

Cultural contrasts in the classroom: Preparing international pre-service teachers for professional experience

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***Abstract:** International pre-service teachers often encounter a range of difficulties in their Professional Experience that differentiate them from the majority of the pre-service teacher cohort. The linguistic and communicative requirements placed upon these international pre-service teachers are significant, as is the cultural adjustment that is necessary in order for them to operate effectively in the classroom. As a result, they often struggle with the dissonance they feel when they begin their Professional Experience placements. The study reported on in this paper describes an intervention program that was undertaken with a group of international pre-service teachers studying a teaching degree at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). International pre-service and colleague teacher perspectives both indicate that this group needs and benefits from additional support that addresses both linguistic and cultural differences. It was also evident that the preparation of pre-service teachers needs to be a partnership with the education faculty which extends beyond the university environment into the classroom.*

Keywords: international pre-service teachers, professional experience

Introduction

Increasing numbers of international students are choosing to undertake their tertiary studies in English-speaking country universities, such as UTAS. This requires them to face multiple challenges including adapting to a foreign culture, understanding the expectations of their courses, and adjusting to language, communication and cultural differences (Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009). Australian universities provide support to international students, but there is increasing concern about the adequacy of the level and type of this support and the

quality of the student experience (Jones, 2010). This concern is not only expressed within the university sector, but also at the federal and state government levels, in part because of the large contribution that international students make to the Australian economy.

Tertiary level study for an international student brings with it a number of academic, linguistic, cultural and social challenges as issues of isolation, cultural adjustment and transition accompany pressure to perform academically (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Leask, 2010; Mills, 1997; Samuelowicz, 1987). According to Ransom, Larcombe and Baik (2006), the challenges faced by international students can be categorised as issues related to teaching and learning, coping culturally or in relation to English language proficiency. It is recognised that these issues are complex and that each individual student responds to the situation in a unique way. The complexity of the international student experience also means that there are no “quick fixes” to ensure that each student gains the maximum benefit from their experience as a tertiary student in Australia. Other studies have shown (e.g., Spooner-Lane et al., 2009) that greater support needs to be provided by universities in order to assist these students to manage the intricacies of teaching in a foreign classroom context.

This paper outlines a pilot program implemented in Semester 1, 2010, in which international pre-service teachers were provided with additional support designed to scaffold their Professional Experience. The project involved gathering data from the participants via an online survey, a series of preparation workshops and two group visits to a primary school to observe “real life” classroom teaching and learning in a Tasmanian context. The purpose of this paper is to describe how the content of the workshops was designed, based upon the results of the on-line survey, and to report on the perceived effectiveness of these workshops in terms of preparing this group of international pre-service teachers for their Professional Experience placements.

Professional Experience

An important component of a pre-service teacher’s preparation for classroom teaching is their Professional Experience (also referred to in the literature as practicum or field experience). This experience ideally provides pre-service teachers with a chance to put into practice the theory that is explored, discussed and evaluated in lectures and tutorials. At UTAS, pre-service teachers are required to complete between 70-85 days of Professional Experience, depending upon their degree. Each Professional Experience placement is assessed according to the criteria for the Graduate Standards, and ratified by the Tasmanian Teachers’ Registration Board. Specifically, pre-service teachers studying at UTAS are required to:

- Demonstrate current professional knowledge and understanding in teacher practice
- Understand the importance of, and demonstrate a capacity to develop effective relationships within the school and pre-service communities
- Assess, plan and teach for the learning needs of a range of students
- Demonstrate the ability to plan for, and maintain a safe, inclusive and supportive learning environment (UTAS, 2010, p. 1).

Professional Experience placements are seen as providing essential links between theory and practice, but for many international pre-service teachers, these links are not obvious. Unfortunately, cultural background and language differences may act as barriers to the successful completion of Professional Experience, and international pre-service teachers often

feel disconnected from their supervising teacher, the students in the classroom and the whole schooling experience (Campbell, O’Gorman, Tangen, Spooner-Lane & Alford, 2008). International pre-service teachers often have greater proficiency in written English than spoken English and as a result find engaging in conversations with others demanding (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000). The cognitive and linguistic demands involved in communicating is increased when pre-service teachers are required to use spoken English to communicate with their students in a diverse range of ways such as giving instructions, giving encouragement, talking with parents and other teachers, planning with their colleague teacher and managing behaviour. As with the international pre-service teachers in Spooner et al.’s (2009) study, these pre-service teachers had learned English, but had not had sufficient opportunities to practise their English to a level of competency for teaching in a classroom.

