

## REFLECTIONS UPON THE EFL SCHOOL-BASED INITIAL TRAINING IN ALGERIA

YOUCEF MESSAOUDI

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Tlemcen, Algeria

### ABSTRACT

The current study was a part of a larger doctoral research. It was a needs analysis, which was meant to determine EFL students' needs in terms of teaching pre-service training. This research tested, whether the school-based initial training was adequately-designed to prepare newly-recruited EFL teachers.

The data collection process was grounded in a triangular approach based on a survey addressed to 10 EFL novice teachers, and on a group interview (forum) gathering university professors, teacher-trainers and school EFL inspectors. This investigation trailed a statistical analysis taking into account the mean, the standard deviation and frequencies to deal with the survey, and a qualitative method to analyze the group interview. This study revealed a number of EFL facets that are completely dismissed in the current initial training programs such as: course design, assessment and teaching practice. Also, it revealed the fact that there was no collaboration between the two ministries of Education and Higher Education in designing teaching practice internships. Finally, it was unveiled that the majority of the newly-recruited teachers were dissatisfied about the preparation they received before one year of the total exposure in front of real EFL classrooms.

**KEYWORDS:** EFL Teaching, Needs Analysis, Initial Teacher Training & Professional Competence

### INTRODUCTION

EFL pre-service training (PS for short) in Algeria is organized in two phases. The first period is a university-based training which lasts for five years and which enables the students to get an MA diploma. The second stage is a school-based initial teacher training programme (ITT) which is held in the newly-recruited teachers. This second phase of training, which is the main concern of the current study, is a one-year internship that newly-recruited teachers should spend in schools before being charged of full EFL classes. The present investigation was devoted to seeing the adequacy of the ITT programme in complementing what was learnt at university; and consequently, it defined the EFL novice teachers' needs to become competent teachers. Also, the researcher attempted to see whether there was any collaboration between schools and the University of Tlemcen, where the EFL student-teachers finished their first phase of training in 2015. Therefore, the population addressed in this study was the teachers recruited in 2016.

### Requirements of an EFL Competent Teacher

According to Borman et al. (2009), EFL teacher requirements to attain professional competence moved from the basic study of theoretical grammar and phonetics to the study of pedagogical grammar and interlanguage syntax, and phonology. In addition, several disciplines were included in the EFL teacher preparation such as discourse analysis, language acquisition processes, instructional design and assessment. All these knowledge areas are referred to under the umbrella term "Knowledge about Language", or KAL for short, (Bartels, 2005; Andrews and Mc Neill, 2005). For instance, Thornbury (1997, qtd in Andrews and McNeill, 2005: 160), claims that, KAL is "the knowledge that teachers

have of the underlying systems of language, that enables them to teach effectively". In the same vein, it was claimed that, linguistics and applied linguistics are primary areas to be covered when introducing KAL to prospective teachers (Bennett & Carré: 2002). As to the linguistic knowledge, it is as a backbone of the training programme since it represents the subject-matter, and at the same time, the medium of instruction in TEFL. As a conclusion of a research about EFL PS teachers' KAL in China, Andrews and McNeill (2005:159) claim: "... We have become increasingly convinced that, the extent and the adequacy of L2 teachers' engagement with language content in their professional practice, is a crucial variable in determining the quality and potential effectiveness of any L2 teachers' practice".

As to applied linguistics which is an inter-disciplinary arena comprising all subjects related to real world issues of EFL teaching (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and language acquisition...), It empowers EFL teachers to root their practice from sound theoretical beliefs, not mere speculations (Popko, 2005). It is supposed that, future teachers will improve their practices by the transfer of their knowledge in applied linguistics in their teaching. Fostering the prominence of applied linguistics in EFL PS training, Bartels (2005: 405) argues that "... Courses in applied linguistics do seem to have the potential to be successful in changing novice teachers' conceptions about language and language teaching". In addition, there are many of crucial met linguistic areas to have a share in any EFL training programme without which novice teachers will be short of many professional dimensions like assessment, classroom management, educational psychology and EFL methodology (Education Commission of the States: 2003; Saha & Dworkin: 2009). Add to all these facets, the cultural component in teaching English to speakers of other languages which is a very crucial element, that should not be underestimated when dealing with learners from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

## METHODS

Intending to draw a clear image about the ITT programme in use and the student-teachers' needs to attain EFL professional quality which enables them to perform as competent teachers who stem all their practices from sound theoretical and practical backgrounds, the researcher asked the following research questions:

- What type of school-based ITT EFL trainees receive?
- What are the EFL student-teachers' needs in terms of professional quality in ITT, and what is to be fostered to enhance this quality?
- Is there any relationship or collaboration between these two phases of preparation to cover all the areas of novice EFL teacher education?

