities, appeared overwhelming. Students' limited English proficiency and engagement in the lessons became a constant challenge for the teacher-learners. Dealing with these challenges required them to make adjustments. Describing these adjustments reflected how the difficulties presented learning opportunities. Teacher learning involved recognizing difficulties and trying out ways to address those difficulties. Doing so entailed modifying instructional materials and classroom activities, reflecting on teacher roles, and examining the workability of prescribed practices.

Challenges in Physical Environment and Classroom Management

One of the recurring challenges faced by the pre-service teachers concerned the limitations of the physical environment in the practicum school. Carla, who did her practicum in an urban public school, mentioned in the interview that one of her difficulties was her classroom which was located next to the canteen. Apart from the noise coming from the outside, the classroom was dark, and the armchairs needed repair. She admitted that the classroom affected her motivation to teach. She also understood why many of her students were distracted, making it difficult for her to catch and keep their attention. She noted that engaging students was her constant struggle. Likewise, Monica shared her difficulty concerning her classroom. There was limited equipment available for technology-based materials, and the armchairs needed fixing. There were also a big number of students in one classroom. Monica dealt with these by making adjustments to her activities. For example, instead of having her students copy lectures from the blackboard, she distributed printed handouts or sent soft copies of those handouts to her students. She also made an effort to make her traditional visual aids more appealing to make up for the lack of technology use in her classroom.

Another common difficulty for the pre-service teachers was handling students' noise. Stacey, who taught Grade 7, admitted that this was the most challenging issue for her.

She said that calling attention of and sometimes reprimanding students consumed a lot of her class time. Handling students' noise was also a concern of Arvin. He had to rely on his disciplinary skills and patience which he admitted were challenged by the situation. Difficulty in classroom management also prompted the teacher-learners to reflect on how they approached the challenges they met. For instance, Ben, who taught Grade 6, shared concerns and adjustments in her reflection log:

> Classroom management has always been my weakness, partly because I don't like imposing authority right away on students but mostly because I want them to like me. But after spending more time with my students, I am starting to realize that it is now necessary to remind them of where they stand. Sure, I can still joke around with them and listen to their stories, but when they begin to disrupt the lesson is where I will draw the line.

Addressing her problem with students' noise prompted Ben to reflect on her role as a teacher. She was then able to make adjustments on how to deal with her students. It appeared that the pre-service teachers valued establishing a good connection with their students, and this made discipline and classroom management issues complicated. However, having to deal with the problem of students' noise allowed the pre-service teachers to reflect on themselves and learn more about patience and teacher roles.

In addition to handling discipline issues, another difficulty relating to classroom management concerns facilitating activities. The pre-service teachers admitted that managing group work was particularly challenging. Challenges in managing classroom activities prompted them to make prior and in-the-moment instructional decisions to manage their classes better. The problem in classroom management was also noted in studies that examined practicum challenges of pre-service teachers (Abas, 2016; Gan, 2013). This may be attributed to lack of experience and limited exposure to real classroom situations. Addressing difficulties in classroom management made the practicum schools a mediation space where conditions and social interactions presented tension. Since such problematic situations prompted the pre-service teachers to think of solutions, the mediation space afforded learning opportunities.

Challenges with Learners' Language Proficiency

Another challenge posed by the practicum context relates to students' limited knowledge about English and limited proficiency in the language. When asked about the challenges encountered during practicum, Ira shared:

> It all falls under the prior knowledge of students. The moment I transferred from (Name of Laboratory School) to (Name of Practicum School), I have noticed that this set of students are not really prepared for the higher level... and I assumed that "Oh they're already Grade 8. They know this." They already know what a verb is. But then, when I ask them what a verb is, they don't

know the answer. So, I couldn't proceed to my lesson because I have first to discuss what a verb is, what are tenses, before I move into our topic, the topic that is assigned for the day.

Gela, who taught in a laboratory school, described a similar challenge as she found it difficult to elicit responses from her students. She noticed that the same students recited, so she sometimes just provided the answers to her questions so that they could move forward with the lesson. Moreover, she lamented that her students were slow in doing the tasks which prompted her to make adjustments in her lesson. These concerns from the pre-service teachers show how learning how to teach requires making constant adjustments to respond to the demands of different and challenging teaching-learning situations.

Therefore, the practicum school as a mediation space made teacher learning possible because of the challenges it presented. It prompted the pre-service teachers to make necessary adjustments to address their concerns about the limitations of their classrooms and the abilities of their students. First, limitations in the classrooms in terms of space and available equipment prompted adjustments. The pre-service teachers modified the format of activities to accommodate the number of learners and address their concomitant classroom management problems. They also came up with alternatives by drawing from their knowledge of designing activities. Second, the relatively low English proficiency and limited engagement of students led to realizing the importance of knowing the learners and their abilities. The adjustments made showed how the challenging mediation space made learning possible. However, the unpredictability and the discomfort in teaching situations are realities of practice. Despite these being realities, the pre-service teachers were still stupefied to encounter them during practicum. Though the difficulties allowed making adjustments and afforded learning in the process, they reflect certain gaps that teacher preparation can address.

