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## ASSESSMENT OF EFL STUDENT TEACHERS' PERFORMANCE IN PRACTICUM

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### **Résumé**

*Le présent article est le compte rendu d'une étude des modalités d'évaluation des élèves professeurs au cours de leur stage pratique dans les établissements secondaires au Bénin. L'étude s'est donné pour but d'examiner les critères d'évaluation de la performance et du progrès des élèves professeurs au cours dudit stage, ainsi que leurs opinions sur cette composante de leur formation en vue de déterminer si oui ou non les maîtres de stage et les stagiaires ont connaissance des compétences visées par le stage. Les résultats révèlent l'inexistence d'un référentiel de compétences pour ledit stage. En conséquence, les maîtres de stage ont recours à leurs vécus dans leur prise de décisions par rapport à l'évaluation des stagiaires. Ce système d'évaluation, selon les stagiaires, est peu fiable. Des suggestions sont faites dans cette étude pour une meilleure évaluation de ce stage pratique.*

**Mots-clés :** *Stage pratique, compétence de l'enseignant, performance de l'enseignant, opinions de l'enseignant, évaluation de la pratique.*

### **Introduction**

The teacher is an important agent in any educational system. His preparation and training constitute the main concern in many teacher education institutions where attempts are being made to equip student teachers with the skills and competencies required for the teaching profession. Many of such institutions have identified and clearly defined in their training programs the set of competencies expected from the student teachers by the end of their training. The teacher training college under investigation in the present study offers both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs in the areas of languages and humanities. These programs are organized as follows:

- Languages (French, English, Spanish, German)
- Humanities ( History and Geography, Philosophy)

The student teachers are enrolled in a three-year program covering a period of six semesters and composed of two main components: a theory component and a practice one. The theory component of the EFL teacher training program is composed of a blend of courses in the content area of English, and courses in educational psychology, TEFL methods, educational technology, and school-site management. This component extends over the whole period of six semesters. The practice component of the program is concerned with the TEFL practicum in selected secondary schools and is carried out by trainees concurrently with the courses at the training college during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> semesters for respectively 20 hours of observation and 60 hours of practice teaching.

At the end of the training, the student teachers, no matter their field of training, are expected to be able to demonstrate the following key competencies outlined in the program at the training college: "*Integrated training program for secondary school teacher candidates*"(May 2009), and that are assessed through the practicum:

- 1) knowledge of content and ability to transmit it to learners
- 2) ability to manage a class efficiently

- 3) ability to plan teaching/learning events
- 4) ability to organise teaching/learning events taking into account learners' needs and learning styles
- 5) ability to use efficient and appropriate teaching methods
- 6) ability to create and maintain good rapport with learners taking into account individual learners' characteristics
- 7) ability to create a nurturing, motivating, and secure classroom environment
- 8) ability to design appropriate assessment instruments
- 9) ability to make adjustments in their teaching in the light of assessment results

In most pre-service teacher education programs, the teaching practicum is considered as a main component. During the practicum, the student teacher has a chance to apply knowledge and skills gained during the theoretical study through the process of teaching a class of learners and receiving feedback. However, there are many issues that make the assessment of student teachers' competence during the practicum problematic (Brown, 1996; Stones, 1994). In the field of language teacher education, these issues relate, for example, to the ongoing reflection and debates of experts on the nature of language teacher education, the knowledge /competence base of language teacher education, and the lack of consensus on the attributes and the defining characteristics of the good language teacher (Hung, 2008, Lawes, 2003; Mitchell, 2000; Pachler and Field, 2001; Pring, 2000.). Nonetheless, most experts in the field of EFL teacher education tacitly agree on the fact that a good EFL teacher should demonstrate a sound knowledge of the subject-matter (English) and of its culture, should have a good command of the English language and of instructional strategies necessary for the teaching of EFL, and should be able to transform curriculum goals and guidelines to meet the needs of individual learners in his/her classroom. Unfortunately, when it comes to assessing these characteristics of good EFL teaching in practice, the procedure becomes fuzzy.

The main problem raised by this study pertains to the assessment procedure that supervisors use to assess EFL student teachers' performance during the practicum in Benin secondary schools. Very often, these student teachers have very little knowledge of the competencies targeted for the practicum component of their training program and of the criteria upon which their performance is assessed. Moreover, the supervisors in the secondary schools do not hold any meeting with the administrative staff at the teacher training college to agree with them on the set of competencies they should focus on through their supervision during the practicum; neither do they have any meeting with the faculty member(s) in charge of the TEFL component of the training program. For the TEFL practicum to yield better results, the student teachers' guidance, supervision, and evaluation should normally be carried out through the collaborative efforts of a faculty member of the teacher training college and the student teacher's supervisor. Both of them should work cooperatively to help the student teacher acquire the required competencies, which is not the case. Besides, the EFL student teachers' performance and progress in the practicum should be evaluated on the basis of clearly defined performance criteria which relate to a preliminarily determined set of language and teaching competencies. Unfortunately, the non-existence of such a framework has often led to a subjective, holistic, and unreliable grading system in the TEFL practicum.

