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## ESL Pre-service Teachers: What Do They Need?

Si Fan [University of Tasmania ([sfan@utas.edu.au](mailto:sfan@utas.edu.au))] and Thao Le [University of Tasmania ([Thao.Le@utas.edu.au](mailto:Thao.Le@utas.edu.au))].

### **Abstract:**

Due to the increasing numbers in the English as a Second Language (ESL) students entering education institutions in their goal to be professional teachers, Australian universities and teacher education programs are under pressure to accommodate and provide assistance to these students in relation to their significant cultural and language differences (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003). These ESL pre-service teachers bring into Australian classrooms a multi-cultural perspective and a bilingual learning experience; however, some of them confront challenges and obstacles due to their language and cultural backgrounds. This study explores the question of what the ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning in a teacher education program are, and what support strategies can be adopted to better assist them. These ESL pre-service teachers were encouraged to participate in focus group meetings and keep reflective journals. Surveys were also given to them in relation to their practicum experiences. The findings of this study have important implications for both the current and future ESL pre-service teachers, as well as the Australian teacher education programs. The findings suggest more supportive and inclusive strategies to better support ESL pre-service teachers in their learning to become globally acceptable teachers.

### **1. Introduction**

Support for English as a Second Language (ESL) international students within Australian tertiary education contexts has always been a critical issue. However, how to better assist ESL pre-service teachers in teacher education programs is also becoming an increasingly important issue facing teacher educators. Due to the increasing numbers in the ESL students entering education institutions in their goal to be professional teachers, Australian universities and teacher education programs are under pressure to accommodate and provide assistance to these students in relation to their significant cultural and language differences (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003).

The ESL pre-service teachers encounter a western education system which is markedly different from the education environment in their home countries. Due to the language and cultural differences, they experience a number of challenges and difficulties in both their learning at universities and teaching at schools. When confronting these problems, some ESL pre-service teachers found it hard to continue their study without support from universities and faculties. Hence, an effective support structure is never so important for these ESL pre-service teachers who may bring multi-cultural learning experiences into Australian classrooms. Universities and teacher education institutions also need to be provided with recommendations on how ESL pre-service teachers can be better supported during their learning to become a teacher.

The specific site of this study is the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania. The research involved the participation of eleven ESL pre-service teachers who came from four non-English speaking countries, including Chile, China, Germany and Japan. The participants included both ESL pre-service teachers who were studying full-time and short term exchange ESL pre-service teachers. The research was conducted during an eight week period and included the following practicum experiences: the School University Partnership Program (SUPP), Professional Experience One (PE1) and Professional Experience Three (PE3). Data were collected from these ESL pre-service teachers in relation to their concerns gained from these practicum experiences in order to better understand their needs and provide recommendations which can support future ESL pre-service teachers.

## **2. Literature review**

Recently, in the Australian wide context there has been a significant increase in the number of international students attending universities and acquiring higher education qualifications (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2003). Many of them choose to enroll in teacher education programs in their goal to become professional teachers. These ESL pre-service teachers bring into Australian classrooms a multi-cultural perspective and a bilingual learning experience (Han, 2005). However, they confront significant challenges due to the language and cultural differences, as well as their status of being students-teachers.

For an ESL pre-service teacher who is both an ESL student and a beginning teacher, the demands of teacher education programs are quite complex (Cruikshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003). The basic support needed by ESL pre-service teachers falls into two categories, which are cultural and language aspects, as well as support on their practicum experiences. One of the primary goals of the support structures at universities is to help ESL students to overcome their language difficulties and cultural differences. Due to the culture shock, ESL students are required to make adjustments to a number of challenges, such as language difficulties, cultural differences, homesickness, financial problems, discrimination, and stress due to change of culture (culture shock) (Cruikshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Reducing these influences and assisting ESL students to reach their academic achievement have become the primary goal of support systems in western educational settings (Barron, 2004; Burns, 1991; Li & Kaye, 1998; Moon, 2003).

