

Comparative Study of English Student Teachers' Teaching Practice in Finland and China

—Case study of UH and BNU from the Prospective of Student Teachers

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Abstract: This paper intends to compare English teacher education between China and Finland especially the teaching practice session of English teacher education, for teaching practice is a vitally important stage for English teacher education but it is under-researched. The study selects English teacher education master's program of Beijing Normal University (BNU) and University of Helsinki (UH) as the research target. By comparison of the teaching practice from the perspective of the interview of the student teachers, it tries to find similarities and differences of teaching practice in these two universities, how well the university prepares for the teaching practice for the student teachers, what competence the students obtain in the teaching practice and what is the feedback of the student teachers to the field schools and universities.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, teacher is becoming an increasingly popular job both in China and Finland. In China, due to the improvement of teacher's social status and welfare, a great many young people are attracted to apply for teacher education in Normal Universities. According to the statistics, there were 9 million college graduate students in 2021, of whom 740,000 were graduate students from Normal Universities. About 600,000 students have obtained the Teacher Certificate and applied for teaching jobs through testing. The number of students applied for teaching jobs through testing reached 5 million in 2021, but there were 789,000 teaching positions. On the other hand, the number of people who enrolled to take national teacher certificate exam has grown from 9.9 million in 2020 to more than 11 million in 2022. Thus, the competition is extremely fierce.

However, due to the different national condition and culture, China and Finland have different selection system and qualification system for teachers. In 1994, China issued the Teacher's Law which defined the qualification of teachers in China. Therefore, there is a teacher certificate system and those who have obtained the teacher certificate can be qualified as a teacher. There are different requirements which include degree requirement and certificate requirement for teachers who teach in different types of schools. For the students who graduate from the normal university will assign the teacher certificate if they satisfy certain requirements. But for those who graduate from other universities, they must take a national teacher certificate exam to get the official teacher certificate.

In Finland, there are 9 comprehensive universities that provide teacher education for teachers in comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools, as well as for teachers in adult and vocational education. Universities have a high degree of autonomy in designing their curricula. However, there are some principles and general outlines followed by all institutions of teacher education. These are partly due to recommendations by the Ministry of Education and partly to an agreement of the Deans of the Faculties of Education and the Directors of the Departments of Teacher Education who are supposed to have regular contact with each other and with the Ministry. The Ministry of Education has full confidence in the departments and faculties involved in teacher education. According to old

decrees issued in 1979 and 1995, all teachers except kindergarten teachers had to attain master's degree for a teacher qualification (BA 180 + MA 120 = 300 ECTS; 1 ECTS is about 27 hours work). Besides, student teachers must take 60 ECTS obligatory Pedagogical studies, otherwise they cannot be qualified as teachers in Finland.

2. Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, the roles of teachers and schools are changing, thus the expectations of the teachers and school change too. "To be fully effective in teaching, and capable of adjusting to the evolving needs of learners in a world of rapid social, cultural, economic, and technological change, teachers themselves need to reflect on their own learning requirements in the context of their school environment, and to take greater responsibility for their own lifelong learning as a means of updating and developing their own knowledge and skills." [1] Teachers are asked to teach in increasingly multicultural classrooms, integrate students with special needs, use ICT for teaching effectively, engage in evaluation and accountability processes, and involve parents in schools [2]. Therefore, teachers need the competence to constantly innovate and adapt themselves to their practice. This study adopts the framework of teacher competence proposed by the Council of Europe [3], for it is commonly used and accepted in most of the European countries.

Competence is "a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values and desire which lead to effective embodied human action in the world, in a particular domain." [4]. It involves tacit and explicit knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as dispositions (motivation, beliefs, valued orientations and emotions). [5] Teacher competences are built on 'a concept of teaching as praxis in which theory, practice and the ability to reflect critically on one's own and others' practice illuminate each other, rather than on a concept of teaching as the acquisition of technical skills' [6]. To understand the teacher competence, we must consider three domains—knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Teacher competences imply a wider, systemic view of teacher professionalism, on multiple levels – the individual, the school, the local community, professional networks.

