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What EFL Student Teachers Think about their Professional Preparation: Evaluation of an English Language Teacher Education Programme in Spain

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Abstract: Given the importance of programme evaluation in the EFL teacher education, this research paper of exploratory-interpretive nature mainly focuses on both strengths and weaknesses identified through the analysis and/or critical evaluation of an EFL teacher education programme carried out in Spain. Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used in the study. The current TEFL programme has several strengths, but also certain significant shortcomings in light of the high percentage of undecided responses. The TEFL programme was evaluated positively by participant student teachers in general, in terms of pedagogic competence and promotion of reflection, although more input on English proficiency is actually needed and the amount of practice teaching should also be increased. Additionally, the findings of this study also offer some helpful suggestions and/or recommendations for improving the current EFL teacher education programme at least in the Spanish evaluation context.

Literature Review

In today's globalized world, the unprecedented importance and role of English as the most influential language of international communication cannot be denied in our lives. Hence, much emphasis has been placed on the need to train highly qualified and competent language teachers, thus highlighting the importance of EFL teacher education programmes. Certainly, not much has been researched and written about the overall evaluation of such EFL teacher education programmes so far, except for a few published studies (Seferoglu, 2006; Peacock, 2009; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karakas, 2012; Akcan, 2016). Additionally, all these studies are context-specific and mainly concerned with the implementation of such programmes in their own settings. Due to the lack of research in this area so far, further studies are actually needed.

Generally, programme evaluation involves 'the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information (...) for forming judgments about the value of a particular programme' (Robinson, 2003, p. 199). According to Peacock (2009), all L2 teacher-education programmes should be subject to critical review, incorporating a procedure for overall internal evaluation by regularly assessing its strengths and weaknesses and making suggestions and recommendations for programme improvement. In order to ensure the effectiveness of TEFL programmes and teacher quality, it is necessary to undertake ongoing programme evaluations (Musset, 2010). In short, evaluation constitutes an essential procedure for EFL teacher education programme improvements.

Current L2 teacher education programmes (both pre- and in-service) in Europe are mainly based on contemporary references developed by the Council of Europe such as

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages -CEFR- (Council of Europe, 2001), European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages -EPOSTL- (Council of Europe, 2007) and European Profile for Language Teacher Education -EPLTE- (Kelly et al., 2004), which aimed at contributing to teachers' professional development and fostering their vocational growth via self-reflection (Karakas, 2012). While the CEFR has become a key reference document for all those involved in language teaching which evidently has significant implications for pre- and in-service teacher education in covering many aspects of the learning, teaching and assessment of modern languages, the EPOSTL is mainly viewed as a competence-oriented reflection and self-assessment tool for language teacher education (Mehlmayer-Larcher, 2012). On the other hand, the EPLTE offers a frame of reference for language teacher educators in both pre-service and in-service education of foreign language teachers in Europe, emphasizing the importance of both student teachers' linguistic competence and teaching practice. Both the EPOSTL and EPLTE provide lists of required professional competences. In short, such European references or tools seek to improve the quality of teacher education programmes.

Since theoretical debates continue to fuel the field of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), Freeman (2016) makes it clear that current programmes are based on prescriptive understandings of what we *think* teachers should know and be able to do and how we *think* they should go about learning this. In general, the main components of the current EFL teacher education programmes comprise field knowledge (linguistic competence), teacher education (pedagogic competence), general knowledge and teaching practices (Karakas, 2012). No doubt, teaching practices constitute the first opportunity for student teachers to apply and develop their practical professional skills in formal teaching settings. One of the issues recently discussed by researchers in all fields of teacher education is, as Mehlmauer-Larcher (2012) reminds us, the actual impact that teacher education programmes have on the behaviour of student teachers in classroom settings. Although there is very little research evidence available on the impact of L2 teacher education programmes (Bartels, 2005), recent research studies (Grossman, 2008; Grossman & McDonald, 2008) conducted in a variety of settings question the value of professional education for teachers. In fact, Grossman (2008, p. 12) argues that what is taught in teacher education 'may be quite distant from the immediate needs of practitioners'.

Concerning the central role of reflection in L2 teacher education, Wallace (1995) highlights the importance of promoting the skill of reflection or reflective practice in teacher education programmes. In the same vein, Chong & Cheah (2009) argue that candidate teachers need to develop the skills necessary to learn from experience through reflection. Lastly, Mehlmauer-Larcher (2012) regards reflection as an essential component for teacher learning processes and, overall, for professional improvement.