Another particular area that ESL pre-service teachers may confront challenge is the practicum experiences. Professional Experience practicums are undertaken by pre-service teachers as a separate subject in many teacher education programs (Han, 2005). They involve making connections between what they have learned at university and how this knowledge and skills can be applied in the classroom (Kiggins & Gibson, 2003). That is, the university assists pre-service teachers to make these theory/practice connections, as well as supports them through these experiences. These Professional Experience practicums provide a way for pre-service teachers to develop their own professional identity as teachers. In this initial teaching process, ESL pre-service teachers confront challenges to their authority 'in the process of becoming locally acceptable teachers' (Han, 2005, p. 4). To deal with this situation, assistance from both university

supervisors and supervising colleague teachers can provide extra support. This study intends to develop support models to assist current and future ESL pre-service teachers from both language and cultural aspects, as well as with their professional teaching experiences.

### **3. Research background**

#### 3.1.1. Research aim

This study aims to determine the dominant discourses present in ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of their learning and teaching experiences within the Bachelor of Teaching program in the Faculty of Education. It seeks to find out what these ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions in relation to studying in the program are, as well as how they are supported in both their course work and practicum experiences. It also aims to develop support models which can enable current and future ESL pre-service teachers to be better assisted. The study intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the ESL pre-service teachers' experiences and perceptions in relation to their study in the Bachelor of Teaching program?
- What support strategies are needed by the ESL pre-service teachers from the teacher education programs?

#### 3.1.2. Participants

The formal study for this research was conducted within an eight week period in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania. Data were collected from eleven ESL pre-service teachers, including the researcher, who were studying in this teacher education site. The research was conducted with the support of the lecturer who was assisting all international students within the Faculty of Education. The participants in this research group included five pre-service teachers from Chile, four from China, one from Japan and one German pre-service teacher. These ESL pre-service teachers were encouraged to record and reflect on their learning and teaching experiences gained in the Bachelor of Teaching program.

#### 3.1.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected in the form of surveys, focus group meetings, participants' journal entries and the researcher's reflective journals. Surveys were given before and after the Professional Experience One (PE1) and the Professional Experience Three (PE3). Focus group meetings were organised every Tuesday afternoon during these eight weeks. The discussions of the focus group meetings were audio taped and made into transcripts to enable further analysis and interpretation of conversations that occurred between the lecturer and ESL pre-service teachers as well as between the ESL pre-service teachers themselves. In addition, the researcher's reflective journal and participants' journal entries were collected in the last week of the data collection to further support the evidence.

A constructivist grounded theory approach and a three-step coding approach, which includes the open, axial and selective coding stages (Sarantakos, 2005), were used to organise the collection of data. The codes constructed in the research were related to what the researcher observed during the focus group meetings and within the textual data. The codes were theoretical and related to the

professional experience practicums and ESL pre-service teachers' responses to their initial perceptions of teaching in Australian classrooms. These codes were identified and labeled into six categories in the selective coding process and introduced in the following section.

#### **4. Findings**

In the last step of the coding process, the data were refined and reduced into six categories in relation to the ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of their experiences in the Bachelor of Teaching program. The categories are discussed below. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect participants' privacy.

##### **Category 1: Beginning teachers' concerns**

The significant number of codes in this category indicates that most ESL pre-service teachers are concerned about their knowledge of teaching, especially teaching strategies. These ESL pre-service teachers demonstrate complete surprise at the 'totally different' teaching climate compared to their own prior knowledge of schools and teaching. Teaching strategies are a new experience for ESL pre-service teachers both in relation to behavior management strategies and specific teaching strategies such as graphic organisers and group work strategies. It is evidenced in Fiona's journal entry.

*Today I taught a lesson on bridges. The boys in the class were given pictures and they needed to justify what kind of bridge is in the picture and guess the weight the bridge can carry. The boys were very active and the lesson did not go well. This is not my first practicum but I still need a lot more classroom management strategies.*

*Fiona's Journal Entry*

Doubting their own abilities to teach in Australian schools appears to be one of the main motivations in wanting to learn more about teaching. The differences in both language and culture make many of these ESL pre-service teachers grapple at wanting to know more about teaching. They see these differences as inadequacies because they find learning with a second language difficult and learning to teach in a second language even more of a challenge. At the beginning of the Bachelor of Teaching program some of the ESL pre-service teachers have already doubted their own abilities and decision to become a teacher due to their perceived inadequacies in their own teaching and learning.

