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## **Learning to Teach English Language in the Practicum: What Challenges do Non-Native ESL Student Teachers Face?**

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*Abstract: This study investigates the challenges sixteen non-native preservice ESL teachers in a Bachelor of Education (English Language) (BEdEL) programme from Hong Kong experienced in an eight-week teaching practicum. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and reflective journals were collected from all 16 participants to obtain a detailed description of the participants' perceptions of their field-based practicum experiences. Results indicate that the preservice teachers' practicum was characterized by a reality shock due to difficulties in experimenting with pedagogical practices they were taught in the BEdEL programme, and a lack of sense of control in class. This reality shock could destabilize the already anxious student teachers and have adverse effects well beyond the eight-week teaching practicum. Inadequacy in English language competence also appeared to affect not only these student teachers' teaching performance but also how they established and maintained their teacher role and relationship with their students. Implications of the results for strengthening current ESL teacher preparation programmes in non-native English speaking contexts are discussed.*

### **Introduction**

Teaching practice has come to be recognized as one of the most important aspects of the teacher education program (Farrell, 2003). Much evidence points to the value of preservice student teaching due to the realistic nature of the experience (Slick, 1998). Research examining student teacher practicum reveals that the practicum component of a teacher training program has an important impact on their future careers (Myles, Cheng, & Wang, 2006; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012). Although there has been a considerable amount of research on teacher learning in the general education field (e.g., Tang, 2002; Graham, 2006; Allen, 2009; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012), in English language teaching there is a paucity of data on what exactly takes place during field experiences, particularly practicum experiences undertaken by non-native ESL teacher candidates (Farrell, 2003). The purpose of this exploratory study is, in part, to address this gap in ESL teacher

education research. The study is designed to identify the major challenges non-native preservice ESL student teachers may experience in teaching practice context.

This paper outlines a case study of the perceptions of an 8-week teaching practicum experience in local schools of 16 non-native preservice ESL student teachers from a university in Hong Kong. What challenges these ESL student teachers experienced during the practicum is the focus of the study described here, which attempted to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What challenges did a group of non-native preservice ESL student teachers experience during the teaching practicum?
- 2) What might contribute to the challenges experienced by these non-native ESL student teachers?

The research is based on the premise that the knowledge derived from this investigation will be incorporated into the teacher training courses so that preservice ESL student teachers can become more aware of the realities of the teaching contexts they are about to enter.

## **Review of the Literature**

The practicum has emerged as an increasingly common feature of ESL/EFL teacher preparation programs (Stoynoff, 1999; Farrell, 2007). Practicum teaching not only allows student-teachers to put their university-acquired knowledge to practical use but also helps them confirm that they have chosen the right career (Phairee, Sanitchon, Suphanangthong, Graham, Prompruang, De Groot, & Hopkins, 2008). Phairee et al. further point out that the most commonly expressed problems during the practicum concern ESL student teachers' anxiety over their limited English skills and the large class sizes they encounter. In his practicum model which aims to offer ESL student teachers an integrated, developmental experience that acknowledges the long-term process of learning to teach and becoming members of a profession, Stoynoff (1999) considers the academic and field experiences as interrelated and complementary parts of a whole that ESL students engage in simultaneously, with the goal of developing teachers who have the self-knowledge and skills associated with effective classroom practice. Within this framework, Stoynoff outlines five principal characteristics of a TESOL practicum: 1) The practicum is integrated into the academic programme; 2) The delivery of the practicum emphasizes a team approach. The team includes mentor teachers, university supervising teachers, language programme managers, and the practicum student teachers. 3) The practicum provides intensive modeling and coaching; 4) The practicum incorporates extensive, systematic observation; 5) The practicum experience is assessed by means of a portfolio. Prepared by the student teachers, the portfolio documents their cumulative development over the yearlong experience. Portfolio documents include teaching videos, lesson plans; reflection

journals in which students record reactions to teaching-insights discovered, and assumptions questioned. Essentially, Stoyhoff's description of the five principal characteristics of a TESOL practicum somewhat represents a synthesis of the two fundamental approaches to second/foreign language teacher education: a transmission approach of acquainting prospective teachers with classroom techniques and skills, and an approach in which the prospective teachers try to develop their own philosophy of foreign language teaching and become reflective of their own learning-to-teach processes (Velez-Rendon, 2002).

