Observation in pre-service teaching practice in TESOL programs (USA) and possible implications for Ukraine

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Abstract. The paper discusses teaching practice as a component in foreign language teacher preparation program in the world. By comparing structural and organizational features of teaching practice in TESOL and Ukrainian teacher preparation programs, the author emphasizes on the importance of observation in the process of teacher training and provides theoretical analysis of the pedagogical notion. Based on best TESOL practices the author presents the results of a small scale study of implementation of observation in pre-service teacher education program of Ivan Franko National University.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education, English as a foreign language, observation, teaching practice, TESOL.

Introduction. Perception of learning and teaching English as a foreign language has changed dramatically over the last 40-50 years which caused major conceptual changes in teacher education programs all over the world. Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, is not an exception. Over the past decade it has been striving to become a part of European and World cultural, economic and political community with a clear understanding of the pivotal role of foreign languages in the integration. Factors like compulsory foreign languages learning in secondary and higher educational establishments, rapid development of IT and tourism industry, student/teacher exchange programs (Erasmus, Fulbright, IREX) have contributed to the growing popularity of foreign language learning in general.

However, there are quite a few problems hindering successful foreign language learning. Among the major ones is outdated teacher preparation system in Ukrainian universities. First of all, the concept of teaching and learning is predominantly based on behavioristic and structural theories where learning is basically understood as a product, instead of a process. This, in turn, explains the dominance of grammar-translation methods in the field of foreign languages teaching in educational settings in Ukraine. Secondly, teaching methods are largely neglected in teacher preparation programs; little place is given to the development of pedagogical and methodological skills. According to the recent report by the British Council in Ukraine (2014), teaching methods as a discipline occupy less than 7% of the total curriculum in EFL (English as a foreign language) teacher preparation programs. Thirdly, in spite of the fact that teaching practice is mandatory for pursuing a degree in teaching, its quality and amount of hours in pre-service programs is insufficient to prepare future teachers to work in educational establishments after graduation.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine teaching practice in the leading teacher preparation program and consider possible implications for improvement of EFL teacher education in Ukraine.

Literature review. Teacher preparation and teaching as a process has been of interest to many scholars. Teaching itself is viewed by Strevens as “a highly complex activity which requires knowledge, understanding, practice and experience before it can be carried out in a fully professional and effective manner” [9, p. 26]. On the one hand, the task of pre-service teacher preparation programs is to equip students with knowledge about applied linguistics, second language acquisition theories, teaching methods and skills. However, Wallace observes that information received during the course of study is rather passive than active (“received knowledge”), implying that practical component is crucial in teacher preparation [12].

Teaching practice (TP) is an integral part of teacher preparation process, especially in pre-service programs [2]. It can be defined as a “learning to teach” activity that requires organizational efforts by cooperating teachers, university supervisors and teacher candidates themselves as well as it is a multidimensional activity that involves such aspects as observing, imitating, planning, engaging, managing, creating, evaluating, and assessing to mention the least [5]. During TP students have an opportunity to get hands-on experience in a professional setting, get acquainted with classroom culture, become aware of challenges and rewards of the profession.

As suggested by Barosci, any teaching practice needs supervision [1] and one of the forms of supervision is observation. Observation is an essential tool not only in terms of seeing other practices or experiences, but also in stimulating critical thinking and self-evaluation. In the first place, a good observation should be well-structured and purposeful. Depending on focus generally observations can be of various types: peer and self-observation, structured/unstructured, focused/general and therefore may employ various strategies and procedures [1, 3, 6]. In regards to purposefulness, observation carries a twofold function as of assessment (evaluative) and professional development (developmental) [3, 4, 13]. In many teacher preparation programs TP is assessed based on criteria, which is of great help to observers. However, for a beginning teacher it is vital to be evaluated not in a summative form, but rather in the form of constructive feedback, as Wyjnryb puts it, “evaluative, not judgmental assessment” [13].