In order to answer these three research questions, three hypotheses were generated:

**H1:** As EFL student-teachers receive a training programme based rather on theory in their tertiary studies, at the level of schools, they are directly exposed to official teaching material in real EFL learners.

**H2:** There is a need for more attention to be devoted to EFL teaching practice and technical knowledge about teaching the language not only about the language itself.

**H3:** There is no relationship between what is introduced to EFL student-teachers at university and what is done in the field of the EFL profession.

As the above-listed questions and hypotheses denote, this work is a needs analysis which is a procedure followed

to gather information about students' needs in terms of their learning (Richards, 2001). Concerning the tools followed in undergoing needs analyses, many options are available in the arena such as questionnaires, self-ratings, interviews, meetings, observations, learners' language samples, and case studies (Remesal 2011). However, none of these tools are without disadvantages. It is to this end that, the researcher followed a triangular approach to maximize the accuracy of the study. Therefore, the researcher followed a multi-method approach to data collection based on a survey addressed to the student-teachers, and a group interview meant for the EFL experts.

As far as the sample population is concerned, it differed in size in accordance with the tool employed in data collection. The subjects targeted through the survey were the ten new teachers recruited as secondary school teachers in the town of Tlemcen, in 2016. All the respondents were Master degree holders. They were asked to assess their knowledge about a number of teaching skills in a Likert scale survey, ordered from very low to very high and to evaluate the training they have received. A statistical analysis, using the SPSS software, was made to deal with the survey data in which the mean, standard deviation and relative frequencies were calculated to well interpret the data. As for the EFL experts' group interview, it was designed to address EFL experts from both Education and Higher Education sectors. It is worth mentioning that, this research tool approached four experts: English Department Scientific Committee President, the Head of the Department, a practitioner, teacher with a hybrid experience in secondary education and higher education, and a recently retired EFL inspector and teacher trainer with the Ministry of Education. This interview's data were analysed using the NVivo 10 software, which enabled the researcher to classify the results in a specific number of nodes. Following a theoretical approach, these nodes were determined by the researcher prior to coding. Each node represented a facet of teacher training or of quality assurance in teacher training. However, the theoretical coding approach does not forbid the emergence of a number of unexpected ideas and beliefs which pushed the researcher to create new nodes, did not stem from the review of literature in the beginning of the analysis process.

## RESULTS

### The Trainee's Survey Results

**Item 1:** The Structure of the English Language and Conventions of Written and Spoken English

Concerning the item related to the newly-recruited teachers' knowledge about the structure of the TL, as shown in table 2, two groups with the same of 3 students, for each, asserted that, their knowledge in the area is respectively 'moderate' and 'high'. There was 1 respondent who claimed to have a 'low' level on this item. These frequencies are supported by a mean of 3.29 and a high SD of 0.756 regarding this spread of opinions (See table 1).

**Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Statistics by Item 1**

		<b>1.4 The Structure of the English Language and Conventions of Written and Spoken English</b>
N	Valid	7
	Missing	0
Mean		3,29
Std. Deviation		,756

**Table 2: Frequencies of the Structure of the English Language and Conventions of Written and Spoken English**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	low	1	14,3	14,3	14,3
	Moderate	3	42,9	42,9	57,1
	High	3	42,9	42,9	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 2: Types of EFL Programmes in Algerian Education**

As to the question about their awareness about types of EFL programmes in Algeria, the respondents were divided into two groups: 4 trainees claiming to have a 'moderate' knowledge in the area, while the other 3 respondents assessed their knowledge to be 'high', as shown in table 4. These frequencies are supported by a mean of 3.43 and an SD of 0.535, as displayed in table 3.

**Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Statistics by Item 2**

		2.2 Types of EFL Programmes in Algerian Education
N	Valid	7
	Missing	0
Mean		3,43
Std. Deviation		,535

**Table 4: Frequencies of Types of EFL Programmes in Algerian Education**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Moderate	4	57,1	57,1	57,1
	High	3	42,9	42,9	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 3: The Interrelatedness of L1 and FL Processes**

In the third item of this rubric, the trainees were asked about their awareness about the interrelatedness of L1 and L2 processes. The trainees' responses were spread on the options 'moderate', 'high', and 'very high' with 2 answers, 3 answers and 2 answers respectively. These frequencies yielded a mean of 4.00. Also, this dispersion of responses resulted in an SD of a high value of 0.816 (Consider tables 5 and 6).

**Table 5: Mean and Standard Deviation Statistics by Item 3**

		3.3 The Interrelatedness of L1 And L2 Acquisition
N	Valid	7
	Missing	0
Mean		4,00
Std. Deviation		,816

**Table 6: Frequencies of the Interrelatedness of L1 And L2 Acquisition**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Moderate	2	28,6	28,6	28,6
	High	3	42,9	42,9	71,4
	Very high	2	28,6	28,6	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 4:** Factors that may Affect EFL Students' Learning of Academic Content, Language and Culture

The high SD characterizing the students' answers about the factors affecting EFL learners indicates that, there was a great disagreement among respondents; the SD attains a value of 0.976. In numbers, 3 trainees claimed to have a high level in the area, while 2 respondents evaluated their level as 'moderate'. The two remaining trainees answered by 'low' and 'very high' respectively (Consider tables 7 and 8).