A number of qualitative studies on ESL or EFL learner practicum experience have been conducted using narrative inquiry as a data collection tool. Numrich (1996) reported the results of a secondary analysis of 26 diary studies by novice ESL teachers undertaking a preservice practicum course in a master's degree programme in TESOL in America. The participants in this study were either teachers just entering the field or teachers with less than 2 years of ESL teaching experience. The student teachers' most frequently mentioned frustrations in their diaries were time management, giving clear directions, responding to students' various needs, teaching of grammar, and assessing students' learning. Unlike Numrich's study which was conducted in a native English-speaking context, Chiang (2008) investigated the effects of a language teacher training course that integrated fieldwork components with traditional lectures in Taiwan where English is taught and learned typically as a foreign language. Results of Chiang's study indicate that field-based components help prospective foreign language teachers to become reflective of their weaknesses and strengths and enhance their teacher efficacy. The empowering effects of the teaching training course, however, was the result of meticulous planning and integrative implementation to optimize the outcomes of student teachers' learning-to-teach in the field-based practicum. Also relying on qualitative research techniques, Farrell (2007) described a case study of how one preservice English language teacher in Singapore failed her practicum. Although initial practicum report indicated that this teacher had failed because she had great difficulty managing her classes and that she was not well prepared for many of her classes, Farrell's analysis of the teacher's teaching journals suggested that fundamentally, it was the teachers' unconscious assumptions about teaching and learning that might lead to the teacher's failure in the practicum. Finally, Barkhuizen and Feryok (2006) reported on a study which investigated pre-service English second language teachers' perceptions of a six-week international experience programme in Auckland, New Zealand. The programme had a school experience component which was intended to develop awareness of teaching and learning experiences in New Zealand. Although this component of school observation and collaboration with experienced teachers in their classrooms provided the pre-service teachers with an opportunity to see what teaching in the New Zealand classroom was like, they did not engage in the actual teaching in their classrooms, which resulted in no chance to transfer to practice the communicative teaching methodologies they learned during the programme

Despite its recognized importance and prevalence in ESL/EFL teacher education

programmes, overall, reviews of literature on second or foreign language teaching and learning by Freeman and Johnson (1996), Freeman (2002), and Chiang (2008) indicate that research concerning the teaching practicum experience of student teachers in second language teacher education programmes is lacking. This paper reports on a study in Hong Kong that examines sixteen preservice ESL student teachers' practicum experiences of learning and acculturation into the teaching profession. By way of semi-structured interview and reflective journals, the study illustrates the major challenges the ESL student teachers encountered in their 8-week teaching practicum in the context of a Bachelor of Education (English Language).

### **Context and Programme Structure**

The context of this study is the four-year Bachelor of Education (English Language) Programme (BEdEL) in a university in Hong Kong. The curriculum of the programme coursework includes Discipline Studies (e.g., courses on English literature, grammar, vocabulary and Phonology, and theories of language learning), Professional Studies (e.g., ESL teaching methodology, classroom management, curriculum and assessment), and General Education

The BEdEL programme also has a school-based field experience component which consists of a one-week school attachment and an 8-week teaching practicum. The one-week school attachment is undertaken in the second semester of the second year in the programme. The school attachment experience is intended to develop awareness of English language teaching and learning experiences in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. The 8-week teaching practicum is undertaken in the second semester of the third year in the programme. The practicum aims to engage the BEdEL student teachers in real teaching context at primary or secondary levels where they work with teachers in the school and engage with their supporting teachers and tertiary supervisors in professional dialogues through post-lesson conferences. Through the eight-week teaching practice, the student teachers are expected to show enhanced confidence and proficiency in taking up the roles and responsibilities of a teacher in the school.

Specifically, during the first 3-4 days of the practicum, the student teachers work full days at the school, liaising with their school supporting teachers to engage in collaborative teaching with them if possible. The supporting teacher, also known as class teacher, acts as a mentor and helps familiarize the student teacher with the school routines and some other pedagogical matters such as the level of their class, lesson planning and preparation, but he or she is not responsible for evaluating the student teacher's teaching. During the rest of the practicum period, the student teacher takes over the assigned class and conducts independent teaching. All the student teachers' teaching performance during the practicum is assessed by their university supervisors through the following three components: 1) *Classroom teaching performance*. The student teachers' teaching performance is

