Research Article

Teacher Educators’ Perceptions on EFL Pre-service Programme in Nepal

Abstract: This article aims to explore teacher educators’ perceptions on EFL pre-service programme in Nepal. In order to achieve the objective, the descriptive qualitative research design was used. Four teacher educators who were teaching English at two different (one constituent and one affiliated) campuses of Rupandehi were purposively selected as the research participants. The semi-structured interview and open-ended questions were used in order to draw out the information from them. The study revealed that almost all the teacher educators involved in the study were found to have positive perception on EFL pre-service programme as it provides content-based and methodological knowledge and professional skills to the pre-service teachers to prepare them for a job. In addition, the study explored that teachers focused more on theoretical work and rote learning rather practical work.

Keywords: Collaborative culture, motivation, pre-service programme, supervision and monitoring, teacher educators, teacher professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Pre-service programme refers to the education given to the individuals before they enter into the service as teachers. Those who desire to adopt teaching as their profession undergo and complete such pre-service programmes as they acquire necessary knowledge and skills improving their competence as teachers. Pre-service teacher education programed is a basic requirement of student-teacher preparation. It is an ongoing and never ending process which prepares them for teaching profession with professional knowledge and skill as foundation of teaching. On completion of the course, the students have to appear at the final examination and those who are found successful on the basis of their performance examinations are given certificates. After passing license exam and teacher service commission examination, they become qualified for entering into the teaching job. Richards and Schmidt (2005) state that teacher training deals with basic teaching skills and techniques required for novice teachers in a pre-service education programme.

This research study is noteworthy because the pre-service teacher education is a foundation of teaching as it supports to improve the learners’ teaching skills. In this regard, Adey and Hewitt (2004) rightly state teacher training and professional development programmes which depend on knowledge transmission models may not be effective in bringing about the desired change. English language teachers, school administrators and learners will be benefitted from this study as it will provide the educators with an opportunity to understand the pre-service programme and modify ELT methodology.

After completing M. Ed. from university campus, I started teaching English in school as a trained teacher but in early days of my teaching, I did not find the huge difference between me and the other teachers having English majoring in BA in teaching styles. Pre-service programme facilitated me little to make my teaching style different from other teachers since I did not get proper feedback during the pre-service programme. Regarding this, Gnawali (2008) rightly states, “training is usually imparted in a cascade model in which there are several layers of knowledge transfer from the master trainer to the trainer, trainer to the teachers and ultimately to the learners” (p.36). I realized why it was quite difficult for me to transform theory into practice in real teaching. Nevertheless, the content and methodological knowledge, preparing lesson plan and teaching materials in pre-service programme helps learners as a foundation of teaching to make their teaching career better.
Problem Statement

Based on my experience of teaching in bachelor and master’s degree students for years, I am concerned that many teacher educators teaching English whom I interacted with, believe that there is a need to make pre-service programme more practical and learner-centered so that they can make teaching learning meaningful. I began to question myself why a few teacher educators are frequently using conventional teacher centered methods. At my own campus, where I have been teaching as an English teacher, many students are pass out campuses without experiencing practical knowledge in a way that contributes to their ability. They lack the essential skills and competencies as teachers in them. EFL pre-service teachers have difficulties, and they face problems in real classrooms regarding the subject areas and teaching skills. Pre-service teacher education programme has provided the learners with adequate course contents but very few teacher educators are able to implement the knowledge in the real field. I want to see why they are unable to implement and transfer their theoretical knowledge to their learners in classroom practice. I intend to carry out the research to explore the gap between theory and practice on EFL pre-service programme in Nepal.

The main purpose of the study is to explore teacher educators’ perceptions and practices on EFL pre-service programme in Nepal. This study has addressed the following research questions:
1. How do the teacher educators perceive the EFL pre-service programme in Nepal?
2. How do they practice implementing the acquired knowledge and skills of pre-service teacher education courses in the real field?

Literature Review

Under this heading, I conceptualize pre-service programme, then, I discuss the issues in pre-service programme and finally justify the need of pre-service programme in Nepal.