Generally, teacher education programmes seem to be especially weak in several areas. Perhaps the main weakness is the so-called divide or lack of connection between theory and praxis. By reflecting on their teaching practices, student teachers are able to establish the link between theory and practice. However, Bartels (2005) and Richards (2008) remind us that student teachers often fail to put such knowledge into practice, in their classrooms during teaching practices. This 'carry-over problem', which has long been discussed by researchers and still remains unresolved, constitutes one of the greatest challenges facing L2 teacher education. Additionally, teacher education programmes are often criticised for being either excessively theoretical or remote from the existing reality in current classrooms and schools. In this respect, researchers like Johnson (1996), Lampert (2010) and Akcan (2016) report that candidate teachers complain that professional preparation courses deliver too much theory and too little practice.

Since the main emphasis seems to be exclusively on content or information delivery which involves a serious threat to quality professional preparation, the point of discussion here is: what makes a quality L2 teacher education programme? In this sense, Richards (2008) made it clear that this question is very difficult to answer since there are no widely-accepted definitions of concepts of 'quality' in SLTE so far. However, Mehlmauer-Larcher (2012) recognises the demand for quality control within language teacher education programmes, which has recently been stressed in the field of language teacher education. In short, current language teacher education programmes with a strong focus on quality control require constant adaptation so as to face the new conditions and demands of a constantly-changing world.

Regarding the professional profile required by language teachers in the 21st century, current language teacher education programmes need to take into account teachers' extended roles and responsibilities because, as Garrido & Álvarez (2006, p. 170) argue, 'How prepared language teachers are to fulfill all these new roles and to carry out the corresponding responsibilities as teachers and learners depends greatly on their training and professional development'. Since the changing reality brings new challenges, the literature suggests that language teachers need to be able to adapt their multiple roles and responsibilities to the new requirements and conditions in order to carry out their job competently. In order to be able to meet the new challenges of the 21st century, candidate teachers need to be well equipped with complex professional competences. Additionally, Musset (2010, p. 3) reminds us that teaching 'is a complex and demanding intellectual work, one that cannot be accomplished without adequate preparation'. No doubt, teachers' professional growth is essentially a question of time and personal dedication as Kelly et al. (2004, p. 19) claim 'language teacher education is a lifelong process'. Finally, it can be concluded that quality teacher education is the key to quality education for learners.

Research Questions

As has already been pointed out above, since the evaluation of pre-service English teacher education programmes has not been researched much so far (Seferoglu, 2006; Peacock, 2009; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karakas, 2012; Akcan, 2016), this study aims to shed some light on this research area by mainly focusing on those programme aspects that need to be emphasized and improved from the perspective of EFL student teachers. With this goal in mind, the research questions are as follows:

1. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the current TEFL programme?
2. Do student teachers believe the current programme meets their needs and expectations and adequately prepares them for EFL teaching?

Method

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed in the present study to analyse student teachers' views about the value and effectiveness of the current EFL teacher education programme conducted at the University of Extremadura (Spain), considering different aspects of the programme that need to be improved in the context of this evaluation. The voices of the participants concerning the issues under investigation were explored through a questionnaire, several open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews.

Context and Participants

Originally designed to facilitate student mobility and the standardisation and recognition of academic degrees within Europe, the *Bologna Process* initiated in 1999, which constitutes a Higher Education systems reform process, imposed major changes in most European universities. Specifically, the foreign language teacher education programmes of the Spanish universities were re-structured, resulting in the formation of another curriculum. Since the recent implementation of the degree in Primary Education at the University of Extremadura (Spain) in the academic year 2009-2010 as result of the Bologna process, there has been no mechanism for internal evaluation of the whole programme.

The context of this study is the four-year EFL teacher education programme conducted at the Faculty of Education of the University of Extremadura in Spain. Around 20 percent of all students attending the generic first three years of the programme at the college choose to become EFL teachers. Overall, the first three years of the degree programme are common to all students and provide an overall knowledge of all areas of education through courses such as *Theoretical, Historical and Political Foundations of Education, General Didactics, Developmental Psychology, Educational Psychology, Educational Sociology, School Organization, Inclusive Education and Attention to Diversity, Technological and Didactic Resources, Tutorial Action and Family Education and Subject-Specific Didactics*. In the subsequent - and last- two semesters, each student gets to choose specialization courses within a field of particular interest. The TEFL programme not only covers theoretical and practical aspects of English language and its teaching methodology (*English Grammar, English for Primary II, English Didactics I and English Didactics II*), but also includes a practical teaching module. It is worth mentioning that students have other specific subjects related to English and its teaching (*English for Primary I* (4th semester) and *Teaching-Learning English for Primary Education* (5th semester)). It needs to be made clear that most programme courses are delivered in Spanish, with the exception of the six subjects related to English language and its teaching methodology. In short, the fourth year gives student teachers the opportunity for in-depth discussion of issues related to English language and its teaching methodology. Student teachers will also deepen their understanding of theoretical aspects of second language acquisition research. During the last semester of the programme, students are expected to produce a written degree project within an area of their choice. Finally, it is worth mentioning that one semester or one academic year of the specialization part of the degree can be studied abroad.