Insights on Teacher Learning and Implications for Preparation of Pre-Service English Teachers

The pre-service teachers' recall of and reflection on their practicum experiences revealed relevant interactions and realizations that described teacher learning. Human mediation from cooperating/supervising teachers was characterized by feedback that guided the pre-service teachers' instructional decisions and reassuring support that addressed emotional concerns. The participants' use of symbolic mediation tools, such as conceptual understanding and beliefs about learning, was evident in their observed teaching practices. The practicum school as a mediation space presented challenges given the unpredictability of the classroom experience. These insights point to the value of recognizing an understanding of teacher learning in relation to contextual factors in the educational settings where the practice is situated.

Explicit integration of sensemaking in teacher learning and understanding the context of practice should be embedded in teacher preparation. First, pre-service teachers' beliefs and received knowledge should be looked into not only to examine how they inform teaching but also to address probable misconceptions. Given the lack of teaching experience, it becomes plausible that pre-service teachers' understanding of learning theories may be purely theoretical, and earlier experiences on language learning may be relative. Therefore, theories and concepts should be tackled in the context of real-life teaching-learning situations. Teacher-learners should also be guided in externalizing their own beliefs. These strategies can stimulate making sense of received knowledge by providing opportunities to clarify misinterpretations and problematize the application of abstract concepts in content and pedagogy.

Second, the consideration of the context of teaching should always be explicitly integrated with teacher preparation. The challenges in the practicum setting enabled teacher learning. The problematic situations prompted the pre-service teachers to modify what they learned during coursework and improvise. This demonstrates that theoretical and procedural concepts make better sense if contextualized. Therefore, teacher preparation needs to be more connected to the realities of the teaching-learning environment. This entails a problem-posing approach so that pre-service teachers may be guided in anticipating and reflecting on realities of practice that are often unpredictable and unsettling.

The insights on teacher learning drawn from this study primarily banked on pre-service teacher perspectives. The research design is practitioner and context-driven; thus, it is necessary to view the participants' accounts of their experiences as "constructed in particular social and institutional settings and therefore are not neutral but constitutive of these settings" (Johnson, 2009, p. 97). Though context-specific, perspectives capture relevant insights on transformations a teacher-learner undergoes as he/she makes sense of lived experiences. The data also externalize the pre-service teachers' reflective process which can inform how their learning can be supported. The teacher-learners' perspectives also reflected their pertinent knowledge sources which teacher educators can tap to deepen conceptual understanding. A deliberate inquiry into how one learns how to teach can evidently inform practice in SLTE.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Examining pre-service English teachers' practicum experiences showed that teacher learning is a sensemaking process that entails externalizing understanding that informs practice. This implicit aspect of teacher learning is enabled by experience. Recalling and reflecting on practicum experiences revealed the pre-service teachers' upheld beliefs on language teaching and learning, understanding of subject matter content, received knowledge on language teaching strategies, and experiences as language learners. A certain degree of internalization is reflected on how these conceptual knowledge sources informed instructional decisions. SLTE coursework should draw from this

sense-making process to support teacher learning. Pre-service teachers need to be guided in reconceptualizing language teaching concepts by connecting them with their prior beliefs, theoretical knowledge, and past learning experiences. Teacher education programs can explicitly frame approaches to teaching which are informed by teacher-learners' varied ways of knowing.

Further, uncomfortable experiences in complex teaching-learning contexts proved to enable teacher learning. This is made evident by how the pre-service teachers dealt with difficulties met during practicum. Challenges prompted them to examine and consider learner factors and the learning environment. Trying out solutions to problems allowed them to gain an understanding of their roles as teachers. This supports the need to situate language teaching concepts in the unsettling contexts of practice. SLTE programs should actively engage pre-service teachers in learning opportunities that are situated in contexts of practice. This can be done by tackling the applicability of methodology to complex teaching and learning situations. Workability of language teaching strategies should also be problematized during course work to promote an adaptive instead of an imitative application of received knowledge.

In the area of teacher education research, a longitudinal inquiry on teacher learning may be explored. Documenting a pre-service teacher's journey from different stages of teacher preparation can provide insights on relevant aspects of learning how to teach. Taking foundation courses, content courses, methods courses, and the practicum, and eventually transitioning to practice as novice teacher can reflect a comprehensive perspective on the socially- and internally-mediated process of teacher learning. Accordingly, understanding teacher learning can serve as critical input toward teacher preparation for adaptive practitioners.

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