**Table 7: Mean and Standard Deviation Statistics by Item 4**

		5.1 Factors that may Affect EFL Students' Learning of Academic Content, Language and Culture
N	Valid	7
	Missing	0
Mean		3,57
Std. Deviation		,976

**Table 8: Frequencies of Factors that may Affect EFL Students' Learning of Academic Content, Language and Culture**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low	1	14,3	14,3	14,3
	Moderate	2	28,6	28,6	42,9
	High	3	42,9	42,9	85,7
	Very high	1	14,3	14,3	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 5:** Assessment Design, Development and Interpretation

As far as assessment is concerned, the trainees were asked, in this item, to evaluate their knowledge about test design, development and interpretation. As shown in table 10, a group of 4 students did not deny having a 'moderate' knowledge in the area, while the remaining 3 respondents claimed that, they have a 'high' level on this item. These frequencies resulted in a mean of 3.29 and an SD of 0.488 as table 9 illustrates.

**Table 9: Mean and Standard Deviation Statistics by Item 5**

		6.1 Basic Concepts, Issues and Practices Related to Test Design, Development and Interpretation.
N	Valid	7
	Missing	0
Mean		3,29
Std. Deviation		,488

**Table 10: Frequencies of Basic Concepts, Issues and Practices Related to Test Design, Development and Interpretation**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Moderate	5	71,4	71,4	71,4
	High	2	28,6	28,6	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

### **The EFL Expert's Group Interview**

On the first hand, the forum participants tackled the issue of the trainers in charge of the ITT in use in schools (at the level of Ministry of Education). According to the invited inspector, ITT trainers are teachers who are formed by the British Council in separated stages of training. However, this population is not without its problems since they all claim that, they have no official status from the Ministry of Education. In other words, these trainees are, at the same time, ordinary teachers and teacher-trainers with neither supplementary salary nor reduced working hour-volume. Having some modules in charge, EFL inspectors also play a role of teacher-trainers in ITT programmes, but their number is not sufficient to all trainees.

On the other hand, the participants agreed on many points, that are characterizing the professional situation at the tertiary level. The first point, that was tackled in this train of thoughts is the fact, that many university teachers cannot be defined, in terms of academic profile, which may lead to not designing teachers in the right module. According to the head of the Department, many teachers are lost between their speciality and their desire of teaching some specific subjects. Also, the department enrolls a high number of students in comparison, with the number of teachers and the variety of specialities.

The issue of collaboration between the ministries of Education and Higher Education was referred to 14 times, which covers 15.08% of the interview. The participants set forth a very critical situation that influences EFL teacher training in our country in depth claiming that there is no collaboration between the two ministries in this context. In the recent years, student-teachers used to go to schools to spend a period of internship; while nowadays, the Ministry of Education is no more accepting trainees from university in schools for training purposes. According to the participants, the issue tackled a political dimension which is out of the reach of academicians. Therefore, officials at University thought about creating an alternative for teacher training, so peer teaching sessions were adopted at the level of the Department of English. However, this experience did not yield the expected results and benefits since it could not provide all the requirements of a real EFL context.

### **DISCUSSIONS**

The participants' contributions, all pointed to a number of common areas such as: linguistic competence, EFL methodology in the Algerian real context, educational psychology, learning strategies and styles, classroom management and assessment. However, they insisted on the detail that a practical approach is sharply needed since all these areas are more grasped and beneficial in real EFL contexts. The lack of a real practical environment identifies the most important need according to what, the researcher noticed during the interview and through the survey data, as it is highly recommended by many experts, for a successful EFL training. The lack of internships inside schools, the only setting that provides all EFL training requirements, either in the university-based training phase or its school-based counterpart was an astonishing finding for the researcher who hypothesised in H1 that the ITT programme is purely practical. Again, this fact represents a very critical deficiency in the current programme. Also, the forum revealed the necessity for a phenomenology-of-education-based approach rather than a purely 'systemic' approach, which can meet heterogeneous trainees' lacks and wants. All these findings about students' needs confirmed the researcher's hypotheses H2 and H3.