Overall, teacher education programmes consist of two main components: the university-based courses where knowledge about teaching is formally constructed and the field-based component where candidate teachers learn to teach by means of experience. As indicated above, the current TEFL programme has a school-based field experience component which consists of two compulsory teaching practicum placements (14 weeks each). Broadly speaking, the main purpose of the first practicum placement, which follows a general approach, is to help prospective teachers get a general idea about the teaching profession, whereas the second practicum course mainly focuses on an area of specialization, providing student teachers with teaching practice in the TEFL field. Student teachers in fact develop teaching skills in the first practicum placement that they may then consolidate and develop further in the second practicum. In short, the practicum as a field experience constitutes a one-off period during which student teachers experience first-hand teaching practice in real classrooms. Certainly, experiential learning is highly valued by student teachers who in fact consider teaching practicum as the most important component of their training process.

The context of the study is the second practicum placement for student teachers which is offered in the last semester of the programme, although another practicum placement is undertaken in the first semester of the second year of study. During the practicum experience all final year student teachers are expected to observe real-time classes in primary schools and teach lessons that reflect the professional competences they have developed through their training process at the university. The first two weeks serve as the 'observation period' for student teachers to familiarize themselves with their assigned school mentor teachers and the classrooms in schools. They are expected to engage in collaborative teaching with their school cooperating teachers by taking up the roles and responsibilities of a teacher in the school. The school mentor, as an experienced professional, is expected to provide constructive guidance and support to the student teacher. During the practicum experience, student teachers are not only able to observe classroom teaching but also have the chance to conduct micro-teaching activities, design lesson plans, materials and incorporate assessment tools. They are allowed to take over the assigned classes and conduct independent teaching. During this time, teacher candidates are constantly observed by their school mentors and also by the university supervisor at least once a month for the evaluation of their teaching performance. It needs to be added that three university lecturers as teacher educators (including the author of this paper) were responsible for supervising these student teachers in their second practicum placement.

A total of 60 students were enrolled in the TEFL programme and were invited to take part in this study. The researcher discarded 2 invalid questionnaires which were either incomplete or failed to follow the instructions of the questionnaire, resulting in a sample of 58 out of the original sample of 60. Accordingly, the valid response rate was 96.66% and a total of 58 questionnaires were identified as valid data for statistical analysis in the present study. The participants in this study were 58 (21 males and 37 females) Spanish EFL student teachers who were training to teach English as a foreign language in primary schools during the 2015-2016 academic year. The sample also included one Erasmus exchange student from Germany. The students ranged in age from 21 to 22 years and were in their final year of study.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

To gather detailed information about how Spanish EFL student teachers actually perceive the effectiveness of the TEFL programme, the participants completed a questionnaire specially designed by Peacock (2009), which covers diverse areas and consists of 22 closed-ended items referring to elements of adequate 'training of EFL teachers'. In the quantitative section, respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement with the statements on a Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. According to Coskun & Daloglu (2010, p. 38), Peacock's (2009) model of evaluation seems to be 'effective in providing multidimensional feedback about the program being evaluated'.

The questionnaire was administered to student teachers during classroom time at the end of the second semester in May 2016, taking no more than approximately 20 minutes to complete. The entire questionnaire was translated from English into Spanish so as to ensure respondents' understanding. The researcher himself as a teacher educator explained in Spanish through clear and simple instructions the overall purpose and potential usefulness of the survey.

Since qualitative research strengthens statistical findings, a qualitative section was also included which contained two open-ended questions (not included in the original questionnaire) through which the respondents had the opportunity to express what they

believed about TEFL programme strengths and weaknesses and make suggestions and/or recommendations for programme improvement in this particular training context. The questions were as follows: *What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the TEFL programme?* and *What aspects of the TEFL programme should be emphasized and improved?* While exploratory in nature, open-ended questions in questionnaires as qualitative data collection method provide in-depth information and a great variety of responses (Dörnyei, 2003).