assessed on a Distinction/Credit/Pass/Fail system of evaluation by their tertiary supervisors. A minimum of two visits must be made to each student teacher by their tertiary supervisor. In case of unsatisfactory performance, two referral visits will be arranged. 2) *Classroom Language Assessment*. Classroom Language Assessment focuses on the following aspects of the student teachers' use of English in the classroom: accuracy and range of grammatical structures; accuracy of pronunciation, stress and intonation; ability to use English as the language of instruction. 3) *Reflective journal*. Student teachers are required to write a 1000-word summative reflection upon completing their teaching practice. The reflective summary should contain the following contents: a brief introduction which summarizes their experiences in the school; their most significant achievements; a conclusion that signals forward planning for self-improvement towards becoming an effective full-time language teacher. Each student teacher's reflective journal is also evaluated by his or her university supervisor.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 16 student teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education degree programme, majoring in English language teaching (BEDEL), at a Hong Kong university. All the participants were females, and spoke Mandarin or Cantonese as their mother tongue. Pseudonyms were used throughout the paper to protect anonymity of the participants. In the current BEDEL programme, 60 per cent of the courses on the programme focus on the English language, while 40 per cent focus on pedagogy and other areas. An overwhelming majority of the English language-related courses deal primarily with areas such as English literature, theories of language and language learning, and grammatical and phonological systems of the English language, with an emphasis on increasing the knowledge and awareness about the systems of the language rather than the ability to use this knowledge in real communication. Pedagogy-related courses include curriculum and assessment, the English language curriculum in Hong Kong, English language teaching skills, catering to learner diversity, classroom management, as well as a teaching practicum in a local Hong Kong school. In the first semester of their third year in the BEDEL programme, students undertake a one-semester period of international experience – typically referred to as ‘immersion’ (Bodycott & Crew, 2001) sponsored by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSAR) – at an overseas university. The teaching practicum in a local Hong Kong school is undertaken in the second semester of the third year, and lasts eight weeks.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The phenomenological case study design was preferred for this study due to its emphasis on subjects' perspectives and the meanings they construct of the phenomena under study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Merriam (1998) sees a case as "a phenomenon that is inherently bounded, with a finite amount of time for data collection or a limited number of people who could be interviewed or observed" (p. 27), and case study represents an intensive, holistic description and analysis of the single phenomenon (ibid). As case study approach also characteristically enables information to be collected from multiple data collection instruments and sources, I was thus able to obtain in-depth data about a small number of cases and compare the cases (Creswell, 2007).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with all 16 participants to obtain a detailed description of the participants' perspectives and perceptions of their field-based practicum experiences. Each interview, conducted in the trainee teacher's first language, ranged in length from approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Interview questions reflected the participants' perceived difficulties they encountered throughout the teaching practice period. For example, participants were asked to describe whether their pre-practicum expectations had been fulfilled, what challenges they had experienced as they struggled with lesson planning, teaching, and interacting with their students and other people around them, and how they were able to overcome challenges. All the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and later further translated into English in their entirety. In addition, follow-up email correspondence with the participants was also used to probe further some points that emerged while the interviews were being transcribed and translated.

Another data source was the trainee teachers' reflective journals. A reflective journal provides a space in which teacher-learners record both critical incidents and routine ones during the practicum and so make sense of their professional beings (Carter, 2008). As "a real insider instrument" (McDonough, 1994, p. 63), preservice teachers' reflective journals can be a useful source of information to teacher educators. "What we may think novice teachers need to learn as they first set out to teach and what they see as most relevant to their needs may be two different things" (Numrich, 1996). Pennington & Richards (1996) also point out that journal studies can allow a more microscopic view of the teachers' processes of development and their perceptions and coping behaviours in specific circumstances. As part of the preservice teachers' practicum performance in this study, the participants were required to write a summative reflection upon completing their teaching practice. To facilitate their writing of the reflection, they were directed to focus their retrospective thinking and writing on the following aspects of English teaching: the approach and strategies they adopted in teaching; their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher; their relations with the school teachers and students, and university supervisors; the challenges they encountered during

the practicum and how they overcame these challenges.