The assessment of the student teachers during the practicum is based on the assumption that it provides invaluable information about the student teacher's language proficiency, knowledge of the subject matter, and teaching competencies. However, considering the problem raised in this study, two questions arise as to (1) How do EFL student teachers' supervisors go about the evaluation of their trainees' performance and progress during the practicum when they have no clear idea about the competencies targeted by the training program? (2) How can trainees know the aspects of their training that require a lot of efforts if they do not know about these targeted competencies?

In order to examine this issue, the following questions are considered in the study:

- 1) What competencies do supervisors focus on through their guidance during the practicum?
- 2) How do they determine these competencies?
- 3) What do they know about the competencies targeted by the training college for the TEFL practicum?
- 4) How do they assess student teachers during the practicum?

- 5) What do EFL student teachers know about the competencies expected from them in the practicum?
- 6) What are their opinions about the assessment procedure in the practicum?

In the present study, the term competence is used to refer to the specific knowledge and skills important for a teacher to succeed in the profession. This includes the competencies of language, personal qualities, inter-personal relationship, planning, and implementation that are measured through his/her performance. The term performance is meant to refer to what the teacher does on the job in terms of behaviour and under a specified set of conditions. Pennington and Young (1989) argue that how well a teacher performs depends in part on how competent he/she is said to be.

### **1. The study methodology**

The sample population involved in this study consists of 18 EFL student teachers (15 males and 3 females) in their third year and last semester of training during the academic year 2013-2014 at the teacher training college under consideration. Included in the sample population is a group of 12 supervisors (7 males and 5 females), all permanent secondary school EFL teachers, with teaching experiences ranging from 8 to 15 years, and 2 to 10 years of experience in supervision. These supervisors had already received the same trainees in their classrooms during the previous academic year for the observation phase of the practicum. In the second phase, which covers 60 hours, trainees are expected to be in the secondary schools with the supervisors for twelve hours a week. Their workload consists in planning and implementing lessons, and receiving feedback from the supervisors.

The methodology of the study is based on the use of open-ended questionnaires addressed to the EFL trainees and to their supervisors, and a structured interview administered to four of the supervisors randomly chosen (Anne, John, Andrew, and Tom). The data gathered through these instruments (see appendices A, B, and C) have been analysed inductively following Thomas' (2006) inductive approach to analysing qualitative data. This has helped to identify the themes that emerge from the participants' thinking about the assessment procedures in the TEFL practicum. The results of this analysis are presented in the next section. All the names that appear in this report are pseudonyms used to refer to the participants.

## **2. Results**

### **2.1. The competencies that the supervisors focus on during their supervision**

In an attempt to answer the first research question that seeks to identify the competencies that supervisors focus on through their guidance during the practicum, the supervisors' responses to item 1 in the questionnaire addressed to them have been considered. The list that emerged from the analysis of their responses shows the competencies they focus on during the supervision. The ranking below presents these different competencies followed by the number of respondents who pointed to each in parentheses.

- 1- class management skill (11)
- 2- lesson planning skill (08)
- 3- competency-based EFL teaching skill (07)
- 4- teacher knowledge (06)
- 5- language competence (05)
- 6- teacher personality (05)
- 7- assessment skill (04)
- 8- reflective practice (01)

From the ranking above, it appears that the competency that warrants most attention for the supervisors relates to the trainees' ability to manage teaching/learning events. This is followed by their ability to plan and carry out competency-based EFL teaching. While only a few of them gave attention to competencies such as the teacher's language competence, personal qualities, and skill of assessment, reflective practice, which is a crucial variable of the teaching profession, receives almost no attention.

## 2.2. How the supervisors determine the competencies

From the responses provided by the supervisors to items 2 and 3 of the questionnaire addressed to them, it appears that they make decisions about the competencies to focus on during the supervision basing on what follows: their past experiences as EFL trainees, their personal experiences as EFL teachers, their knowledge of the competency-based language teaching principles, their knowledge of the curriculum orientations and of trainees' needs.

## 2.3. What the supervisors know about the competencies targeted by the training college for the TEFL practicum

The data from the interview to four of the twelve participant supervisors reveal what follows: First, their ignorance of the competencies targeted by the teacher training college, and second, the influence of their past learning experiences as EFL trainees on their decision-making about the supervision work.