The method used to analyse participants' responses and comments was theory-based content analysis, which is a widely used qualitative research technique. The most frequently mentioned responses from the participants were categorized and reported so as to determine the top likes and dislikes concerning the strong and weak aspects of the TEFL programme as well as their improvement proposals and/or recommendations. When coding the qualitative data, the minimum frequency cut-off point for responses of at least five occurrences was adopted. The main rationale for determining this cut-off point is that, although restrictive, five occurrences were assumed to be sufficient and acceptable to ensure methodological rigour in content analysis. Any cut-off point is, in fact, by nature arbitrary and to a certain extent is mainly determined to collect a reasonable quantity of data for analysis. The next decision was to group the participants' responses at a more conceptual level, thus allowing the identification of general themes from the data. Written comments from respondents were treated as qualitative data, and a thematic analysis was then undertaken.

In this study, several semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 10 randomly selected participants from the total sample so as to verify the data obtained through questionnaire and open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 5 minutes and was conducted in the respondents' native language. Data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed by means of content analysis. The type of questions that were asked in interviews were related to the questionnaire and responses to open-ended questions. Such questions were as follows: *What do you like most about the TEFL programme and why? What do you like least about the TEFL programme and why? What improvements, if any, would you propose and why? and do you feel well prepared to successfully teach English? Why or why not?* As Cohen et al. (2000) argued, interviews provide researchers with in-depth information and might act as a complementary research instrument for gathering relevant quality data.

All participants were asked for their permission to use their responses for research purposes only. It should be made clear that candidate teachers were not pressured to participate in the research. They were in fact asked to voluntarily participate in this study. The questionnaires were completed anonymously in class and handed in on completion. Participants were requested not to consult their classmates while working with the questionnaire in order to ensure that the answers actually reflected each student's own opinions and feelings. As Oppenheim (1992) reminds us, the general belief that anonymous questionnaires encourage the participants to be more honest and sincere when answering must be counterbalanced by the possibility that people lose interest in the study because of its impersonality. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the data.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 below, and are followed by an interpretation and discussion of the quantitative and qualitative data in relation to the research questions. Table 1 outlines the 22 statements from the questionnaire and the percentages of respondents selecting each alternative.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Statement 1. The TEFL programme has good linkage between different courses.					
2.22%	8.89%	33.33%	46.67%	8.89%	100.00%
Statement 2. The TEFL programme avoids overlapping information between different courses.					
6.67%	11.11%	24.44%	46.67%	11.11%	100.00%
Statement 3. The TEFL programme gave me adequate training in English.					
4.44%	22.22%	28.89%	31.11%	13.33%	100.00%
Statement 4. The TEFL programme gave me adequate training in teaching skills.					
6.67%	11.11%	22.22%	57.78%	2.22%	100.00%
Statement 5. The TEFL programme gave me adequate training for the needs of the local context (teaching in Spain schools).					
2.22%	33.33%	28.89%	33.33%	2.22%	100.00%
Statement 6. The TEFL programme is up-to-date.					
0.00%	13.33%	33.33%	44.44%	8.89%	100.00%
Statement 7. The TEFL programme encouraged me to reflect on my past experiences as a language learner.					
2.22%	15.56%	22.22%	37.78%	22.22%	100.00%
Statement 8. The TEFL programme encouraged me to be a reflective teacher (when I start teaching).					
2.22%	6.67%	24.44%	46.67%	20.00%	100.00%
Statement 9. The TEFL programme promotes flexibility in using different teaching practices for different situations.					
2.22%	6.67%	17.78%	60.00%	13.33%	100.00%
Statement 10. The TEFL programme balances teacher-centred and student-centred learning on its courses.					
2.22%	8.89%	48.89%	28.89%	11.11%	100.00%
Statement 11. The TEFL programme taught me how to teach English.					
2.22%	24.44%	20.00%	42.22%	11.11%	100.00%
Statement 12. The TEFL programme taught me how to evaluate myself as a teacher.					
8.89%	17.78%	24.44%	35.56%	13.33%	100.00%
Statement 13. The TEFL programme taught me classroom management skills.					
4.44%	20.00%	28.89%	35.56%	11.11%	100.00%
Statement 14. The TEFL programme taught me how to use foreign language teaching materials.					
4.44%	6.67%	20.00%	60.00%	8.89%	100.00%
Statement 15. The TEFL programme taught me how to adapt foreign language teaching materials.					
4.44%	13.33%	37.78%	37.78%	6.67%	100.00%
Statement 16. The TEFL programme increased my powers of self evaluation.					
6.67%	13.33%	42.22%	28.89%	8.89%	100.00%
Statement 17. The TEFL programme taught me foreign language testing and evaluation skills.					
4.44%	17.78%	31.11%	42.22%	4.44%	100.00%
Statement 18. The TEFL programme is relevant to my needs.					
0.00%	20.00%	35.56%	37.78%	6.67%	100.00%
Statement 19. The TEFL programme has a good balance between the teaching of: English, teaching skills, and classroom management skills.					
2.22%	17.78%	40.00%	40.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Statement 20. The TEFL programme prepared me to teach English in the classroom.					
2.22%	28.89%	17.78%	48.89%	2.22%	100.00%
Statement 21. The TEFL programme met my needs.					
6.67%	24.44%	51.11%	15.56%	2.22%	100.00%
Statement 22. By the end of the TEFL programme, I will be ready to teach English.					
4.44%	22.22%	31.11%	35.56%	6.67%	100.00%

Table 1: Percentages of respondents selecting each alternative.