Peer observation is one of the methods that provides an opportunity for both the observer and the observee to mutually enhance their teaching practices. Firstly, it is an indispensable tool in learning from others and sharing own experience with them. While observing, the participants may become aware of their peers’ teaching techniques, methods, and assignments that can be used in a classroom. Learning by sharing is especially actual now when we all have become spontaneous participants of socio-cultural changes in education. Following that, Kumaravadivelu states that EFL teaching and learning worldwide is witnessing a “postmethod era”, implying...
that traditional teaching methods are no longer sufficient to satisfy contemporary learners’ needs in rapidly changing learning environments. Instead, every teacher represents a unique method that has evolved from their personal and professional experiences and most likely will be changing/transforming to accommodate needs of learners [4]. Secondly, observing peers in TP can be a powerful tool in developing reflective teaching and raising awareness of students’ role and participation in the classroom. According to research findings by Barosci, peer observation of teaching activities as well as actual learning that is happening in the classroom prove to be more effective during TP for teacher students in terms of professional development [1]. The implication that arises for contemporary EFL teacher preparation programs shows that peer observations should be well thought and planned to include both teaching and learning perspectives.

In terms of planning and structuring, it is important that the observation process in TP includes all stages: pre-observation, observation and post-observation [1, 5, 14]. Pre-observation stage is often neglected in TP, however, if executed, can carry a lot of valuable information for the observer and the observed. On the one hand, pre-observation helps establish “psychological bridge” between the observer and observee, boost confidence if necessary; on the other - it is an additional opportunity to look at the goal and objectives of the lesson planned to help targeting specific concerns the teacher trainee may have or raise awareness of specific aspects of teaching worth focusing. As to observation itself, a wide array of strategies and methods can be employed in a classroom. In the EFL field most commonly known and used are structured and unstructured observations. Unstructured observation do not have any specific focus, which implies the observer writes their notes on what they see or what they consider noteworthy. Structured observations are focus specific and therefore can provide valuable data for further analysis and processing. Normally, the observation report sheets include, but are not limited to such criteria as: lesson structure, classroom management, types of teaching activities, teaching strategies, teacher’s use of materials, teacher’s use of language, student’s use of language, student interaction [6]. Like pre-observation, post-observation phase (or feedback) is a fundamental part of the observation process. Formative feedback in TP helps develop skills for professional learning, thinking, and action; notice and learn from teaching experience, plan effective lessons, reflect on practice to review and assess his/her own practice independently.

Although the benefits of classroom observation are obvious, we should bear in mind certain limitations it brings along. To start with, many pre-service and long practicing teachers do not like being observed. There are several reasons to that. Firstly, anxiety and tension it can cause for both the novice and experienced teachers. As noted by Richards, student or novice teachers under observation often “overact” or “overprepare” in their strong desire to show their best. On the other hand, a candidate may feel distracted by the presence of the observer and being aware of the fact that he or she is being assessed [6], may fail to demonstrate teaching skills at their best. Therefore, as stated by Zaare, the activity of pedagogical observation requires a high degree of objectivity and ethics on the part of the observer [14].

Teaching and observation are seen as two inseparable processes not only in TP, but also in everyday teaching routine. Engin argues that teaching is a “sole activity”, stating that the essence of teaching lies in sharing knowledge, experience, emotions both with students and peer colleagues. Although peer observation is generally viewed as a method in pre-service teacher training programs, Engin suggests that it can be as well used for the practicing teachers [3]. There are, however, several conditions to be met – creating atmosphere of mutual support, collegiality, openness and readiness to improve. Trust and healthy professional relations among colleagues boost confidence, nurture support, creativity, personal and professional development and can become determinative for future teachers on TP. Furthermore, most trainees having previous experience of spontaneously observing their school teachers have already shaped certain views on teaching. Some of them being positive, others – not, it is crucial to ensure that while on TP student teachers are exposed to and observe the best teaching practices.

Teaching practice in TESOL programs in USA. According to AACTE 2013 PEDS Report findings, the average number of clinical (teaching) practice allocated in a teacher preparation programs in USA ranges from 480 to 586 hours (approximately 13-15 weeks). Nevertheless, the report emphasizes that it is important that the prospective teachers are involved in getting hands-on teaching experience as early as possible and throughout the entire program [11]. TESOL teacher preparation programs in the USA design their curricula in accordance with TESOL standards [10], where TP plays a pivotal role, however, TPs within the programs differ in duration, content, and organization [11].

In this paper we aim to describe TP in MATESOL program in the University of Illinois at Chicago, department of Linguistics. TP comprises three stages – introductory, experiential and developmental. The first stage lasts one semester and is predominantly focused on unstructured and structured observation. Teacher students are guided through classroom experiences by cooperating teacher, assisting him/her with everything that is happening in the classroom. The goal of student teachers in this stage is to observe cooperating teacher in action, language learners and their behavior, and teacher-student interaction in a classroom. By the end of the semester teacher candidates prepare three observation papers with detailed description and reflection on their classroom experiences.