*I am a little bit scared and feel unprepared for this course. ...How can I teach students with my poor English, I don't know many technical words, I don't know all the Australian body language. I have a lot to improve within these two years!*

*Mary's Journal Entry*

##### **Category 2: Cultural aspect in teaching and learning**

The second category demonstrates that the cultural aspect is a significant influence on ESL pre-service teachers' experiences of learning and teaching. Most of the ESL pre-service teachers

have teaching experiences in their own countries, so they are more likely to compare the teaching in Australia with their prior teaching experiences. In contrast, Australian pre-service teachers do not have the amount of teaching time in schools as their international colleagues when they start the degree. When ESL pre-service teachers compare their teaching experiences they realise the importance of culture in teaching practice. Many of the ESL pre-service teachers come from an education history which values a transmission style of teaching instead of the Australian way of actively constructing teaching practice. This is evidenced in their lack of understanding of teaching strategies which focuses on scaffolding and supporting students in their learning. The following examples show the recognition of two ESL pre-service teachers who were observing in the School University Partnership Program (SUPP):

*I always thought language teaching has to be in a classroom with lots of writing, reading and remembering. In Australia language learning is very different. There is more interesting activity for students to participate. I think it is a great way to motivate students' learning.*

*Mary's Journal Entry*

*I find the teaching approaches in Australia are very different from in China. Here it is more interactive. ... Students do not feel any embarrassment in answering questions in front of the class. The teacher frequently interacts with the students, which is very helpful...*

*Tina's Journal Entry*

### **Category 3: Language aspect in teaching and learning**

The third category indicates that the language issue, in addition to the cultural aspect, is the second largest influence which affects the ESL pre-service teachers' teaching and learning practice. All of the eleven ESL pre-service teachers in this research are from non-English backgrounds: five have Spanish as their first language, four have Chinese, one speaks German and another speaks Japanese. These ESL pre-service teachers need to overcome these language barriers as well as overcome the common difficulties faced by all beginning teachers. This is further supported by the ESL pre-service teacher's concern which is recorded in the researcher's reflective journal:

*Two of the ESL pre-service teachers expressed their concerns about the Profession Experiences in today's meeting. One of them doubted their own English language, she thought she could only communicate with students using simple sentences, and that it was hard to give clear instructions. The other one had a student in her classroom who asked questions to test her about her English language.*

*Researcher's Reflective Journal*

### **Category 4: Attributes teachers should have**

The fourth category, 'Attributes teachers should have', corresponds to one of the survey questions, 'Now that you have done some teaching, what do you consider a good teacher to be?' The ESL pre-service teachers give various answers to this question. Most of the ESL pre-service teachers

claim that a good teacher should have some internal positive attributes as well as some external teacher qualities. For instance, Sunny, one of the first year ESL pre-service teachers wrote:

*(A good teacher is) someone who loves what he/she does and who really gives his/her best. Not doing it for choosing a job at random but for the sake of children's future. (A good teacher) should be someone who clearly established his /her idea towards the career. He/she also has to keep in mind that teaching is not just a transmission of information, but also of values and experiences.*

*Sunny's Survey Response*

Some of the other ESL pre-service teachers' responses include the following teacher qualities.

That is, teachers need to:

- Be professional;
- Be responsible;
- Be resilient;
- Be confident;
- Be creative;
- Be hard working;
- Be in a good relationship with students; and
- Be able to give constructive feedback.

The frequency of these responses demonstrates ESL pre-service teachers' realisation that teaching is not about the transmission of knowledge to students but that the teacher's qualities are a significant part of the teaching and learning process. This demonstrates a realisation that knowledge can be constructed differently with students which is a significant contrast to their own education histories.

### **Category 5: Experience of the Professional Experience practicums**

As a compulsory subject in the Bachelor of Teaching program, the Professional Experience practicum involves all pre-service teachers' participation including the eleven participants in this research. Most concerns of the ESL pre-service teachers, including both short and long term ESL pre-service teachers in this research, are related to these practicum experiences. The main realisation for these ESL pre-service teachers is the importance of integrating their teaching philosophy into practicum experiences. Some of them who have not had in their previous education or teaching experience realised that teachers need to underpin their practice with a philosophy of teaching. Mark's journal provides evidence of this point:

*..If you as a teacher are not sure about your philosophy, how should students learn from you? ..It is very evident to me that you have to be sure about your own philosophy so that you are able to teach students and they will trust you and find their own philosophy of life.*

*Mark's Journal Entry*

Another feature of this category is the necessity of a formal connection of their practicum

experiences with their course work. The ESL pre-service teachers need to incorporate their teaching philosophy and teaching strategies into practice. This means that they need to discuss the different ways of how they could make the connections.