The data analysis was carried out through the qualitative research method of thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Ates & Eslami, 2012). Specifically, the analysis of the interview data and reflective journals occurred in a recursive and iterative manner (Merriam, 2009). All the student teachers' interviews and reflective journals were analyzed in a parallel fashion in relation to similar categories of themes. This means that interview and journal data from each participant were considered as a whole, and a further comparative analysis was undertaken across data from different participants to identify parallel or connected themes. Initial analysis of the data involved reading, re-reading and annotating the transcripts and journals with comments and specific descriptive phrases, a process that Merriam (2009, p. 179) calls "open coding". These open codes that were in the form of specific descriptive phrases were subsequently clustered into broader ideational categories after considerable revision and refinement. This process revealed three major types of challenges the participants in this study encountered in the practicum, which are classified as: 1) Experimenting with innovative pedagogical practices; 2) Classroom management; 3) Language as challenge in instruction and communication.

## **Results**

### **Experimenting with Innovative Pedagogical Practices**

At the beginning of the practicum, most student teachers thought that they were equipped to teach after more than three years' course work, and they felt they knew in their mind what good teaching is. Implied in their reflective journals is that fundamentally, language teaching should be task-based:

The English language education I have received in secondary school was very traditional. The traditional approach was widely used because it was successful to prepare students for college entrance exams.

However, when I learned the theories of TBL (task-based learning), I began to realize that the traditional approach should be reformed and task-based approach should be promoted. Therefore, I decided to adopt task-based approach during the teaching practicum period (Elizabeth)

While the above quote indicates Elizabeth's general awareness of the difference between traditional and task-based language teaching approach, the following comment reveals a more sophisticated understanding of 'tasks' in task-based language teaching context:

Tasks need to be seen as tools for achieving a lesson's learning objectives so that students have opportunities to consolidate the related vocabulary and grammar items. A lot of scaffolding also needs to be provided. At the end of the task, there should be evaluation of students' task performance to see whether the task aim has been realized.

(Wendy)

After the first few days of teaching in the practicum, the student teachers started to feel surprised at the workload required of them in carrying out actual task-based language teaching. They commented that a lot of time and energy were invested in designing tasks and developing and preparing task materials. The internet and their peer student teachers were the major sources of ideas of 'tasks' to be used in their lessons. Several student teachers admitted that task preparation was so demanding and time-consuming that they were only able to carry out task-based teaching in lessons when their supporting teacher or tertiary supervisor was present for lesson observation.

However, more than half of the student teachers also acknowledged that task-based language teaching is a challenging idea that is very hard to achieve in practice, particularly in a class with a relatively low English proficiency or a class where there are a variety of discipline problems. For example, one student teacher described that she prepared a speaking task for her class in the first lesson to help them practise use of "too much" and "too many". However, she found it difficult to conduct the task in the lesson because the students' speaking ability was very low, and thus had to cancel it. In addition, some student teachers' comments allude to their perceptions of some of the constraints of the Hong Kong ESL context for implementing task-based teaching. One student teacher observed that her students were used to teacher-centred lecturing and were not confident in speaking, and 'tasks' in her lessons often failed to stimulate use of the target language as expected. Others felt that they were caught between the desire to involve students in task-based learning and the supporting teacher's request for covering the prescribed teaching contents as well as the school's demands for a more examination-oriented classroom instruction. For example, one preservice teacher wrote in her reflective journal:

For my class, they will be facing the TSA (*Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) is a pen and paper assessment to provide the Government and school management with information on school standards in key learning areas for the purposes of school improvement*) very soon so they are urged to practise more for the test. Since the passage the students will be required to write in the test is a description of pictures, the EDB (*Education Development Bureau*) staff suggested the school to have more practice on picture description. (Stella)

### **Classroom Management**

The most common concern running through the retrospective thoughts of all 16 student teachers is classroom management, which involves dealing with misbehavior, as well as establishing rules and routines, among a host of other teacher activities. The majority of the student teachers treated classroom management as the biggest issue during the practicum period. They commented that although they had learned some theories about classroom management through

readings and discussions in their university lectures, they felt extremely confused when faced with chaotic situations in class. Discipline problems posed an element of shock particularly to the student teachers who themselves had been students in more regimented and uniformed teacher-managed classrooms. Jackie, a student teacher who attended her primary and secondary school in China wrote:

The first day when I stepped into the classroom, the situation was totally not what I had expected. I realized the reason that this class was regarded as the ‘demon class’ of the school. They had no motivation in English language learning. There were various kinds of classroom discipline problems happening all the time. They got used to moving around the classroom as well as eating, talking and playing during the lesson since they haven’t had any English lesson for nearly two months. (Jackie)

Another student teacher said in the interview:

Even when our supervisor, supporting teacher and me were sitting in the back of the classroom observing my fellow student teacher’s teaching, the students totally ignored us, and did not concentrate on learning and just talked to each other among themselves. My fellow student teacher got less and less confident lecturing in the front. The class was out of control. I could see tears in my fellow teacher’s eyes, and she almost cried! (Rebecca)

Usually, the supporting teacher was the person a student teacher would most likely turn to for advice about discipline problems. However, there were times when their supporting teacher seemed not very approachable or the ‘management strategies’ suggested by the supporting teacher did not work well. One student teacher, Ruby, felt regret about her relationship with her supporting teacher who was a senior teacher in the school but practically never talked to her. The lack of meaningful professional dialogue with her supporting teacher sparked off her feeling of isolation in the school. She could only discuss her class management problems with her tertiary supervisor through emails. Several other student teachers in this study were assigned by their schools to stay in a particular office separated from other staff members in the school, which makes it difficult to communicate with their supporting teachers about class discipline problems.

It is important to note that having a well-behaved and motivated class of students can free a student teacher from investing heavily in students’ discipline problems and allow her or him to concentrate on the pedagogical aspect of teaching. Conversely, teaching and interacting with students having low motivation to learn and discipline problems often requires a high level of competence to handle classroom management problems. Failure to work out appropriate ways of managing this kind of class may give feelings of helplessness (Tang, 2002), which can result in an unsatisfactory relationship with the class. Helen’s experience illustrates this. She was teaching a primary Level 5 class, and her sense of having no control over what happened in her class seemed to bother her the most: “Every time I carried out task-based teaching, the class got out of control, and everything ended up being completely chaotic”. Worse still, friction arose between her and her tertiary supervisor as a result of her supervisor’s negative comments on her

teaching. Her practicum experience could thus be described as struggling in a boat in the rough sea.

For several preservice teachers who came from mainland China, the challenge in maintaining control in class throughout the practicum was somewhat further compounded by their inability to speak standard Cantonese, i.e., the dominant language of the local community. As one of them explained:

The students could not understand me when I explained some language points or grammatical concepts in English. So I spoke in Cantonese, which often ended up with laughter from the class. Then I had no choice but switch to Mandarin. So in this situation, it's somewhat difficult to command authority as a teacher in the classroom. (Grace)

Overall, halfway through the practicum, most student teachers' initial enthusiasm had somewhat dissolved into complaints about the realities that seemed beyond their control (Johnson, 1996). Some student teachers who came from mainland China even contemplated abandoning teaching after graduation, as implicit in the comment: "After graduation, I don't think I will pick up a teaching job in Hong Kong. Teaching young kids may not be quite suitable for me".

### **Language as Challenge in Instruction and Communication**

It was common during the practicum that supervisors occasionally spotted some grammatical, lexical, and phonetic errors while observing their student teachers' lessons. Some student teachers appeared to have difficulties in providing clear task instructions or coherent explanations of language points, although this did not happen on a regular basis. As mentioned above, one of the student teachers in this study failed in the Classroom Language Assessment as her supervisor thought she got problems with her pronunciation. Consequently, two more follow-up visits by a second tertiary supervisor had to be arranged for her, which she found very stressful. The practicum experience made her realize:

"I really need to work hard on practising my classroom language. For instance, I have to speed my pace. Generally, I speak very slowly in my teaching. Students might be bored with what I said. Also, I have to bear in mind that I am a "language teacher" inside classroom. I have to speak clear and accurate English." (Jenny)

The data also indicated that some student teachers experienced difficulty in speaking in English spontaneously during class. One student teacher mentioned that she spent a lot of time figuring out what language she would use in class and memorize it in advance. Another student teacher said that she tended to first compose her thoughts in Chinese, and then translate these thoughts into English. Fundamentally, this problem of not being able to think in English to convey a complete idea could be attributed to a lack of readily usable linguistic repertoires in English. Consequently, this "thinking in mother tongue and then translating the thoughts into the second language" process might compromise the student teachers'

spoken fluency, which could further threaten their sense of self as a teacher.