It is evident therefore, from the literature and from the investigators’ own experiences, that universities recognise the need to support students from abroad and provide services for them, yet these services are often inadequate when it comes to meeting the needs of international pre-service teachers. The project discussed in this paper acknowledges this, and was designed to address both the linguistic and communication needs of these students, along with the specific challenges associated with classroom teaching.

The project

The project aimed to provide a model of support for international pre-service teachers in the Faculty of Education. International pre-service teachers on the Launceston campus were invited to participate in a series of workshops, facilitated by skilled mentors, designed to provide the participants with the communicative, pedagogical and cultural understandings necessary for the undertaking of a successful Professional Experience. The content of the workshops varied, but there was a strong focus throughout on developing participants’ expressive communication skills. Site visits to schools and classrooms also occurred in order to further understandings of teaching practices, curriculum and classroom processes in Tasmanian schools.

Participants

Participation in the workshops varied, but typically there were between 5-8 students at each session, with some participants being very regular attendees. At the time of enrolment into the Faculty of Education courses, the English language requirement was an IELTS score of 6 overall and most students who participated had entered with this score or better. Most participants were from Asian countries and had not been into an Australian school. Pre-service teachers from all year levels were welcomed, but most participants were in either their first or second year of the degree.

Instruments

A pre-survey was designed and administered to the international pre-service teachers using Qualtrics software. The survey was completed on-line and contained demographic questions, 16 open-ended response questions and 70 Likert scale items. Evaluation or feedback proformas were distributed at the end of each workshop session. These typically contained a variety of open-ended questions and Likert scale items. Field notes were also kept documenting the workshop sessions and the school visits. Some interviews were conducted with the colleague teachers and the pre-service teachers following their Professional Experience placements, and it is expected that further interviews will occur later in the year.

Results and Discussion

Survey results

A comprehensive survey was administered to the pre-service teachers to firstly gain an understanding of their perceptions and beliefs about classroom teaching, and secondly to guide the content of the workshops offered. The main aim of the survey was to assess which areas of Professional Experience pre-service teachers were most concerned about in order for workshops to be tailored to meet these needs. In addition it was designed to provide information about participants' backgrounds, including their nationality, academic qualifications in the field of education and teaching or other school-based experience, including whether they had been into an Australian classroom.

Information was gathered regarding the pre-service teachers' own school experiences. This allowed the pre-service teachers to not only reflect on their experience, but also to consider how their experience may be different to that of students in Australian schools. Pre-service teachers were invited to provide detailed responses to open questions regarding teachers, discipline and a comparison to Australian schools. Their responses showed that they were already beginning to consider the differences between schools they had attended and schools in Australia, with one participant writing about a "teacher centred learning environment", explaining that "students didn't have their say" in their country of origin, were subjected to "physical and mental punishments" and that in Australian school students "are having too much freedom". The following comments are illustrative of the responses received to the question, "What differences do you think there are between the schools you attended and schools in Australia?"

Children have freedom in Australian schools. In fact they are having too much freedom! Children learn much simpler stuff here! No stress, no pressure from anywhere.

Teaching is based on the hands-on activities in Australia, while in Uganda teaching lacks the practical aspects. In Uganda, teaching is aimed at achievement of final product while in Australia it is knowledge based.

Possible differences between schools in pre-service teachers' home countries and Australian schools were explored in greater depth with a list of statements concerning different aspects of schools. Participants were asked to select whether statements were true for schools in Australia, their country or both. A high number of 'true' responses for their home countries, in contrast to 'not true' received for Australia, occurred for the following statements:

- Students sit in rows facing the front
- Students do all their work in notebooks
- Students have textbooks for each subject
- Students usually work in silence in the classroom.

In contrast, pre-service teachers indicated that the following statements were true of Australian classrooms, but less so for their home countries:

- Parents may enter classrooms in the morning
- Students can choose what work to do sometimes
- Students with special needs (e.g., a student who is blind) usually attend the same schools and are in the same classrooms as children without special needs

- Students regularly use computers in the classroom.

The above information highlights the areas in which the international pre-service teachers have little or no experience from their own schooling and may therefore require additional support (such as talking to parents, using computers in the classroom and working with students with special needs).

The last set of Likert scale items required the participants to indicate their level of confidence with using English in a variety of situations. Not surprisingly, the areas in which the international pre-service teachers had little experience, such as talking to parents and using computers in the classroom, were those where students identified themselves as not being confident. Overall, students seem to be most confident when dealing with students in small groups, less confident with larger groups, and least confident when dealing with teachers. The results were similar to those found in Spooner et al.'s (2009) study, where participants indicated that their major concerns were related to their perceived lack of English language fluency and lack of understanding of Australian school culture.