Teacher education is a process that helps the student teachers to gain the knowledge, skills and develop their attitudes to be a teacher. It helps to cultivate a qualified teacher, who can adapt to the changing world. To assess a student teacher's qualification of teaching is based on the evaluation of the three competences. "Teachers should have a specialist knowledge of the subjects(s) they teach, plus the necessary pedagogical skills to teach them, including teaching to heterogeneous classes, making effective use of ICT, and helping pupils to acquire transversal competences. Ministers have also noted specifically the need to promote certain key professional values and attitudes amongst teachers: reflective practice, autonomous learning, engagement in research and innovation, collaboration with colleagues and parents, and an involvement in the development of the whole school." [7] As a critical cycle of teaching education, teaching practice is very important for student teachers to prepare for experiencing the teaching job in advance and to see whether they are well prepared and qualified to be future teachers. Therefore, this research adopts the teacher competence framework to study how student teachers apply their knowledge, skill and dispositions into the teaching practice and how it helps the student teachers to develop and strengthen their competence.

3. Methods

This research analyzes the objectives of English teaching education and teaching practice in Beijing Normal University and University of Helsinki. On the other hand, the research focuses on the interview of teacher students of the two universities. It interviewed 4 teacher students from each university and deeply discussed with them about their teaching practice and their feedback on the teaching practice. Each interview lasted one and half hours and then a comparison had been made.

4. Comparison of Teaching Practice of English student teacher in UH and BNU

As discussed, teacher education is to train the student teachers in terms of competence of knowledge, skills and dispositions, teaching practice is vital in applying the knowledge and skills to practice. It will help student teachers to build their belief to become a future teacher. Therefore, teaching practice is an indispensable cycle for teacher education. Both UH and BNU emphasize the importance of student teachers' teaching practice. Besides the theoretical study in the university, teaching practice is the critical cycle for realizing the idea of becoming a teacher. In the context of initial teacher education, teaching practice experiences are regarded as one of the strongest factors in changing student teachers' conceptions of teaching. Teaching practice is the intersection where the theoretical and cultural tradition related to teaching and education and the school's reality meet. The student teachers adapt to the educational culture and is able to utilize the educational knowledge related to school that they have acquired in teacher education.

4.1 Types of Teaching Practice in UH and BNU

To help student teachers to be familiar with the pedagogical knowledge learned in the university, both universities in Finland and in China provide opportunities for them to observe and teach in the field schools. In University of Helsinki, there are two types of teaching practice. One is guided basic practice which is carried out in the first semester after the student teachers have completed the Planning, Implementation and Assessment of Teaching course. The second type is advanced practice in field school which is in the fourth semester after students have participated in the course Curriculum and the Development of Educational Institution and they must complete basic practice. Beijing Normal University offers Shadow practice in the second semester which lasts for 16 weeks and practice in the field school in the third semester which lasts for 16 weeks too. The following tables 1-2 show the two types of teaching practice in the two universities.

Table 1 The practicum of University of Helsinki for English Student Teachers.

Types of teaching practice in UH	time	length	Observation Of teaching lessons	Practice lessons	Mentor's guidance hour	School as a community hour
Guided Basic practice in field schools	The first (autumn) semester	7-8 weeks	30*45-minute Or 18*75-minute	15*45-minute or 9*75-minute	7 h	10 h
Advanced practice in field schools	The second (spring) semester	9 weeks	36*45-minute or 22*75-minute	15*45-minute or 9*75-minute	9h	15h

Table 2 The teaching practice of Beijing Normal University for English Student Teachers.

Types of teaching practice in BNU	time	Length	Observation of teaching lessons	Practice lessons	Mentor's guidance hour	School as a community hour
Shadow practice	Second semester	16 weeks(1 day in a week)	80*45 minutes	4-6 lessons		
Practice in the Field School	third semester	16 weeks(4 days in a week)	80*45minutes	4-6 lessons		

4.2 Teaching practice in Student Teachers' perceptions

The study interviewed 4 teacher students respectively in the two universities. All the 8 students have finished their two sessions teaching practice in the field school and some of them have got teaching jobs in local secondary and upper high schools. Each interview lasted for 1 and half hours and the questions focus on preparation, duration, and feedback of their teaching practice. There are 10 questions which are based on teacher competence framework.