The results are better illustrated in Figure 1, which displays the level of agreement and disagreement with each statement.

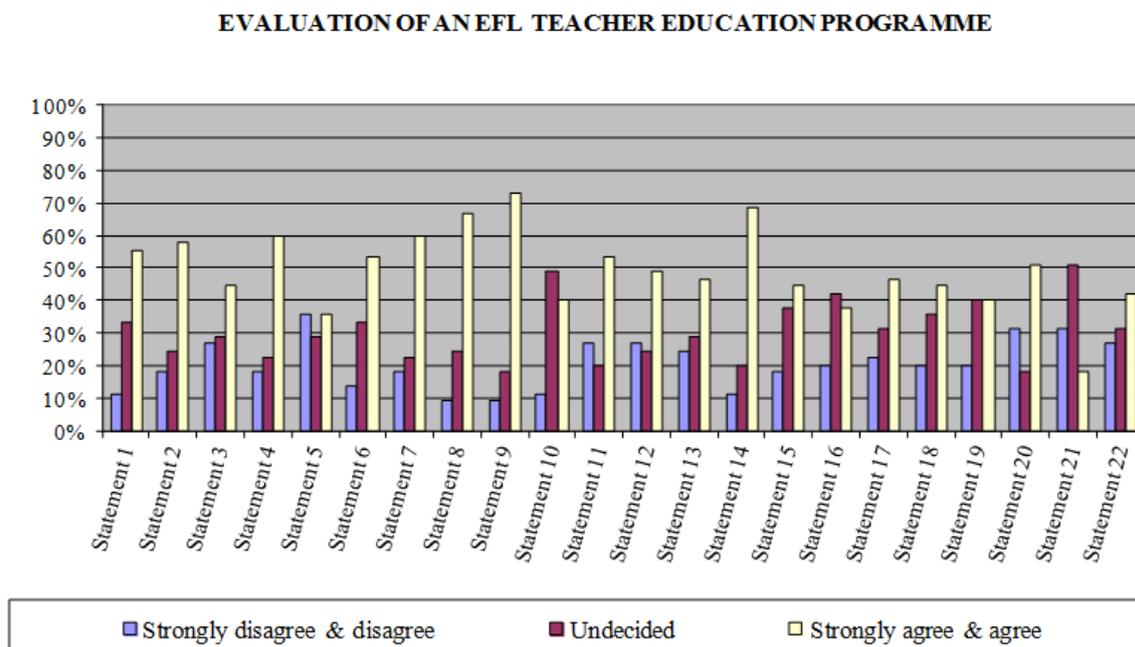


Figure 1: Responses to statements about the TEFL programme.

Quantitative Results

For reasons of space here, the emphasis has been placed only on those statements which generated high levels of agreement above 50% (‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’). Unlike Coskun & Daloglu’s (2010) study in which the pedagogic side of the programme is weak, it is worth mentioning that the results obtained in this research paper corroborate the findings of Peacock (2009) in the sense that teaching skills –pedagogic competence- are emphasized over English proficiency and management skills (as will be shown later). However, it is pointed out that higher percentages were surprisingly found in the ‘agreement’ category in 16 out of 22 statements in the present study (except in the following questionnaire items 8, 11, 12, 16, 17 and 21), as opposed to Peacock’s (2009) study in which, additionally, there were more unsure responses. This might suggest, in some way, that our primary education student teachers seem to be much more satisfied with their TEFL programme than secondary education trainee teachers from the study by Peacock (2009).