All four informants affirmed that they have no idea about the competencies defined by the teacher training college for the practicum. They also confessed that they received no information, no guidelines from the college concerning the implementation of the practicum component. Most of the supervision work that they do during the practicum is patterned on the model they experienced as EFL trainees in the past. Here is what one of them said:

I have no idea about the competencies they want the trainees to have. I must confess that the training school didn't guide us; they didn't say anything about what the target is. There is no specific guidance that we should follow, but ourselves, as former trainees in such training, we define the needs of our trainees and we work on those needs. I don't know why the school takes for granted that we should know what to do. I don't know if it is because we have been trained there, and the school knows that we are supposed to know what is convenient. (John)

Alluding to the same situation, another supervisor contended as follows:

Frankly speaking, the teacher training college has not specified any kind of competencies we should look at while helping our trainees in their work, but anyhow, as we have been through this school, we have an idea about what should be the different competencies teachers should have in order to be good at teaching; so we try to do the work from our own experience. (Anne)

## 2.4. The assessment procedure used by the supervisors in the practicum

The analysis of the interview data revealed the following themes concerning the assessment procedure used in the practicum:

- Past learning experiences and teaching experiences as the main source of supervisors' decisions about assessment in the practicum.
- Planning, teaching and class management skills as the main assessment criteria in the practicum
- Consideration of the requirements of the competency-based approach in the supervisors' decision-making procedure about assessment in the practicum.

Indeed, all four interviewed supervisors said that they define assessment criteria basing on what they learnt from their own training at the same college and from knowledge they got from their own practicum experiences. This corroborates the responses collected through the questionnaire addressed to the twelve participant supervisors. Relying on these experiences, they assess their trainees' performance in the practicum basing on their assumptions about what trainees should know about the practice of teaching. One of them said what follows:

As I have no information from the teacher training college, I know that it is up to me to define some criteria, and I have my criteria based mainly on what I know young teachers need to know in order to tackle the job of teaching. We try to do what we were taught when we were trainees at the training school. (Tom)

Another supervisor expressed the same idea in the following words:

I take from my own case as I was a trainee, my experience with my supervisor when I was doing my practical training. I've also been doing teaching for a certain number of years, so there

are some things which are obvious to me as far as the competencies that the trainees need to develop are concerned. (Andrew)

Alluding to the assessment criteria that receive most attention from them, all four interviewed supervisors pointed to the trainees' ability to plan and implement lessons, to their pedagogical and class management skills. Here is what Tom and Anne declared: *"For example, first of all, they should know how to plan a lesson, how to conduct a lesson and manage interactions in the classroom. We observe them; we are there to see what is acceptable and what is to be improved."*(Tom)

*"First a good teacher should go to class with a lesson plan, and implement it very well."*(Anne)

The same abilities are considered to be crucial for teaching in the data collected from the questionnaire addressed to the twelve participant supervisors.

Besides, two of the interviewed supervisors also added that they give a special attention to the principles of the competency-based approach (CBA) when making decisions about trainees' assessment. They contended that most of what they expect from trainees in terms of the competencies that they should demonstrate relates to the requirements of the CBA which are specified in the curriculum. They said:

I think the most important thing is lesson planning and how to handle the lesson taking into account the suggestions made in the curriculum concerning English learning in the competency-based approach."(Andrew) "I assess their competence on the basis of how well they plan and conduct the lesson, how well the learners are involved. A lesson should be learner-centred according to the competency-based program (John)

## **2.5. What the EFL student teachers know about the competencies expected from them and their opinions about the assessment procedures used in the practicum**

In an attempt to answer the last two research questions in this study, the data collected from the open-ended questionnaire addressed to the participant student teachers have been considered. The analysis of these data revealed the following themes as regards their knowledge of the competencies expected from them in the practicum and their opinions about the assessment procedure used:

- 1- Trainees' ignorance of the assessment procedure in the practicum
- 2- Trainee's assumptions about the competencies expected from them
- 3- The supervisor's feedback as a valuable source of information about progress
- 4- The obscure nature of the assessment procedure in the practicum
- 5- The need for a change in the assessment procedure during the practicum

Indeed, the EFL trainees have no clear idea about the way their performance and progress are assessed in the practicum and the aspects of their performance that are assessed. They expressed their ignorance regarding the competencies expected from them for the practicum, the criteria upon which their performance is assessed, and the grading system in the final inspection. Regarding this aspect, some stated:

*"I have no idea about the fact. I have no clue."*(Clara)

*"I don't know much about it."*(Bob)

*"I don't know much about it. I know it is based on some criteria, but I don't know them."*(Greg)

Most of what they know about the competencies targeted by the training college for the practicum relates to the assumptions they make about assessment in the practicum basing on information they got informally from former trainees, from their supervisors, and from some lecturers who allude to some of the key competencies outlined in the training program for all fields of study at the teacher training college. What is missing, in fact, is a list of competencies defined for the specific field of EFL teacher training that should be made available to the EFL trainees.