The data also revealed that teaching the subject knowledge to the students' level and using the appropriate English to communicate with the students were the biggest language-proficiency challenge to some of the student teachers, as evidenced in the following comment: "It is quite difficult for me to explain and solve the grammatical problems to the students. Sometimes, the skills I have used were not clear and effective that made students more confused." Under such circumstances, some student teachers simply switched to Cantonese or Mandarin, which might affect their performance assessment. One student teacher complained about her supervisor's criticism of too much use of Cantonese during class. During the interview, when asked if she believed she was capable of being a full-time English teacher, she indicated that she had no confidence to teach English in a secondary school after graduation as she felt that her English proficiency had even declined after several years of undergraduate studies. Because of her weakness in English proficiency, she had experienced much difficulty coping with her academic assignments prior to the practicum.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Researchers have generally found that student teaching tends to move teachers toward traditional styles of teaching, away from innovative methods and strategies espoused in teacher education (Veenman, 1984; Allen, 2009; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012), and preservice teachers tend to be described as having difficulty translating concepts learned in methods courses into their classrooms (Gramham, 1997). A common explanation of this phenomenon in the literature is that despite valuing their preservice training, preservice teachers' conceptions of teaching or of themselves radically change as they confront realities (Rozelle & Wilson, 2012) and somewhat re-create their roles on entry into the teaching context through adopting the practice of colleagues (Allen, 2009). For example, Allen (2009) noticed that prospective teachers during pre-service training valued the theory that they had learned on campus but once they became practitioners, they followed traditional teacher practice. In Allen's study, the preservice teachers' capacity to implement innovative practice was thwarted by team planning which provided pedagogical protocols and exemplars that were to be followed by all teaching staff. Under such circumstance, implementing the theory and practices that they had learned on campus into classroom practice did not come easily. Moore (2003) also found that the preservice teachers often adopted the style and method expressed by the mentor teacher regardless of whether they were in conflict with theory or practice suggested in the university classroom. Moore's study shows that the preservice teachers made these choices rather than risk disapproval of the mentor teacher, and suggests the need for those participants in school and university partnerships to find means for school supporting teachers, university faculty, and preservice teachers to openly discuss learning situations to which they all bring

varying levels of expertise or experience. “To do so clearly involves the development of university and school relationships through the process of identifying problems and creating solutions through interaction” (Moore, 2003, 41).

In the present investigation, the preservice ESL student teachers were taught innovative pedagogical principles and practices such as task-based language teaching during the BEdEL programme. The English language curriculum promulgated by the government’s Department of Education also highlights the importance of task-based learning in schools. It was thus not surprising that an adherence to task-based language teaching was epitomized in the student teachers’ planning of lessons and designing of instructional activities. But many of them soon realized that implementing task-based teaching was by no means an easy job. As shown by the data, the stressful nature of designing and preparing ‘tasks’ for class as well as the pressure of covering the prescribed amount and type of teaching contents during class appeared to be the important reasons why some student teachers abandoned their ideal pedagogical techniques. Echoing the observation in the literature, the data also reveal that some student teachers’ supporting teachers seemed conservative and discouraged them from experimenting with innovative teaching techniques. These realistic and contextual factors appeared to overwhelm the student teachers to the point that they were only able to try their best to make their lesson look like task-based teaching when their university supervisor was present in their class for lesson observation. At other times, they relied more on the teacher-centred, book-based or exam-oriented teaching strategies they themselves had been exposed to as students in primary and secondary schools. The findings of this study thus suggest a gap between the pedagogical principles and practices the preservice student teachers were taught on the BEdEL programme and Hong Kong classroom cultural traditions, which are characterized by a heavy emphasis on textbooks and examination preparation. Consequently, a question that teacher educators involved in the current teacher preparation programme must address is how they can ensure that the pedagogical principles (e.g., task-based teaching) taught in the programme can be carried over into the practicum and sustained in the face of challenges and other influences.

Probably nothing posed a greater concern to the participants in this study than discipline problems. This finding supports the claim in the previous research that classroom management is the most significant cause of concern for pre-service teachers, particularly during the practicum (Bromfield, 2006; Reupert & Woodcock, 2010). While classroom management is generally considered a deterrent to preservice teachers joining the profession (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Point, 2003), there is a paucity of data outlining what actually contributes to pre-service teachers’ confusion and inability in managing classroom behaviour and maintaining a classroom environment conducive to effective teaching and learning (Reupert & Woodcock, 2010). In this study, the challenges the ESL student teachers faced were largely learning motivation and discipline problems. The majority of the participants found that their students were generally poorly-motivated, and some of these students had even completely lost interest in learning