As can be seen there is a high level of agreement for those statements referring to flexibility, use of materials, teacher reflection, pedagogic competence and linking of programme elements. Most respondents (namely 73.33%) agreed that the existing TEFL programme promoted flexibility in using different teaching practices for different situations (item 9). More than two-thirds of respondents (specifically, 68.89%) believed that the existing programme encouraged the *ability to use* foreign language teaching materials (item 14). However, more input on the *ability to adapt* teaching materials is somehow suggested in this study because less than half of respondents (44.45%) agreed to this statement (item 15). While Coskun & Daloglu’s (2010) study reveals higher levels of agreement with both abilities (87% and 84%, respectively), Peacock (2009), in contrast, reports lower levels of student agreement (36% and 33%, respectively). Additionally, while two thirds of participants (66.67%) expressed their agreement with the idea that the existing TEFL

programme successfully promoted teacher reflection (item 8), a similar percentage of respondents (60%) also supported the need for reflection on past learning experiences as language learners (item 7), which suggests the importance of experiential knowledge. In short, the reflective component seems to receive special emphasis in this TEFL programme. Chong and Cheah's (2009) study is in fact in line with these suggestions in concluding that student teachers need to learn from experience through reflection. This is also discussed in Liou (2001) and Lynch (2003) who argue that programmes successfully promote teacher reflection and self-evaluation, and incorporate experiential knowledge to a satisfactory degree. With respect to pedagogic competence, 60% of participants expressed satisfaction with the teaching skills training received (item 4). Similar percentages can be found concerning the coherence of the TEFL programme because somewhat more than half of respondents (57.78% and 55.56%, respectively) expressed some level of satisfaction with the overlapping and linkage among courses issues of the current programme (items 2 and 1, respectively). The resulting data in fact suggest that the programme does well in linking courses and avoiding overlapping information among different courses, and also provides up-to-date knowledge in the field (item 6, 53.33%). However, the skill of self-evaluation (items 12 & 16) seems to be somewhat less emphasized in this study than in Peacock's (2009) study.

Regarding their overall satisfaction with the programme, more than half of respondents expressed their relative satisfaction with the effectiveness of the TEFL programme in recognizing that they learnt how to teach English (item 11, 53.33%) and, thus, felt sufficiently prepared to be able to teach English in the classroom context (item 20, 51.11%), even though only 42.23% of respondents acknowledged that they would be ready to teach English by the end of the TEFL programme and nearly a third of participants were undecided on this issue (31.11%, item 22). Surprisingly, item 21 attracted the lowest level of student agreement with only 17.78% of participants believing the programme met their needs and about half of respondents (specifically, 51.11%) were unsure on this matter. However, a higher percentage of participants (namely, 44.45%) felt that the programme was relevant to their needs (item 18). Such a difference in percentages suggests that maybe participating student teachers are not actually aware of what their real needs will be when starting to teach.

The data also revealed that student teachers showed a great deal of uncertainty about their opinions with a high percentage of responses in the 'unsure' category. In fact, while the study by Peacock (2009) revealed that 15 of the 22 statements elicited over 30% of 'unsure' responses, 10 out of 22 statements were found in the present study. Perhaps the respondents' youth and lack of teaching experience contribute to their uncertainties about various aspects of the TEFL programme. However, it should be made clear that such uncertainty in responses was not reflected in the analysis of participants' comments in interviews.

With respect to the perceived weaknesses of the TEFL programme, the main weakness highlighted is the lack of language awareness, which corroborate other studies (Barkhuizen, 1997; Peacock, 2009). In fact, this is backed up by student agreement with questionnaire item 3 which shows that only 44.44% of participants agreed that the programme provided them with adequate training in English. This is also evidenced in item 19 in which a lack of balance in the programme among linguistic, pedagogical and managerial competence is revealed because similar percentages are surprisingly found in both the 'agreement' and 'unsure' categories (namely, 40%, respectively). Like Peacock's (2009) study, the current TEFL programme places more emphasis on promoting teaching skills than the areas of English proficiency and management skills. In this respect, Medgyes (1999) reminds us that the language proficiency aspect is a very important concern in English language teacher education programmes. The data collected by means of the questionnaire suggest that participating student teachers believed that the current TEFL programme adequately covered pedagogic competence, although the linguistic component (knowledge of

language) needed to be improved much more. These three areas are actually incorporated in the current TEFL programme but apparently with an unequal treatment.

Given the focus of the present study, it can be concluded that there is a relative level of agreement and/or satisfaction with the programme features, although the respondents also highlighted the weaker sides of the programme that are in need of improvement. The results are in line with those observed from previous research, in particular Peacock (2009) and Coskun & Daloglu (2010).

Qualitative Results

In addition to the quantitative results, candidate teachers were given two open-ended questions so as to gather more detailed information about their perceptions and opinions as to the effectiveness of the TEFL programme in general, assessing its main strengths and weaknesses and, accordingly, making suggestions and/or recommendations for programme improvement in this particular training context. The numerous responses given through the open-ended questions and obtained in semi-structured interviews provided insightful data. It is worth mentioning that responses from interviews coincided to a large extent with the comments expressed through open-ended questions, although more detailed data were gathered from interviews.