Conceptualizing Pre-service Programme

Pre-service programmes are those which provide adequate content and methodological knowledge and skills to the prospective teachers before they enter in the field of teaching. They get professional knowledge which serves them as the foundation for teaching. The early teaching experiences of pre-service teachers have a positive impact on their professional development as teachers to build grounded theories about how to teach. It helps shape their understanding of practicum experiences themselves as teachers and achieve understanding on common concerns and discoveries. Collaborative journaling, ethnographic style interviewing, group discussion and keeping reflective journal contribute to their understanding of pre-service programme.

The formal beginning of pre service teacher training in Nepal dates back to 1956 with the establishment of College of Education for primary and secondary school teachers (Panta, 2006). The College of Education ran Proficiency and Bachelor of education programme; both consisting of two and four years of duration part of which was allotted for practice teaching. In this respect, Mergler and Spooner-Lane (2012) state that pre-service teacher education programmes aim to prepare graduates to become qualified teachers equipped with practical practices that will serve to meet the increasing demands associated with the teaching process.

Pre-service teacher programmes are conducted by different universities such as Tribhuvan University (TU), Kathmand University (KU), Purwanchal University (PU) and Nepal Sanskrit University (NSU), Mid-western University and Far-western University. Tribhuvan University, being the largest among all is producing a large number of teacher educators every year. These programmes are of four to six years duration. Faculty of Education (FOE) at Tribhuvan University has produced thousands of graduates but a research report produced by the Faculty of Education itself confesses, “There is no evidence to be assured that FOE campuses have the institutional capacity to provide high quality teacher education that the education system of the country requires” (FOE 1998 in Bista, 2002, p.10). The curriculum is effectively prepared but it does not allocate enough room for the practical aspects.

Teachers are more theory oriented so transfer of learning is almost negligible. The curriculum “gives the impression that it is a theoretical training programme” (MOES, 2006, p. 15). Similarly, teachers can speak a lot about group work, pair work or the classroom dynamics but it is hardly practiced in the real classroom situations. Moreover, there are no monitoring, supervising and the follow up programmes. Feedback for instance is very hardly given in time since there is supervision from neither trainers nor the supervisors or the head teachers. The reason behind this partly may be not having knowledge of ELT to the supervisors as they are from non ELT background or mostly it is due to their carelessness.

Issues in Pre-service Programme in Nepal

The ultimate goal of pre-service programme is to transfer theoretical knowledge and skills what the pre-service teachers have learnt to a variety of real classroom situations. However, transferring knowledge is not easy and it may not take place at once. Learners need to take knowledge that they have learnt in a classroom and apply it in new contexts where they teach. Teacher educator’s job is to guide and direct students, providing feedback and correction on their work. Learning to teach is a social, contextual,
dynamic and cognitive process. Pre-service programme helps student teachers perform better and cope with new challenges and need of changing world of 21st century in the classroom practice so that student will have improved performance. ELT courses and training of teachers in Nepal started in 1971 with the implementation of National Education System Plan (NESP), when the Institute of Education of Tribhuvan University initiated B.Ed. programme in English Education as Awasthi (2011) asserted “even after so many years, there is still a dire need of trained and efficient English teachers in Nepal” (p. 22).

I believe a trained teacher performs better in class and helps students do better in the examination. This may not be true in many of the teacher training programmes not only in case of Nepal but also in a developed country. Here is an example of the US where Jacob and Lefgren (2004) write, “Despite the importance of teacher training in most school districts, there is surprisingly little evidence on the effect of teacher training on student achievement” (p. 52). The trainers do not seem to have been sincere in supervising their students during practicum. A small study carried out by FOE (2003) shows that the teachers who are trained from pre-service programme of the university have not been able to show positive changes in classroom teaching.

This situation presents that there is some problem in the pre-service training programmes organized by the universities. The training programmes are rather rituals (FOE, 2003). The pre-service teacher education programmes which are based on the university system and higher education have been criticized on the ground that they have not been able to essentially capture the actual working conditions of the teachers in schools and campuses. Application of training skills in classroom practice is another issue in the existing teacher training programs. One of the reasons could be that “the existing modes of teacher training are lecture dominated and classroom centered” (CHIRAG, 1995). These documents present that the training has not been translated in the classroom behavior.