Question 1 "How did your university prepare for your teaching practice? What was your expectation of it?" The teacher students from Beijing Normal University (BNU) think that their university not only offers them theoretical courses on pedagogy before the teaching practice, but also

contacts some better secondary and upper secondary schools in Beijing as their field schools. The students have rights to choose their ideal field schools. Once the students have decided their field schools, the university will hold a meeting to convey information of the field schools and the relative regulation of teaching practice. Each teacher student will be assigned to at least one mentor in the university and in the field school. Teacher students will communicate with the mentors in advance. The teacher students generally have a high expectation of the teaching practice. They believe that field schools are different from the university which teach them theories rather than teaching skills such as course design, class management, and students' assessment etc. The teacher students from University of Helsinki (UH) think that the university makes full preparation for their teaching practice. Firstly, faculty of education will give them a *Practicum Handbook*. There are two field schools cooperated with the university. Before teaching practice, faculty of education will hold a meeting to help teacher students to get familiar with the field school. Except one student who thought that the meeting was not helpful, the rest of teacher students believe that the preparation and meeting are very helpful for their teaching practice. All the teacher students have a high expectation of the field schools because they are not quite familiar with English teaching and teaching environment of secondary schools in Finland. They hope they can better understand the basic education and English teaching of Finland by working in the field schools. By comparison, both universities in China and Finland attach importance to teacher students' teaching practice, and both provide the students with field schools and make full preparation in advance to help students finish teaching practice.

There are six questions concerning teacher students' teaching practice in the field schools and these questions cover three competences of teachers, i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitude. For example, question 3 "What do you usually do in the teaching practice? In another word, what is your schedule during the teaching practice?" The teacher students from BNU think that they spend a long time every day in the school, and they have a tight schedule. The teacher students in Helsinki think that they have more freedom and stay for a shorter time in the field school.

The fourth question "How does the field school help you to strength your theoretical knowledge?" Teacher students in Beijing think that field schools do not highlight their theoretical knowledge, and they obtain the theories mainly from the courses in the university. The teacher students in Helsinki think that the field schools highlight their pedagogical theories. "There are at least 10 seminars or lectures during the whole teaching practice. The themes of the lectures and seminars are educational theories. We must participate in them." (The fourth interviewee from UH)

The fifth question "How does the mentor instruct and help you?" The teacher students from Beijing believe that the mentor is generally responsible, and they will try to help the teacher students to familiarize with class teaching, and they share the teaching experience and class management method with them etc. The teacher students from Helsinki think the mentor is very responsible and kind. They will help her familiarize with the school and the class. "The mentor will communicate with me before and after the class and help me to familiarize with the textbook, teaching materials and the names of the students. We will arrange a weekly meeting to instruct me on how to arrange my teaching schedule and which part could be omitted." (The third interviewee from UH)

The sixth question "How does the field school help you to gain teaching competence which did not obtain in the university?" The teacher students think that teaching practice is helpful for them to understand upper secondary education and they learn practical teaching skills. The teacher student from UH thinks "I don't think they put any specific emphasis on any these competences. They treat everything equally in my opinion. But the practicum is like learning by doing. It is a chance to do the teaching. learning about the teaching methods." (The second interviewee from UH) "Practice develops my skill competence by making me implement what I learned." (The third interviewee from UH).

The rest of the questions concern about the teacher students' feedback on the field school and the teaching practice. For instance, "What is your greatest gain in the practice?" The student from Beijing thinks "My greatest gain in practice was the realization of what kind of school I would like to teach in and what kind of city I would like to live in. If I have to say the greatest again, that would be the experience itself which taught me what working, the occupation and profession of teacher, was like."