During introductory stage microteaching is introduced to teacher students as well. Microteaching, although simulative in nature, is an essential component of any teacher training program [7, 8, 10]. It is aimed at fostering collaborative and reflective learning, boosting confidence, providing support and constructive feedback to teacher candidates. At first, students practice teaching with peers in class. Classroom experiences are focused on teaching language skills, vocabulary and grammar for 10 min., gradually increasing teaching time to 30 min. a class. Also, while microteaching, students are videotaped and then write their weekly reflections, thoughts and ideas in an online journal. This is an efficient tool in developing critical thinking and objectivity of self-evaluation.

The real teaching/learning context in TESOL teaching practice is provided by ELIs (English Language Institute) and takes place in the second stage of TP. These institu-
tions are an integral part of US universities and their main function is to teach English to foreign students (current and prospective) to help them be successful in their academic programs. Experiential stage of TP (9 credit hours) lasts one semester as well. Student teachers practice three times per week in an Intensive English Program (IEP). Teaching sessions last from 45 min and up to a two-hour class. Therefore, future teachers are gradually immersed into professional teaching environment and gain solid foundation through hands-on experience. This process is closely monitored by a counselling teacher and a cooperating teacher who observe and provide formative feedback. The aim of this stage is to prepare teacher candidates to the challenges of the profession.

To enhance TP outcomes MATESOL program in UIC has introduced Conversation Partner Program (CPP). As teacher candidates proceed to the experiential stage they are partnered with ELI students. Such partnership has pedagogical and cultural benefits: student teachers can learn to define learner’s needs, develop strategies, identify learner’s weaknesses, design relevant tasks, and become aware of culture influence on learning.

Developmental stage aims to encourage candidates to try and innovate, to shape their views on teaching and do professional development throughout whole teaching career. Student teachers and a counselling teacher meet twice a month to discuss their concerns/problems, evaluate and share their teaching experience. At the end of TP students are required to submit a Statement of Teaching Philosophy - a reflective paper on where and how they see themselves now and in the nearest future.

Teaching practice in EFL teaching programs in Ukraine: rationale for the study. Like in the USA, TP is an essential part of the system of teacher education in Ukrainian universities. Until recently TP in EFL teacher preparation programs took place in the 4th (4 week duration) and 5th years of study (8 weeks duration). Specifically, 4th year students have undergone teacher training in secondary schools, while 5th year students have had their TP in universities or tertiary level institutions. Since 2016–2017 academic year the new rules and requirements have come into effect for master degree students. Now, duration of Master degree program has changed to 2 years instead of one, and therefore TP is going to be held in the 6th year of studying. However, since the study being described in this paper was conducted in 2015, this factor will not be taken into consideration.

Structurally, TP on both education levels comprises 4 stages: preparatory, introductory, executive, and final. The goal of preparatory stage is to organize TP: establish positive contact with the school administration, pick classes and cooperating teachers for teacher students. Introductory phase in bachelor program lasts 1 week aiming at familiarizing a teacher student with the school structure, classroom documentation, participation in staff meetings, getting acquainted with the class, designing an individual TP plan and submitting it to the TP counselling teacher for final approval. During the main stage, which lasts 2 weeks, a teacher student is to plan and conduct 4 classes a week additionally to observing 8 classes a week. The final stage (1 week) is focused on summarising teaching experience and submitting necessary documentation.

Although the structure and duration of TP is defined by the national standards, TP itself can vary within the universities in terms of their content and quality. The study of existing TP programs’ syllabi has revealed several problems in teacher training in Ukraine. Firstly, although all stages have well elaborated requirements of accomplishment, they are too general and formal. Thus, the requirements for successful accomplishment of TP contain: one report about teaching practice; a lesson plan; a plan of extracurricular event; psychological characteristic (portrait) of a learner; assessment by the school signed by cooperating school teacher, homeroom teacher, and principal. These papers then are submitted to counselling professor at the university for final assessment. It can be referred, that such summative and formal evaluation leaves little or no place for constructive formative feedback. Secondly, little attention is paid to the procedure of observation. The idea of peer observation is present (so called “mutual visiting of classes”), however, it is really vague without concrete criteria for (peer and self) observation and necessary procedures. Lastly, Ukrainian teacher preparation programs lack reflective practices and critical thinking. TP being a part of the program is predominantly focused on practicing teaching skills, vocabulary and grammar. Since the main aim of TP is reproduction of skills, it does not allow a teacher student to think about his/her prior learning experiences and adapt them to their teaching situations, generate new ideas and experiment, which is crucial for teaching profession and development. Without discussions, conferences, journals and reflective tasks it is impossible to develop a teacher able to adapt to the needs of contemporary EFL learners and changing learning environments.