The workshops

An analysis of the survey results assisted in the design of the workshops. To date, a total of five workshops, of approximately one hour duration each, have been held. Table 1 provides an overview of the dates, focus and description of the workshops and school visits.

Table 1. Overview of workshops

Date	Focus	Description
27/5/10	Reading aloud School visit 1 (24/5/10)	Facilitator modelled reading of picture book ('Belinda', by Pamela Allen) Discussion occurred around reasons for reading aloud, keeping children engaged, use of expression In pairs, students chose picture book and read to each other Classroom observation of literacy practices (Prep and Grade 3/4)
8/6/10	Sharing picture books Phonic resources	Participants shared picture books that they had been practising to read; group shared feedback. Discussion occurred around choice of book, pronouncing different words, 'nonsense' words Phonic resources shared (picture cards with words and actions)
24/6/10	Why do we read? Reading unfamiliar words	Discussed reasons for reading (e.g., enjoyment, information, moral, humour) Discussion of reading strategies (e.g., chunking, sounds, picture clues)
14/7/10	How do we teach reading?	Discussed sight words, word attack skills, syllabification
30/7/10	School visit 2	Classroom observation of teacher modeling strategies to engage

		learners (prep/1 and Grade 3)
5/8/10	Planning for positive behaviour	Modelling of story reading and responding to interrupting behaviour Viewing of teaching video clips and discussion around behaviour management strategies

As Table 1 shows, the focus for the first few workshops was on reading. This focus served several purposes: (1) reading aloud is a particularly common practice in early childhood and primary classrooms, and therefore likely to be something that the pre-service teachers would be called upon to undertake as part of their Professional Experience; (2) feedback from the survey indicated that pre-service teachers were concerned about their accents and expression and reading aloud would provide opportunities to address these aspects of their oral language; (3) observations of international students in classes revealed that they often experienced difficulties in the areas of pronunciation, grammar and functional language (e.g., problems with pronouncing individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation and pausing impacted upon their ability to communicate with others, reading aloud and modelling of language to school students); and (4) motivation: the project leaders were also confident that selection of picture books that were entertaining and often humorous would help students to feel at ease and therefore more prepared to participate.

Following each workshop session, participants were asked to complete a short evaluation form that typically contained a combination of rating scale items and short answer responses. Feedback received indicated that while most participants were either 'somewhat confident' or 'confident' with many aspects of reading aloud (e.g., varying tone of voice, using lots of expression), there was still general apprehension around correct word pronunciation. The pre-service teachers indicated that the workshops were helpful in providing them with strategies to prepare for reading aloud in the classroom. One participant, for example, planned to incorporate the following before reading aloud to a class:

Read it several times at home; look up the unfamiliar words; read it to a friend first
(Workshop 1)

In terms of usefulness, participants indicated that they found the following aspects particularly valuable:

The focus on pronunciation and the skills of reading to a group (Workshop 1)

Reviewing what's important when reading aloud; practising reading aloud (Workshop 1)

Strategies for pronouncing difficult words – fly, really (Workshop 1)

Feedback from other sessions indicated that in addition to finding the content of the workshops valuable, the international pre-service teachers also appreciated the opportunity to contribute and practice their oral language skills in front of a group. For example, one participant wrote:

Although I still have a lot to learn and improve, I find reading aloud is enjoyable for both audience and reader as both engage and share the story. I would like to improve more so that

I can be confident in front of students ... I am sorry for taking up a lot of time myself, but the session was very useful and helpful and I thank you for giving these opportunities to us.

(Workshop 2)

As the workshops progressed, students began to make some important discoveries about the reading aloud process and the emphasis shifted from individual pronunciation of words, to reading words in context. For example, one student wrote:

I think we should learn the intonation of sentences. We can read individual words, but for the whole sentence it is hard to pronounce.