(The first interviewee from BNU) The student from Helsinki believes “To see how the Finnish teacher run the lessons and get familiar with how the national core curriculum is implemented. I observed quite many lessons in my basic field school, and I enjoyed it. Get better understanding Finnish education and the real thing. It gave me more confidence. No matter whether I can find a job or not , I know I can handle and teach.” (the fourth interviewee from UH)

When it comes to the question “What are your suggestions for the practice school and university?” The teacher student in Beijing says, “I think they could have a closer cooperation and make information much more transparent and up to date.” (The first interviewee from BNU) “The practice school can give the student teacher more opportunities to teach and get involved in the class management. The university can offer more helps to make student teachers apply the theories they learned in the class to the teaching practice.” (the fourth interviewee from BNU) The teacher student from Helsinki believes “More work on practical things at university : softwares (Abitti), where to find jobs, class management tools.” (the second interviewee from UH) “My suggestions for the practice school is to provide more support for student teachers who do not speak Finnish. I would also love to participate in more school events. My suggestion for the university is to focus less on theories and more on practical knowledge and hands-on experience. We would also love to learn about the systems that Finnish teachers use at work (e.g., Wilma). Most importantly, they should not overwork us with too many assignments and homework and long lectures.” (The third interviewee from UH)

As for the question “ Did the teaching practice satisfy your expectation and will you become an English teacher after graduation?” Most of the students from both universities give positive feedback on the teaching practice. “In fact, the practicum filled my expectation in many ways, for example, the workload was much heavier than I thought, and the students grade level was out of my expectation as well. However the practicum did give me much surprise and new findings of myself.”(the first interviewee from BNU) However, there is one interviewee says that she will not become an English teacher after graduation. “ No. It is so tired.”(the third interviewee from BNU) The teacher student from Helsinki says “Yes, I get to know the Finnish school and how the teacher teach in the classroom.” (the first interviewee from UH) Another student thinks “ Yes. Practicum is the best part of the whole STEP program and it is the most meaningful and helpful as well, most rewarding.” (the second interviewee from UH)

5. Conclusion

Beijing Normal University and the University of Helsinki offer professional academic study for English languages, pedagogical study, and teaching practice for English Teacher Education program. Both universities emphasize the importance of pedagogical study and teaching practice. Although the whole process, study hours and courses are different in these universities, teaching practice is highlighted. To help student teachers to be familiar with the pedagogical knowledge learned in the university, both universities in Finland and in China provide two sessions of teaching practice for them to observe and teach in the field schools. Teacher students who have completed the teaching practice in the field schools are qualified for the application of degree. The objective of teaching practice is to develop teacher students’ nuclear practical competence, i.e. competence of curriculum design, development, implementation and assessment. From the interviews with the teacher students in both universities, the study finds that both universities follow their objectives to guide the teaching practice. The teacher students, in general, agree that the universities make full preparation for their practice which help them to get familiar with the field schools and the whole process. Both teacher students think that their mentors are kind and experienced teachers who give them detailed instructions on how to design a lesson, how to teach, how to manage the class and how to give feedback to the students. At the same time, the mentors will point out their problems, give them feedback and have a face-to-face discussion with them. They regard the mentors as great helpers. In terms of competence framework of knowledge, skills and dispositions, the teacher students all agree that the teaching practice cultivates their competence to some extent, but the students from Beijing emphasize that the theoretical knowledge is not highly emphasized in their teaching practice. On the

contrary, they have much written feedback to write which is time-consuming. They hope that the field schools could also hold the seminars which focus on the competence for the language teachers as the field schools in Helsinki do. All the teacher students think that they do not get enough chances to give lessons in the field schools. Besides the observing lessons, they suggest that the field schools should give them more opportunities to teach in the class which will be helpful for them to improve their teaching skills. All the teacher students agree that the teaching practice is very helpful, and they are satisfied with it. The field schools and the whole practice sessions meet their expectations. Except one interviewee who decide to give up being an English teacher after the teaching practice, the rest of the interviewees are encouraged to be a language teacher in the future.

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