Research design and methodology. To address one of the issues discussed above, a small scale qualitative study was conducted in 2014–2015 academic year with 4th year students of the faculty of Foreign Languages at Ivan Franko National University (Lviv). The aim of the study was to determine what impact developed observation skills have on teaching practice. The nature of research defined its methodology and employed such methods as discussions, observations, reflections, checklists, reflective paper. Two instruments of collecting data were used: unstructured/structured observation sheets and reflective paper.

The study was conducted with two foci - the first being concentrated on teaching observation and teaching skills in the course of “EFL teaching methods”, while the second – on practising those skills during TP. According to typical organization of a course in Ukrainian universities, each week of lecture alternated with a practical class. During the course the emphasis was laid on the procedure of observation and its twofold function as a learning tool and feedback. Observation skills were taught through micro teaching, where students were delivering 20-min classes in front of their peers. Since student teachers were practicing in a simulative situation, we started from structured observations that focused on learning materials and teaching skills. In the first 3 weeks of the course students were given observation checklists with items to evaluate; in the next 4 weeks those were developed into observation sheets that required comments. In post observation phase, students handed their observation feedback sheets to the observer and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of micro teaching and reflected on benefits they got from observing.
During TP teacher trainees were to observe not only peers, but also cooperating teachers at school. First week unstructured observation was held in order to become aware of classroom culture. Trainees were provided with observation sheets, where they noted everything they experienced in the classroom. In the weeks to follow structured observations were held that targeted more areas: the lesson (procedure and plan), the learner (participation, type of grouping), the teacher (methods and techniques), classroom management (seating arrangement). It is worth mentioning, special attention during TP was paid to pre- and post-observation sessions. Pre observation meetings held with a teacher trainee, peer trainee, a cooperating and a counselling teacher aimed at targeting anticipated problems and boosting confidence. The aim of post observation sessions was to provide constructive feedback to the trainee, in an open and supportive atmosphere, stimulate reflection and critical thinking.

After TP was accomplished, student teachers were asked to write a reflective paper which had to address the following: feelings (most positive experiences and achievements, concerns about teaching) and vision (their future profession and teaching philosophy).

**Research findings and conclusion.** The study yielded several findings. First and foremost, observation skills taught in the course prepared student teachers to teaching practice. In terms of psychological benefits, trainees claimed that observation was no longer an unpleasant experience. Although the study was conducted in reverse order (first structured, later unstructured observations) this did not pose any problems for most trainees. On the contrary, structured observations taught them to be specific and developed skills of attention to detail, whereas unstructured observations stimulated more reflection. Additionally, bottom-up approach made it easier for student teachers to comprehend parts of a class as an integral whole. Furthermore, peer observation combined with reflection was an effective tool in generating new techniques and experimenting, some of them being innovative and successful. As to pedagogical advantages, observation made students aware of a learner’s role in the classroom and take into account learner’s needs while planning a class. Furthermore, observation of cooperating teachers was an excellent opportunity for student teachers to explore classroom culture, specifically, the importance of creation of supportive learning atmosphere. As Engin points out, teaching embraces both cognitive and affective aspects, the latter involving a lot of emotional efforts and energy on the part of a teacher. Observing peers and cooperating teachers created favourable conditions for reflecting over the challenges of the profession and becoming aware of “what it takes”.

On the whole, the study showed that observation plays a pivotal role in teacher preparation programs. The outcomes of the research proved to have positive impact on teacher trainees not only in terms of practising skills, but also for their professional development. Observation sheets turned out crucially useful for trainees and helped them to improve their teaching skills. Additionally, insightful observation could only be made possible using reflection as a tool. However, although the small scale of the study does not allow us to generalize, these findings might be of interest in terms of further development and improvement of TP in EFL teacher preparation programs in Ukraine.

**REFERENCES**