Besides, the respondents have no idea about the criteria upon which their progress is assessed in the practicum. Pointing to this aspect, some of them declared:

*"I don't know the criteria used to evaluate our progress during the practicum."*(Suzy)

*"I have no idea about it."*(Chris)

*"I don't know, even my supervisor didn't tell them to me."*(Laura)

They alluded to a variety of criteria they assume could be the focus of their assessment during the practicum. These assumptions are based on the feedback they get on their performance from their

supervisors after each teaching. This constitutes a valuable clue that provides them with information about their performance. It helps them to determine whether they are making progress or not and to make decisions about aspects of their performance that need improvement. Though the respondents acknowledged the usefulness of the supervisor's feedback, they show a negative attitude to the assessment procedure in the practicum. They think of it as being an obscure and unreliable process carried out with no clearly defined criteria known to them. They expressed their opinions as follows:

*"The way our evaluation is carried out is not valid and reliable." (Fred)*

*"It is subjective. We have no idea about what is expected. We don't know much about it, so we don't know how to behave that day during the inspection. It is bad." (Tony)*

*"The way of evaluation needs some improvement because I don't know on what criteria it is done." (Steve)*

*"The feedback from the supervisor is very helpful. It points to many things, even the mistakes I make in pronunciation. But things can be better if I know the criteria before." (Alan)*

*"The way it is carried out is ambiguous, not clear. They should normally explain to us how it will be done." (Mike)*

*"It would help a lot if we get informed on the criteria used to evaluate trainees' performance." (Peter)*

With regard to their dissatisfaction, they suggested that some improvements be brought to the assessment procedure. They alluded mainly to the observation of trainees by teachers from the teacher training college, and to an official list of the assessment criteria that would be made available to them by the teacher training college. Here is what some of them said about these aspects:

*"We should know the criteria and prepare ourselves correctly." (James)*

*"I think it could be better if the administration of our training school send us teachers during the training so that they can observe us before the inspection." (David)*

### 3. Discussion

An important matter to be discussed here relates to the obscure and unreliable nature of the assessment procedure in the practicum. As the results indicate, there exists no official list of competencies for the TEFL practicum. Therefore, the student teachers have no clear idea of what is expected from them in the practicum, and the secondary school supervisors rely on their personal experiences to make decisions about the evaluation of trainees as they got no information from the teacher training college regarding the implementation of the practicum. Normally, the student teachers' supervision, evaluation and guidance during the practicum should be a collaborative effort of the faculty of education staff and the secondary school supervisors. Both should work together to provide trainees with the required competencies for the practicum. Their evaluation of student teachers' performance will assist in identifying skills that require particular attention in the remaining period of teaching practice.

Another matter that is worth discussing relates to the nature of the partnership between the teacher training college and the secondary schools which are selected to host the practicum of the student teachers. This partnership is limited to sending and receiving trainees, which justifies the absence of the teacher training staff in the supervision work during the practicum. No follow-up is carried out by the teacher training staff to check how the practicum is being implemented in the secondary schools, and to see how trainees translate theory into practice.

A third issue that warrants attention in this study pertains to the value of the supervisors' feedback for the participant EFL trainees. They found it very informative in that it provides them with clues concerning aspects to improve in their teaching. This is consistent with Freeman's (1989) premise that the purpose of the interactive process between student teacher and supervisor is to generate some form of change in the teacher candidates. It is through field teaching and feedback that the student teacher has a chance to apply knowledge and skills gained through the theoretical study in coursework.

The fourth and last matter raised by the findings of this study is related to the focus of trainees' assessment in the practicum. As the results indicate, the competencies that receive more attention from the supervisors relate to planning and classroom implementation. Other aspects of the teaching performance such as personal qualities, interpersonal competence, language competence, and reflective practice did not receive much consideration from supervisors due to the lack of performance

standards from the teacher training college. The same focus appears through trainees' expressed assumptions about what is expected from them in the practicum.