(Workshop 2)

Similarly, students found that in addition to 'sounding out' there were many strategies that could be used to read unfamiliar words:

Look at the pictures, sounding out and discuss the cover

(Workshop 3)

Chunk the words, re-read the sentence and guess from the context

(Workshop 3)

The fifth workshop focused on 'Planning for Positive Behaviour' as many students had expressed a concern, both in the survey and verbally, about their ability to manage children's behavior; again, this was a common concern expressed by the participants in Spooner et al.'s (2009) study. Past experience had also shown the researchers that similar concerns had been raised by supervising colleague teachers. In particular, colleague teachers identified that the pre-service teachers lacked 'presence' in the classroom and were often reluctant to engage in conversations with students and teaching staff. While recognising the limitations of an hour-long workshop in terms of addressing these issues, this workshop focused on observing some behaviour management strategies that could be used by the pre-service teachers on Professional Experience. It also provided the opportunity to discuss the perceived behavioural differences between classrooms in other countries. Feedback from this session indicated that many participants were 'not confident' with 'managing whole class behaviour' or 'managing the behaviour of older students'.

In summary, it is not possible within the confines of this paper to provide a detailed description of the content of the workshops or an in-depth analysis of the perceived benefits; it is hoped, however, that the preceding overview has provided the reader with at least a limited understanding of how the workshops were used to prepare the students for their Professional Experience placements. The next section presents the findings from a colleague teacher's perspective, followed by the results of an interview conducted with an international pre-service teacher following a Professional Experience placement.

The colleague teachers' perspective

All pre-service teachers undertaking their Professional Experience placements are supervised by a classroom teacher (termed colleague teacher). The colleague teacher is responsible for modelling best practice in planning, teaching and assessment, for providing pre-service teachers with regular constructive oral and written feedback, and ultimately formally assessing the pre-service teacher against a particular set of criteria. The voices of colleague teachers provide a viewpoint that is worthy of consideration and provides a further insight into issues surrounding international pre-service teachers on their Professional Experience. Other researchers (e.g., Dlamini & Martinovic, 2007 as cited in Spooner et al., 2009) have

found that colleague teachers have their own concerns about having international pre-service teachers in their classrooms, including the possibility of having to re-teach each lesson taught due to a lack of English language proficiency. Data were collected from colleague teachers via pre-service teacher reports, personal communications between colleague teachers and university staff.

Personal communication from colleague teachers indicated that these international pre-service teachers responded very well to suggestions and had a genuine interest in the classroom. They were keen to do well and acted on advice, and completed planning components as required. Conversely, colleague teachers suggested that shyness and reticence to become involved in 'the life of the school' was a major issue. This was exhibited by an inability to initiate conversations with other staff members and parents. The following comment was received from a colleague teacher who supervised a pre-service teacher in her third year:

...showed a genuine interest in the cooperative learning culture and her thorough observations of teaching practices were evident in her planning and delivery of lessons ... [but] it took a long while for Louisa to feel confident to speak to other teachers and staff...

There were also genuine concerns expressed by colleague teachers in relation to the effectiveness of oral communication, behaviour management skills and understanding of the educational context. Additional support was provided by the university in terms of visits to the classrooms by a mentor, yet it was still evident that many of the international pre-service teachers struggled to engage with contextual pedagogy, classroom practices and learner expectations. One colleague teacher summed this up by stating the following:

...lack of experience within the Tasmanian education system has impacted on her understanding of how children learn and how we teach.

Sienna's Perspective: The Student Voice

In designing an intervention for students whose "difference" is a key identifier, there is a risk that, as educators, we have made assumptions about the experiences and needs of international students in our Faculty, especially as we refer to them as a seemingly homogenous group by designating them the title of "international students". It is important, then, to attempt to include the perspectives of the students into our evaluation of the program.

The perspective of one of the students involved in this study, Sienna, was captured via a semi-structured interview with one of the investigators. Sienna's perspective highlights some of the issues in assuming to understand how a cultural, educational or linguistic situation might be "different" for a student. The insights and understandings that Sienna contributes, demonstrates the ways in which the learning that occurs on Professional Experience is similar, as well as different, to the experiences of local pre-service teachers.

Sienna is a second year Bachelor of Education student who has completed two Professional Experience placements in primary schools. Prior to her second year Professional Experience, Sienna was involved in the support program for international students in the Faculty of Education. Her perspectives on the process of becoming a teacher highlight some of the tensions inherent in the merging of cultural understandings of what is important in the teaching and learning process.

A major focus of the support program was to provide international pre-service teachers with opportunities to experience and develop understandings about a different cultural approach to teaching and learning. When asked about how she viewed the teaching and learning differences between her home culture and the Tasmanian context Sienna mentioned that there were both similarities and differences.

It's not simple, but I think there are similarities and differences between Australian teaching and learning and in my country. And also there's a different point of view because I saw teaching and learning when I was a student so it's kind of a bit different now...I didn't notice some things when I was a student but now I'm getting to know how it is for teachers and it's not very clear cut.