The Need of Pre-service Programme in Nepal

The theory and practice of pre-service teacher education are experiencing a shift towards the new paradigm, with its emphasis on globalization, localization and individualization, contextualized, multiple intelligences and life-long professional learning in the process of teacher development. In facing up to challenges and impacts of globalization, high technology, economic transformation, international competition and local development in the new century, teacher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region have made numerous educational reforms (Cheng, 2005). Pre-service teacher education programme is designed to teach the graduates who want to engage in teaching learning process after completing the course. In this regard, Freeman (2001) states teacher education is the sum of experiences and activities through which individuals get support to be teachers and guarantee them to develop all the skills required to become trained and professional teachers.

The pre-service training programme is significant as it provides student teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge and skills to start their career. However, they are not adequate for their lifelong career as the new ideas and concepts are being introduced and, learners’ needs and wants go on changing along with time and economic, social and technological change, without change, the profession will be monotonous. So, teacher development is the process of becoming the best kind of teacher that one can be (as cited in Gnawali, 2008, p.36). Therefore, pre-service programme is the foundation of teacher development even if it is not enough until it is updated and refreshed by in-service training regularly.

Becoming a teacher is really a demanding and challenging experience that involves learning how to survive and how to cope with the complex world of the classroom. Employing their practical knowledge and thinking on their feet, teachers learn to handle everyday affairs. Gaining experience means learning what to look for and how to respond to what they find. Responding to various situations and handling them away, teachers finally develop their own ‘theory of action’: the theory that intuitively and implicitly guides teachers’ behaviour. However, when the curriculum changes and new textbooks are prescribed, and through these changes the new concept in language teaching and learning gets introduced teachers may feel threatened. Teachers face changes not only in curriculum but also in the social, economic, technological and ideological spheres (as cited in Gnawali, 2004, p.33). Then they are compelled to leave the comfort zone.

Methodology

This study was carried out using a qualitative research method to explore teacher educators’ perceptions on EFL pre-service programme in Nepal. The participants were four EFL teacher educators having at least five years’ teaching experience. Two of them were from a constituent campus and the other two were from an affiliated campus of Tribhuvan University (TU) who are engaged in the professions after passing M.Ed. programme of TU. They were ready to share their perception on pre-service programme. I selected the participants using purposive sampling procedures to get in touch with people who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) to get the adequate information. I collected the data through semi-structured interview and open-ended questions from them. The collected data were coded, categorized under different themes through qualitative techniques. These codes were organized around research questions. To maintain ethical considerations, the identities of the participants were masked using
pseudonyms and the data were analyzed and interpreted descriptively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore teacher educators’ perceptions on EFL pre-service programme in Nepal. The study is qualitative in nature. Therefore, data obtained from the participants were analyzed and interpreted descriptively. The major analysis and interpretation of the data are discussed under the following seven headings:

Effectiveness of Pre-service Programme

Pre-service programme prepares prospective teachers to enter into profession. They learn approaches, methods, and techniques to teach content in the class. They develop knowledge and skill to deal with real teaching. The study reveals that pre-service programme, for example practicum, maximizes learning opportunities of the pre-service teachers. Focusing the effectiveness of pre-service programme, one of the teacher educators, a participant P 2 asserted, “In my view, the existing Four Year B.Ed. and M.Ed. semester programmes run by TU are effective as they produce qualified and trained teachers for education sectors and there is balance between theory and practice”. P2 claims that current four Year B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes run by TU produce qualified and trained teachers for education sectors. There is good balance between the theory and practice in the courses.

Similarly, another participant P1 had the similar experience who said, “The enrollment number of students in B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes is ascending. There is sufficient subject matter in the courses which assists the teachers to update with new teaching techniques on their part”. He claims that students’ attraction is high in B.Ed. and M.Ed. programme. When they complete their study, they get job in educational institutions easily as they are competent in subject matter. In this regard, another teacher educator, a participant P3 put similar view, “Pre-service teacher education programme is prerequisite for professional development because it is designed to educate and train the student teachers formally to enter into the teaching field”. Thus, P3’s perception of teacher education programme is positive as she believes it is mandatory for entering in teaching career and licensing in teacher education. It is being popular among the students. In this context, another participant P4 said, “The student teachers learn all about teaching activities, new teaching methods and techniques give them ideas for effective teaching when they enter into this profession”. This illustration highlights that the student teachers learn different teaching and techniques help them for effective teaching when they enter into this profession in real classrooms and get the real experience of teaching and developing language skills.