Regarding the strengths of the TEFL programme, it is argued that the most common strength is that the programme promoted the development of pedagogical knowledge or competence, as in Peacock's (2009) study. Several illustrative overall comments, made by nearly two-thirds of respondents, that expressed this idea were as follows: 'It is essential to become familiar with different methods and approaches to EFL teaching' and 'Special emphasis on didactic aspects was given'. More specifically, other common comments related to teaching strategies, techniques, activities and classroom resources such as: 'We have been taught different ways of teaching an L2 (helpful techniques and strategies) and facing different classroom situations' and 'We have been taught how best to use different types of teaching materials and classroom resources'. Additionally, discussions on the usefulness of practice teaching were evident in comments like 'We were encouraged to practise teaching skills' and 'Classroom practices and simulations were highly helpful'. In short, such emphasis on pedagogical competence through practice which prepares them to become successful teachers was evidenced in these comments. Such reflections about the practice component of the programme were also discussed in Erozan (2005), Seferoglu (2006) and Coskun & Daloglu (2010) who, however, make it clear that these programmes generally appear to lack practice opportunities. In relation to the theory/practice nexus, what is true is that candidate teachers continually demand less theory and more practice, namely practical implications and detailed and concrete examples of teaching activities and classroom situations. Perhaps this may be due to their young age and lack of teaching experience, but also to the still prevailing overemphasis of theoretical positions in second language teacher education.

Several respondents also made comments in relation to teacher educators' professional performance in terms of feedback such as 'Teacher educators are well qualified, motivated and prepared to train student teachers, providing help when necessary' and 'Our questions, language problems and doubts were constantly solved'.

With respect to the weaknesses of the TEFL programme and suggestions for improvement, nearly half of the respondents complained about their poor level of English proficiency which may be explained in terms of lack of communicative practice in classes. In this sense, many student teachers provided comments such as 'I think we are not sufficiently

prepared to be able to communicate with children, to make us understood, because our English mastery is poor' and 'More communicative interaction and practice in English is needed in classes'. There was even one candidate teacher who made reference to the high level of English being taught at University 'The difference between the level from secondary education and the one followed at University is hard'. Among other reasons, their poor English level may be due to the late specialization mentioned as well. This was reflected through several comments such as 'We begin to specialize very late, particularly in the last year of this four-year degree' and 'To me it is impossible to be trained to be able to teach in schools in just four months, just before the teaching practicum period'. In this sense, an early specialization should be emphasized over late specialization. In short, such comments made by almost a third of the respondents suggest that the preparation for English proficiency development is not enough or adequate. Such limitations and deficiencies in their self-perceived L2 communicative competence may be the result of the late introduction of the EFL component into the programme. Needless to say, good L2 instruction always rests on the sound command of the target language, although this is not the only aspect that we need to take into consideration. Since a reasonably good command of English is seen as a gateway to success, teacher education programmes then need to provide more thorough preparation in English language subject knowledge. In the same vein, Peacock (2009) suggests increasing time for English proficiency development. The Erozan's (2005) study concludes that the language improvement courses are generally effective.

Related to the previous category (late specialization and shortness of the training process), but with a slight difference in emphasis, there were also comments which referred specifically to the scarcity of specific subjects related to the knowledge of English, as evidenced in comments made by several candidate teachers such as 'We need more specific subjects of specialization in English language and TEFL' and 'Lack of linguistic training that does not allow us to teach English'. In relation to this question and given that their English level is not high enough, other respondents also complained about the feedback or input received from their teachers, providing comments such as 'Scarcity of feedback by teachers' and 'I would like to be corrected every time I make a mistake, in particular grammar and pronunciation mistakes'. Such comments suggest the need for regular teacher corrective feedback in class as respondents believe they can learn a lot from errors.

Regarding the poor level of English proficiency due mainly to late specialization and the lack of specific subjects, respondents made helpful suggestions for improvement. In fact, many candidate teachers agreed that they need to acquire more knowledge about the English language throughout the degree programme as future primary teachers, making the following suggestions or recommendations: 'The whole degree should be taught in English so as to improve our English mastery. This way we could think in English and not in Spanish', 'There should be more speaking practice opportunities with native speaker teachers to be able to use English more naturally and spontaneously' and 'More opportunities for teaching practices abroad'. In short, more courses addressing student teachers' linguistic competence are really needed. The need for more practice component in the language improvement courses is also discussed in Erozan (2005). In relation to this category, one candidate teacher even provided the following comment 'Significant differences of language level among student teachers are found which need to be carefully considered'. In short, such dissatisfaction with the quality of language training received is evident since student teachers wish for more development of the English language proficiency component in this programme.