Sienna's response indicates that the process of making cultural comparisons between teaching and learning in her home culture and in the Tasmanian context is a more complex one than simply contrasting one approach to education with another. Her response suggests that the transition from her identity as a student to that of a teacher also plays a role as she reveals that as a pre-service teacher, she is more aware of the elements of the teaching and learning process:

When I was a student I used to think that teaching is just lecturing or explaining things but when I came here and started to study about teaching and learning it changed and also I remembered different strategies that my teachers used when I was as student and now I notice that how important it is to have small group activities. I remembered later that it's a part of teaching and that it's not always explaining... it's a mixture of a lot of things that I know.

Sienna describes how her own views on her educational experiences at home have changed as a result of her development as a pre-service teacher. In doing so, she challenges the assumption that the education provision in her home country is narrowly traditional and teacher- directed:

I think that lots of people think that teaching in my home country is very traditional ...I myself used to think that it was very traditional but actually we make a group and there was different types of learning. Even when we had traditional desks, we had whole group discussions. But I didn't notice until I really studied teaching and learning...it was interesting to think about how it changed.

Sienna did, however, recall instances where differences in cultural practices caused her some personal discomfort. It is common at UTAS (and in other Australian tertiary institutions) to call lecturers and tutors by their first name, rather than use formal terms of address. Similarly, whilst on Professional Experience, pre-service teachers when speaking privately to their colleague teacher commonly use first names in conversation. Despite her belief that culture may not play a significant role in her Professional Experience, this cultural difference, however, was discomforting for Sienna:

I don't think it's culture or language and one thing is better than another – if you're able to observe, then you do notice what is good about a culture...going over what it means, you are constantly comparing a way of doing . I don't always evaluate. I might notice differences, but then this is something that I am missing then this is something that I have to learn. For example, my colleague teacher told me to call her by her first name, rather than Mr or Mrs, but for me, coming from a country where we don't call

teachers or older people by their first name, for me this is scary and I don't want to be rude, but in Australia it is kind of strange to call someone Mr or Mrs if you want to be friendly. I have to adjust. Sometimes it's hard for me and I feel bad if I have to call a teacher by their first name.

Sienna's recollections of her Professional Experience were positive and she could identify easily the ways in which she thought she had developed as a pre-service teacher. Sienna's experience encapsulates the process of "becoming" a teacher as she seeks to understand the complex ways in which teachers provide an opportunity for learning against the backdrop of her own personal prior experience. When asked what she thought good teaching looked like, Sienna highlighted the link between teaching and learning:

I have lots of good teachers in my head, I think...for both practicums they were very good teachers. They help learning, that's the main thing. Good teachers help learning and they know how to help and improve learning and they value teaching and learning and they value their students. And they love their job.

Conclusions

Clearly there are issues that international students experience in undertaking programs in Australian universities. Foremost among these are general cultural, language and academic issues which centrally-provided university international student support programs recognise and are designed to address.

However, international students undertaking pre-service teacher education programs face special, and quite specific, issues. Many of these relate to the Professional Experience component of the program, where there is a particular emphasis on English oral communication skills and a highly detailed understanding of the local school and classroom culture. In many instances, international students have not had any personal experience in Australian schools; in fact they may have had quite contrasting and sometimes contradictory previous school experience, and these are often inappropriate to import into teaching in Tasmanian classrooms. This situation places international students in a position of some vulnerability when they embark on Professional Experience, a situation corroborated by both performance and colleague teacher feedback.

The Professional Experience support program was designed to address this situation by providing general insights and awareness of Australian school culture, explicit instruction in some standard aspects of early childhood/primary school teaching (e.g., picture book reading; teaching reading), oral language skill development (e.g., English pronunciation), and guided observations of experienced teachers teaching. The program was delivered in anticipation of a Professional Experience period and in a group context with active involvement and oral contributions encouraged. Feedback was positive and the international pre-service teachers reported greater awareness and understanding of teaching and learning in Tasmanian schools.

Preliminary results from this project indicate that while international pre-service teachers are diverse in terms of their home educational experiences, they face similar challenges in adapting to teaching in a Tasmanian classroom. The support program provided the opportunity for discussion of some of these challenges, along with the provision of practical strategies to implement in the classroom. It is anticipated that further evaluation of this program will occur through the administration of a post-survey and follow-up interviews, but

initial recommendations would include the need to continue to offer additional support for pre-service teachers with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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