During 2007, these ESL pre-service teachers were strongly supported by a lecturer who provided regular weekly focus meetings to discuss the ESL pre-service teachers' concerns, especially their integration into Australian schools. The focus group meetings were not only a data collection method in this research, but also a supportive structure organised to give assistance to international pre-service teachers. These focus group meetings gave these pre-service teachers opportunities to share understandings and experiences about their practicums and their different cultural experiences of teaching. The following example is a part of the conversation which occurred between three ESL pre-service teachers and the tutor in a focus group meeting:

**Tutor:** *Did your colleague teachers help you a lot?*

**Tina:** *I learned a lot because they use a lot of methods. For example (pause) the mathematics, they do not use the same way. I took (lessons in) the first week, they wanted to fail me because I used Chinese methods. For example (pause) spell the words ten times.*

**Mary:** *Really?*

**Tina:** *Not a punishment. In China we usually do this.*

**Fiona:** *Yes, sometimes we write hundreds of times.*

**Sharon:** *It's not a punishment.*

**Tina:** *The students and the colleague teacher both did not like this. They were not happy with this. That's one thing. The other is, in mathematics (class), I wrote on the whiteboard twenty-four calculations, (and) asked them to calculate subtractions and additions. Twenty-four question, but they through (that is) too many. But it is a method we used in China.*

*Transcript of the Focus Group Meeting*

All the ESL pre-service teachers who participated in these focus group meetings valued these focused discussions as an effective way of assisting them through their Professional Experience practicums. These discussions allowed the ESL pre-service teachers to discuss their own cultural experiences and compare these to their Australian experiences. For many of them it was not an accepted practice in their countries to use a variety of teaching methods. The lecturer provided explanations as to why teachers used these different strategies as well as supported these pre-service teachers through their experiences.

These discussions assisted in making transitions in their teaching practice. The ESL pre-service teachers who participated in these sessions treated them as a debrief session to discuss the challenges they faced in their practicum experiences. They also had each other for support during this challenging time. The second year ESL pre-service teachers were able to support the first year ESL pre-service teachers in what they could expect in their following practicum. This mentoring

relationship assisted the ESL pre-service teachers through the Bachelor of Teaching program.

**Category 6: Reason for choice of education**

Most ESL pre-service teachers stated that being a teacher is not just a job; it is about improving oneself as a person and being responsible for the future. Teaching for these pre-service teachers is about building their professional identity to inspire their students to consider other careers, that is, to ‘open doors for children’ (Mary’s Journal Entry, 2007).

Teaching will enable these pre-service teachers to provide students with options for their future. These ESL pre-service teachers expressed a desire to empower students in their career choices and help support these students during this process. Many of these ESL pre-service teachers viewed their own education, especially their Bachelor of Teaching experience, as giving them options in their own careers. Some ESL pre-service teachers give further explanations on their motivation in becoming a teacher in their journal entries. The following examples are the evidence of this category:

*I want to inspire somebody. I want to give something good to students.  
 Teachers ...open up doors for children to step further in right direction.*

*Mary’s Journal Entry*

*Because I really like the idea of being a person that could help others, and when I was a kid I always wanted to be different things but the profession that was still in my mind for many years was being a teacher.*

*Joy’s Survey Responses*

**5. Implications**

*A support model for ESL pre-service teachers*

As the first year of studying in the program appears to be the period in which more concerns emerge from ESL pre-service teachers. A support model, which is based on the Cruickshank, Newell, and Cole’s (2003) support program in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Sydney, can be used to enable future ESL pre-service teachers in teacher education programs. This model is informed by two modules and has an explicit focus on the professional development of first year ESL pre-service teachers. The two modules of the model are showed in Table 1:

Table 1

*A support model for ESL pre-service teachers*

| Modules                          | Contexts  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Module 1<br>(Semester 1, Year 1) | Academic orientation:<br>Development of writing skills and study skills including language proficiencies. |



Table 1 continued: *A support model for ESL pre-service teachers*

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Module 1<br>(Semester 1, Year 1) | Cultural orientation:<br>Exchanging teaching experiences about the Professional Experience practicums. Sharing ideas about cultural differences had in teaching.          |
| Module 2<br>(Semester 2, Year 1) | Aligning with the professional studies:<br>Making connections between course work and practicum experiences, and development of teacher identity and teaching strategies. |

The two modules in this model are based on guided small group discussion which is used to assist the experiences of pre-service teachers. The two orientations in the first module focus on the discourses constructed about ESL pre-service teachers' concerns of the cultural conflict and limitations in the practice which they have in the first year of the Bachelor of Teaching program. This module can be organised in the first semester of their first year of teaching to help them overcome the 'culture shock' and minimize the limitations in teaching and learning. Further, the second module in the model can be organised in the second semester of the first year. This module intends to assist ESL pre-service teacher in making connections between course work and actual teaching practice.