Then, the results, set forth before, showed a paradox that different Master projects are designed for different purposes, while all holders of any Master degree have the right to be a candidate for a teaching profession position. This situation resulted in many cases in which teachers were appointed in schools, while their Master specials were designed for

other purposes. The societal factor seems neglected in designing Master projects which is a very significant variable in curriculum design. Master programmes designers are not taking into account society needs in different areas which resulted in many useless specialities for the Algerian context. Also, the government, represented in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, appears somehow absent in providing guidelines and defining society necessities from the university, unlike the Ministry of Education which takes the curriculum totally on its responsibility. Finally, it is worth pointing to the fact that no economic, business, nor any other domain employers, rather than education, are consulted when discussing the aims of programmes at the university. Again, all these facts yielded from the discussion of the project factors confirmed what was proposed by the researcher in H3.

As far as trainers are concerned, as they are a corner-stone in the success of EFL teacher training programme, this factor also gives the critical impression about both phases of training. At the school-based ITT, except few EFL inspectors, there are no special EFL teacher-trainers devoted to the development of novice teachers; however, they are rather ordinary EFL practitioners who are called to train newly appointed teachers in periodic occasions. With neither official status nor financial benefits, many teacher-trainers take in charge this central mission which could be another element influencing the results expected from the ITT. In a different way, the same problem is noticed at University, where, in many cases, teachers are not designed in charge of modules in correspondence with their specialties. According to specialists in the field, this factor threatens the quality of teaching and training to a high extent, as many crucial considerations of teachers are neglected as was pointed to in H2.

As to the institutions, the forum proved that our institutions are not equipped and organized for different kinds of activities. Though there are many teachers who try to make some innovative attempts to improve training, they remain personal endeavors which lack official authorization. In fact, our institutions need to be more included in top-down communication, because though there may be a positive environment for improvement and innovation, if they are not allowed and officialised by the Ministry, they will remain impracticable. Nevertheless, the participants claimed also that as our educational institutions require more leadership, they lack the know-how managing the available human and physical resources too. In a nutshell, many problems existing in developing competent EFL teachers, either at the primary education level or tertiary level, are beyond the institutions reaching.

During the discussion on the forum and the questionnaire results, many points were interposed to clarify the current situation of EFL training. These pieces of information, though unexpected by the researcher, were very helpful in answering the research questions and testing the hypotheses. First, the researcher hypothesised in H1 that PS training at the University is purely theoretical: a fact that was signalled in this part of data as there is no general agreement among the staff that all students will/can become teachers. In other words, the goals of the courses offered are not really clarified for the staff as well as society whose seems to be neglected too. These facts can be related to the trainers and institutional factors already dealt with. As to the school-based ITT, the very astonishing emerging datum is that this programme is to a high extent theoretical too, and this fact negated the second part of H1 in which the researcher thought that ITT is rather approached with the practical view. In its turn too, the ITT programme appears to be not well organized in terms of content, schedule and staff.

The observer of the results exposed above will easily notice that the point of collaboration between the two concerned ministries covered a great share of discussion which reflects its prominence in the studied topic. It is of paramount importance because the ministries remain the source of every policy followed in the institutions nationwide,

while any attempt to innovate, develop or propose any kind of activity should go through the cannons of the ministry to be permitted. In other terms, all practices in schools or at university to develop EFL PS training are condemned to failure if the current situation remains as it is. More collaboration and communication inter-ministries should be held, especially that the two ministries handle the same population, as well as more intra-ministry dialogue (between officials and practitioners) is recommended. Ministries of Education and Higher Education should be more open to all the parameters and bodies that are concerned with change and quality in education to avoid resistance to change; and therefore, this awareness will assure the success of the teaching process.

## CONCLUSIONS

While discussing the issues of the forum, the participants did not deny that every attempt to initiate any program or 'better' practice is doomed to failure if it is not initialized by the top officials of the two ministries or their representatives. This is why, the interviewees always recommended for a high collaboration between the ministries of Education and Higher Education, their institutions and human resources for our learners' and teachers' benefits. Also, it was highly recommended to invest in experienced (or even retired) practitioners in the development of new teachers.

However, the conclusions of this study identifies the fact that guaranteeing the integration of all the requirements in a PS training programs and ministries collaboration is not necessarily satisfactory due to recurrently emergent wants and needs among novice teachers. Indeed, many unanticipated data originated from cross-checking the results of the questionnaires and the experts' forum. This is why the researcher created an open question in the questionnaire for trainees to discuss any individual need or problem. It is of paramount importance to recapitulate what the novice teachers call for to be fostered in a future ITT programmes:

- Trainees wished if more activities were designed to address their linguistic competence.
- Many novice teachers did not deny their lack of confidence about their communicative competence.
- Trainees needed more theoretical courses in EFL teaching methodology
- Trainees showed their sharp need to deal with EFL teaching methodology in practice.
- The newly-recruited teachers always admitted they need to be supported from a psychological side.

Because each individual in a group of trainees could have his own area of deficiency, an adequate ITT programme is not to be totally based on prescribed courses and activities. Reasonably, a potential margin should be left to deal with any probable emerging need.

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