The Practicum in TESOL

The Practicum in L2 Teacher Education: A Hong Kong Case Study

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In this contribution I consider the question of the practicum, or teaching practice, as it is known in British and British-influenced jurisdictions, from the specific perspective of Hong Kong, where I work. I mention some of the strengths and limitations of the practicum at my institution, but the question I primarily wish to address is a general one that I imagine applies in all contexts. This question is, How can we ensure that the ideals and practices we encourage our students to develop in the supervised practicum are carried over into their careers as teachers?

Hong Kong is a society built on international trade and commerce. Although 98% of the population has Cantonese as its mother tongue, there is a tremendous demand for a bilingual workforce. From the 1950s to the 1970s Hong Kong experienced an economic miracle based on low-value-added manufacturing. This rapid economic development relied on an unskilled labour force for which proficiency in English skills was not a requirement. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the manufacturing that had been the mainstay of Hong Kong’s economy in the 1950s and 1960s moved over the border to mainland China in search of cheaper labour and land, these overheads having become internationally uncompetitive in Hong Kong. It was replaced by high-value-added
service industries that required a much more sophisticated, bilingual workforce.

Along with its economic development, Hong Kong also made rapid strides in education, although there was a time lag. It was only in 1971, for example, that universal primary education was introduced, and junior secondary education became universal only in 1978. At the university level, up until 5 years ago only 5% of the 17–20 age group could receive university or polytechnic education, with the figure now having risen to 18%.

As a consequence of the relatively slow pace of educational development at university level, the majority of the primary and secondary teaching body was educated in 2-year college of education certificate programmes. And those degree holders entering the teaching profession were able to do so without any formal teacher education. The emphasis was on producing teachers in large numbers rather than of high quality. As far as English is concerned, the problem has been exacerbated by the perception on the part of school principals that oral proficiency in English is the primary requirement for English teachers, with the result that teachers with no formal education in language teaching are often drafted to teach the subject.

Conscious of this problem, City Polytechnic (now University) of Hong Kong initiated a degree programme in TESL in 1991. The BATESL is a 3-year programme that prepares students to teach English in Hong Kong secondary schools. It was hoped that graduates of the BATESL would follow this with a 1-year postgraduate certificate of education before starting their teaching careers. Because graduates are allowed to teach in Hong Kong without a formal postgraduate teaching qualification, however, most BATESL students have gone straight into teaching without doing the postgraduate certificate.¹

In addition to courses on language teaching theory and methodology, linguistic description, and language proficiency, the BATESL offers its students a staged induction to classroom teaching, supervised by City University staff with local Hong Kong secondary school teaching experience. In Year 1 our students do campus-based, video-supported observation of classroom practices. A corpus of recordings of authentic local English language classes has been developed for this purpose, and a reflective, small-group approach is used in working with these materials. Students also do microteaching (practice teaching in controlled conditions with their classmates). In Year 2 they do a field-based internship, in

¹One reason for this is financial; students need to start to earn some money. But other constraints are the small number of places available on the full-time postgraduate certificate courses and the possibility of doing the certificate part-time, in-service, after they have started teaching.
which they are assigned to work with a cooperating classroom teacher and carry out classroom observation and supervised teaching. In Year 3 they return to the classroom and do a short teaching practice, again under the guidance of a cooperating teacher, and supervised by a member of staff at City University. The aim of the 3-year induction is to take students from “idealised conception of teaching to the hard realities” (Lo, 1996, p. 41). The teaching practice is generally perceived as a success by students, and each year they ask to spend a longer time in the classroom, a demand that has been fulfilled, to a certain extent, with a lengthening of the time of the teaching practice on several occasions. In spite of the short time available and complaints that the students are too tightly supervised by their cooperating teachers, students clearly find the teaching practice useful in alerting them to the various difficulties of teaching as well as to successful strategies to overcome these difficulties. In their teaching practice diaries and in verbal reports students have consistently highlighted such areas as the following as ones in which they have benefited:

- appreciation of the importance of variety,
- appreciation of the respective roles of the mother tongue and the L2,
- awareness of the need for repetition and paraphrase in classroom language,
- awareness of students’ preferences for different types of activities
- discipline,
- lesson timing,
- skill in building up relationships and motivating students,
- use of audiovisual aids, and
- voice production.

Johnson (1996) has called for teacher preparation programmes to “put forth a realistic view of teaching that recognizes the realities of classroom life and adequately prepares pre-service teachers to cope with those realities” (p. 47). In spite of its shortcomings, especially the limited time it offers in the classroom period, the above perceived benefits indicate that the BATESL teaching practice contributes to this goal.

In a large-scale research project, Richards and Pennington (1996) studied the way our graduates teach during their first year in the classroom after they graduate. In some ways the results of this research were disappointing, if predictable, given that the problems of beginning teachers have been well documented across a wide range of disciplines and countries (Veenman, 1984). Richards and Pennington discovered that, in spite of their initial ideals, BATESL graduate teachers reverted to
a range of pragmatic strategies that meant the abandonment of some of the beliefs about appropriate teaching they had developed in the programme. In a monograph based upon the project, Pennington, Lee, and Lau (1996) list these strategies as follows:

- teaching became more teacher-centred;
- teaching was focused less on communication than on form and discrete lexis and rules;
- teaching closely followed the textbook;
- teaching involved little creative lesson planning or materials design;
- teachers accepted greater use of Cantonese by the students than they wished; and
- for certain communicational functions, teachers themselves made greater use of Cantonese than they wished.

These findings may well not be surprising, given the stresses that teachers are subjected to at the beginning of their careers (Fogarty, Yarrow, & Costlin, 1993). The fact that they have had to compromise various ideals they adopted in the BATESL does not necessarily mean that they will not return to them, once they feel more secure in the classroom. Describing the relationship between the teacher educator and the novice teacher, Freeman (1989, cited in Bailey, 1992) has said, “Change is not necessarily immediate or complete. Indeed, some changes occur over time, with the collaborator [teacher educator] serving only to initiate the process” (p. 254). Nevertheless, if we are to maximise the likelihood of change and optimise the degree of change, then further supervisions would seem to be highly desirable in the context of our Hong Kong BATESL graduates. We need to ensure that our graduates develop an awareness of their current practice, as described by Pennington and Richards, how it diverges from their ideals, and an acknowledgment on their part of the need to change (Bailey, 1992, p. 254).

In planning for the BATESL it is clear that we miscalculated in assuming that our graduates would go on to do a postgraduate certificate in education (which has a considerable teaching practice component). However, the issue of the gap between the ideals that our students develop in our programme and their pragmatic teaching strategies after they graduate is a problem better addressed by us than by the organisers of the independent postgraduate certificate, given our familiarity with our students. In the short term, individual colleagues have attempted to address this problem by offering an informal mentoring service for our graduates, which gives them the chance of talking through their classroom experiences and problems with a member of City University staff (a survey of our graduates indicated a very strong demand for such support). In addition, our graduates are encouraged to make use of the
Hong Kong on-line mentoring network for English teachers (*TeleNex*, http://www.telenex.hku.hk/). In the longer term, we are planning to establish an integrated 4-year BATESL programme, with a much greater emphasis on practice teaching in the extra fourth year. What our experience has taught us, however, is the need for support for teachers after the teaching practice, during the early years of their careers, if we want to be sure that the lessons learned in our programme are carried over into the teaching careers of our graduates.

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- In recent years, the practicum has emerged as an increasingly common feature of teacher preparation programs. A survey conducted by