The lack of input on classroom management skills was also mentioned in interview as a programme weakness. Little or almost no attention is certainly devoted to classroom management techniques in this TEFL programme. This is in line with Eisenman et al. (2015) who recognise the lack of attention that classroom management receives in many teacher

preparation programmes. In this respect, some candidate teachers made comments such as 'We were not trained to face the unexpected situations that may happen in classes' and 'We did not learn how to manage a class with children with special educational needs'. With respect to this question, other suggestions, made by some candidate teachers, were as follows: 'more emphasis on L2 learning psychology, particularly when teaching children with special educational needs and in conflictive classroom situations' and 'We should be taught more teaching strategies and techniques to be adapted to real classrooms with children with learning difficulties and motivational problems'.

Regarding the question of whether the programme adequately prepares them for teaching English, it can be concluded that, in general, there is relative agreement and/or satisfaction with the TEFL programme. However, several respondents expressed a relative dissatisfaction, as is evidenced in comments such as 'There is still much to be learnt about EFL teaching' and 'We are not prepared enough to be able to teach English to children'. Such dissatisfaction with professional preparation was also evident in comments as follows 'We need more formal training in pedagogical aspects' and 'We need more resources at our disposal'.

Other programme weaknesses also emerged from their comments such as the overemphasis on theory without the accompanying practice teaching. In this sense, several respondents expressed their complaint with the excessively theoretical, formal and impractical nature of courses, providing comments such as 'Less theory is preferable with more useful teaching tips for the EFL classroom'. In this respect, other candidate teachers made suggestions such as 'More emphasis on practical aspects of teaching and, accordingly, more practical teaching sessions to learn how best to teach' and 'The need for the simulation of practical classroom situations before entering the school'. The programme is more theory-based, however, many participating student teachers are in favour of a more practice-oriented programme. The findings from this study are consistent with other research findings on the practice component of EFL teacher education programmes (Erozan, 2005; Seferoglu, 2006). Researchers like Peacock (2009) and Karakas (2012) in fact stress the need for increasing the amount of teaching practice. In relation to this category, some student teachers also complained about the way some courses are conducted. They mentioned the importance of teachers' having good knowledge of their students, with comments such as 'Many aspects are overlooked because they are assumed as already known' and 'Teachers should have a clear idea of what students already know'.

Last but not least, there were also comments that specifically referred to the lack of contextualized knowledge and/or training, as evidenced in remarks such as 'At times the context for which we are training is overlooked'. In this sense, several candidate teachers suggested 'We cannot lose sight of the context in which English teaching actually happens' and 'Further contextualization of the Primary classroom reality is needed'. As can be seen, the comments from the open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews were the source of the most insightful data in the present study.

Conclusion

Given the importance of systematic evaluation of teacher education programmes aimed at enhancing the quality of education as well as the lack of literature in the field of English teacher education programmes, this research study shed light on those aspects of an EFL teacher education programme carried out in Spain that need to be improved, and linked the findings to research on other teacher education programmes. This evaluative review revealed the main strengths and weaknesses of an EFL teacher education programme

conducted in Spain from the perspective of student teachers. In general the TEFL programme was evaluated positively by participating student teachers, in terms of pedagogic competence –teaching skills - and promotion of reflection, although both linguistic competence (English proficiency) and managerial competence were not quite well covered in the programme. The main weakness highlighted was the lack of language awareness mainly due to the lack of communicative practice in classes and late specialization. In relation to this, participating candidate teachers' comments revealed that the TEFL programme puts more emphasis on theory (received knowledge) rather than practice (experiential learning). Hence more teaching practice opportunities as a means of experiential learning are certainly needed. Additionally, specialization should start earlier in the programme and there should be more specific subjects related to the study of English so as to cater better for student teachers' language development. In general, there is a relative agreement and satisfaction with the TEFL programme which meets the needs and expectations of student teachers to a certain extent, although this programme evaluation revealed certain aspects or areas where some improvements are possible as well as desirable.

Since evaluation is an issue under the influence of its sociocultural context, caution should be exercised in interpreting and generalizing the findings of the present study given the limitations of the sample size and the particular characteristics of the research context. Thus, results of the present study call for further replication and confirmation in other instructional settings. Perhaps future research studies should collect questionnaires and conduct more in-depth interviews of a larger number not only of student teachers but also of teacher educators. No doubt, additional participants could have provided more insights into the programme. Further research is needed such as longitudinal studies that investigate the real effects of TEFL programmes over time, drawing on qualitative as well as quantitative research methods. In short, more evaluation studies in other training contexts are actually needed.

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