#### **4. Suggestions**

The study reveals that the EFL teacher candidates and their secondary school supervisors have no clear idea of the competencies targeted for the practicum. The findings also indicate that the grading system used during inspections and the field practice is unreliable as it does not relate to any clearly defined set of competencies and performance criteria that the training staff, the supervisors, and the trainees have shared awareness and understanding of. With regard to this situation, the following suggestions are made to help to improve assessment procedures in the practicum:

First, a new program should be initiated to replace the conventional practicum program which was solely based on observation and practice teaching. This program should rely on a number of specific competencies suitable for trainees' effective preparation for the TEFL profession.

Second, performance-based standards should be developed through the collaborative effort of the EFL teacher training staff and the secondary school supervisors. These two aspects require that the partnership between the training college and the selected secondary schools no longer be restricted to sending and receiving trainees, but it should be extended to a preliminary collaborative reflection through which what the teacher candidates are expected to know, be like, and be able to do during the practicum will be clearly defined and agreed upon by both sides.

Third, it is essential that EFL teacher candidates have knowledge of these standards they are expected to reach. This could be done through an informative list of the competencies and performance criteria they could have access to through the college's website or administration.

Fourth, in addition to the traditional measures that have been used so far to assess performance in the practicum, and that are quantitative in nature, qualitative assessment can also be used to provide interesting data about trainees' competence. Such alternative methods require that trainees complete performance-based tasks that generate more complex responses and that show their problem-solving capabilities and deeper analysis skills than traditional measures. The types of activities that lend themselves to performance-based assessment involve the documentation of real teaching experiences through the construction of a teaching portfolio, written reflections, written journals, projects, group work, oral report, all of which provide a proof of trainees' performance, but also provide details about their work environment, their beliefs, and values. Moreover, the teaching practice, instead of relying on planning and implementation skills, should also be considered as an opportunity to judge whether or not trainees' command of English would be adequate enough to sustain instruction in an EFL class. It is during the teaching practice that trainees will learn if they can survive in a classroom and function as teachers of English.

Finally, a crucial aspect that deserves a special attention relates to the choice of supervisors in the secondary schools. The background information collected from them indicates that some have very little experience in supervision and therefore cannot handle the work efficiently. Most senior EFL teachers who are likely to satisfactorily carry out the supervision work have retired. Therefore, it is suggested in this study that a supervision scheme be elaborated by experts in the field, and the EFL teachers who have some experience in EFL teaching and who are willing to offer guidance to novice teachers or to teacher candidates be trained for the purpose.

#### **Conclusion**

The present study is significant in that it sheds light on the weaknesses of the TEFL practicum component of the EFL teacher training program under consideration. It highlights the flaws in the procedures used to assess the EFL trainees' performance and progress in the practicum. More importantly, it has helped to identify the aspects that need improvement in the organisation and implementation of the practicum component of the training program and to suggest relevant solutions that would help improve assessment in the practicum. It has also provided a good opportunity to lay emphasis on the necessity for establishing a framework within which the EFL trainees, the secondary

school supervisors, and the EFL teacher training staff would reach a shared awareness and understanding of the competencies targeted for the practicum.

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## Appendix A: Open-ended questionnaire to the supervisors

These open-ended questions appear in the questionnaire addressed to the supervisors to elicit from them information about the way they assess the EFL trainees' performance during the TEFL practicum

1-/ Make a list of the competencies that you focus on during the supervision of the EFL trainees assigned to you for their TEFL practicum.

2-/ On what basis did you decide to focus on the competencies that you have listed above?

3/ How did you make the decision to focus on these competencies?

## Appendix B: Interview guide questions

This interview schedule is used in the study to elicit from the supervisors information related to what they know about the competencies targeted by the teacher training college and to the assessment procedures that they use during the TEFL practicum

1-/ What are the competencies targeted by the teacher training college for the TEFL practicum component?

2-/ What information or guidelines did you get from the teacher training college regarding the implementation of this practicum component?

3-/ On what criteria do you assess your EFL trainees' progress during the practicum?

4-/ How did you decide on these criteria?

5-/ What competencies do they relate to?

6-/ How have these competencies been determined?

**Appendix C: Open-ended questionnaire to the EFL trainees**

The following questions are the ones included in the questionnaire addressed to the EFL trainees to collect data related to what they know about the competencies targeted for the TEFL practicum and to their opinions about the assessment procedures used in the practicum.

1-/ What do you know about the grading system in a formal inspection?

2-/ What competencies are targeted in your final evaluation during the inspection?

3-/ How do you know about these competencies?

4-/ On what criteria is your progress evaluated during the practicum?

5-/ What helps you determine whether you are making progress or not?

6-/ How do you decide on aspects of your performance that need improvement?

7-/ What do you think about the way your evaluation is carried out during the practicum?

8-/ How do you think your evaluation should be carried out?