This support model does not only cater for ESL pre-service teachers' needs in English proficiencies, but also caters for their wanting to recognise their culture differences and to develop own professional identities. A significant point of this model is that this program can include university supervisors' participation; in this way university supervisors can better understand ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions about their practicum experiences and provide better communication between ESL pre-service teachers and colleague teachers. This support program, which caters for ESL pre-service teachers' concerns and perceptions, can be used to assist future ESL pre-service teachers in their teaching and learning in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania.

*An enabling program*

This research also suggests that an enabling program, which is an online based program, can further assist the support structure that is recommended. One recommendation is that a space be created on the MyLO system, a centrally supported online course management system (Learning Online, 2009), to provide ESL pre-service teachers with opportunities to exchange ideas with lecturers or other pre-service teachers through on line discussions or sending messages. One study (Schuck & Segal cited in Schuck, 2003) indicated that an online network, such as this enabling program, can balance the effect of distance and ensure the effectiveness of communication for ESL pre-service teachers.

As ESL pre-service teachers learn to teach and learn in two contexts, the university and school, they need a 'third space' to bridge these two contexts and to provide more opportunities for interacting with lecturers and other ESL pre-service teachers. The relationship needed between the university, schools and the enabling program is shown in Figure 1 on the following page:

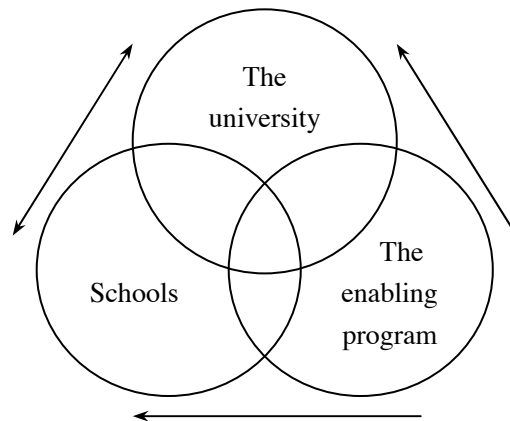


Figure 1: *Relationship between the university, schools and the enabling program*

As it can be seen from Figure 1, the enabling program supports both the course work at the university and the pragmatic experiences in schools; it provides its participants with a platform between the two and helps ESL pre-service teachers to successfully transform teaching theories into practice. This informed, reflective learning practice is strongly recommended by Lee, Green, and Brennan (2000) due to its resilience on knowledge production and communication. The conceptual space in Figure 1 is therefore a space where the university, schools and the enabling program 'come into a new and reflexive relationship with the academic' (Lee, Green, & Brennan, 2000). ESL pre-service teachers can cope with their teaching and learning practice more effectively in the new relationship between the three spaces when an enabling program is created.

This program can be used in assisting both first year and second year ESL pre-service teachers; as well, both of long term and short term exchange ESL pre-service teachers. Topics of the discussions can be flexible. Any perceptions about teaching and learning that they experience in both the university and schools can be discussed. In this way assistance about both university course work and practicum experiences can be provided. This program enables more flexible and interactive responses to occur between its participants. It can be organised as an effective tool to assist future ESL pre-service teachers in the Bachelor of Teaching program.

## 6. Conclusion

This research examines what the ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions are, and what support strategies are needed and expected by them in relation to their learning and teaching experiences in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania. It involves both the investigation and analysis of teacher education practice as well as ESL pre-service teachers' response to such practice. An analysis of data gathered from surveys, focus group meetings and journal entries suggests more supportive, inclusive strategies to better support ESL pre-service teachers in their learning to become teachers. The findings of the research contribute to a better understanding of ESL pre-service teachers' cultural and educational needs, which inform and improve the support given to prospective ESL pre-service teachers in teacher education institutions.

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