English. Confronted with the discipline problems such as students sleeping, talking or playing games in class, some preservice teachers could not finish what they had prepared for, and had to depart from the planned lesson plan, and often ended up spending more time controlling the class than teaching. It was thus not surprising that the majority of the student teachers in this study developed a generally negative view of their students. The data show that such unproductive experience might even drive the ESL student teacher to retreat and cause disempowerment of the student teacher's sense of self as a teacher. Consequently, because of the student learning motivation and discipline problems, nearly half of the student teachers in this study felt difficulty in building up their confidence in teaching at the end of the 8-week practicum, and a lack of sense of control in class was pervasive among them. To some extent, the 'reality shock' (Veenman, 1984) the student teachers experienced during the practicum could be the result of the minimal preservice classroom experience. But it clearly had more to do with the student teachers' lack of confidence and preparedness in the area of classroom management. In other words, the current teacher education courses failed to adequately prepare them for dealing with classroom management. The course providers thus need to reconsider the classroom management content they have been delivering. If such classroom management content focuses on a smaller range of proven effective strategies suitable for a wide range of problematic behaviours that are underpinned by theoretical models, greater perceptions of preparedness and confidence in managing challenging student behaviours will be likely to occur among the student teachers (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012). Meanwhile, the current ESL teacher preparation courses can have these teacher candidates read and analyze case studies of preservice ESL teachers' practicum experience (Farrell, 2003). According to Farrell, not many such case study examples of ESL student teachers during their teaching practicum exist in the English language teaching literature at present. It is thus suggested that in order to build up a corpus of case studies of how ESL student teachers are developed during their initial teaching practicum, research studies similar to the present one need to be conducted in different contexts. "The results of these studies can be incorporated into the teacher training and education courses so that preservice teachers can become more aware of the realities of the teaching contexts they are about to enter" (Farrell, 2003, p. 109).

It has been assumed that in the case of non-native ESL preservice teachers, their command of English affects their self-image as professionals, which in turn, influences the way they teach (Sin, 2008). This means that a high level of English competence is a requisite for successful practicum experience for non-native preservice ESL teachers because this may lead to enhanced confidence in their teaching ability and an adequate sense of professional legitimacy. It is thus not difficult to understand that Richards (2010) rates language proficiency as the most important skill among the ten core dimensions of expertise in language teaching. The results of this study alert us to the deficiency in linguistic skills of the preservice ESL teachers. Some student teachers in this study found it difficult to

speak English spontaneously during class. Another challenge is that they felt incapable of explaining many of the rules of the English language grammar and vocabulary to the students' level. Inevitably these language related difficulties impacted not only on their teaching performance but also on their maintenance of teacher role and relationship with their students. An important implication of the results is thus that language improvement needs to be afforded with the central place in the ESL teacher preparation programme as suggested by Stoyhoff (1999) and Richards (2010). Currently, the discipline-based courses such as English literature, grammar, and theories of language and language learning in the BEdEL program focus on increasing the knowledge and awareness about the systems of the language rather than the ability to use this knowledge in real communication. It is thus suggested that teacher candidates should be provided with opportunities to improve their written and spoken English throughout their teacher training programme through language courses that are particularly designed for the non-native English speaking teacher candidates.

## **Conclusion**

The study reported in this paper aims to outline and interpret the major challenges experienced by a group of non-native ESL student teachers in the context of a Bachelor of Education (English Language) programme (BEdEL). The results of this study show that some BEdEL preservice teachers compromised their initial ideals and expectations, and reverted to pragmatic strategies that meant the abandonment of experimenting with the pedagogical techniques they had learned in the programme. Classroom management appeared to be the biggest concern of this group of preservice ESL teachers, which could have adverse effects well beyond the 8-week teaching practicum. The study thus raises issues about the efficacy of the BEdEL programme in preparing the student teachers to implement the innovative practices they were taught, and in preparing them to deal with classroom management. The findings reported here therefore strongly imply an urgent need for teacher education institutions and school supporting teachers to explicitly discuss the student teachers' difficulties with implementation of innovative practices, and to explicitly promote and model classroom management strategies.

This study also reveals that preservice ESL student teachers' English language competence tends to have an impact not only on their teaching behaviour but also on development of their professional identity. Hopefully, by becoming attuned to these preservice teachers' struggles and tensions due to deficiency in their English language skills, those responsible for the design and delivery of the ESL teacher preparation programme may be able to consider positive ways to integrate a focus on language training into the content-based courses in the programme.

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