Thus, the aforementioned discussion of the participants reveals their positive perception on the effectiveness of pre-service programme. The increased number of students in B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes shows its popularity. Pre-service teacher education programmes aim to prepare graduates to become qualified teachers equipped with practical practices that will serve to meet the increasing demands associated with the teaching process. (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012) These courses produce skilled and trained teachers with academic excellence needed for educational field so they can get jobs easily at private, public and community schools and campuses.

Implementation of Curriculum

Curriculum and course of study is designed on the basis of international standard but there lies problems in its effective implementation. The existing curriculum of semester system of post graduate requires practical skills of ICT. In this vein, P1 said, “The course of pre service programme is useful, contextual and need-based which prescribes the required resources but they are not easily available in book stalls”. Thus, the P1 claimed that pre-service teacher education programme provides pedagogical skill along with content knowledge. However, resources are not easily available in the market. Similarly, another participant P2 also had the similar experience. He said, “It provides methodological skill and theoretical knowledge to implement it in the classroom. However, it lacks some practical applications”. The main issue is of availability of resources which affects its implementation for professional growth of teachers. Regarding the implementation of curriculum, P3 put her similar view in the following ways: “The training seems to be merely a formal ritual rather than being implemented for teacher development”. Almost all participants expressed similar views that the course of pre-service programme lacks some practical applications as the curriculum does not allocate enough room for the practical aspects. So, teachers are more theory oriented and the transfer of learning is almost negligible. Their view is harmony with (MOES, 2006) “the curriculum gives the impression that it is a theoretical training programme” (p. 15). It requires a specialized knowledge base obtained through both academic and practical experience, and it is a field of work where membership is based on entry requirement and standards. The view of participants is harmony with what MacKey and Gass (2005) showed the situations for implementing curriculum do not support the goals of curriculum that is curriculum designer made curriculum implementation process quite complicated and difficult as it was largely affected by physical, social, cultural and political situations where ELT curriculum was implemented.

Gap between Theory and Practice

All the participants reported pre-service course of Tribhuvan University is more theory-based rather
practice as it provides content-based teaching. Teachers are familiar with pair work and group work but most of them do not practice them while teaching. Instead, they use the lecture method most of the time. As stated by P4, an English teacher, teaching in M.Ed. semester system expressed his view, “The sequence, scope, time allocated to the contents are well prepared considering the need of the present students who want to begin their career as teachers with this programme, however, the problem lies in implementation level”. P4’s experience reveals that the contents of teacher education are well-prepared but it is not being implemented in real classrooms. His view is supported by the study of Akcan (2016) who explored similar findings that pre-service teacher education programme provided novice teachers with a good foundation in English language teaching but theory and practice was not integrated in the programme. In Nepalese context too, both student teachers and teacher educators do not take it seriously although it provides them with the chances to apply theory into practice. Their views are justified by Adey and Hewitt (2004) who rightly state teacher training and professional development programmes which depend on knowledge transmission models may not be effective in bringing about the desired change.

Similarly, in this context, P1 said, “I believe that the contents of EFL pre-service courses are theoretically appropriate but they lack some practical applications” P1 argues that the course of pre-service programme is more theoretical rather practical. In this line, P2’s respond is different from P1. He said, “EFL pre-service programme is satisfactory for developing teacher educators because it provides theoretical knowledge and professional skills to teach in the classroom and qualified human resources”. The expression presents the positive perception of P2 about EFL pre-service programme in Nepal.

The above views of participants reveal that the course is supportive and satisfactory for developing teacher educators with sufficient content and professional skills to teach in the classroom. He believes that the manpower of this programme can compete in competitive market. Pre-service teachers progress through their degree, they are expected to link a university based theory to school based practice through practicum (Tuli, 2009) which helps them to transform theory into practice.

Efficacy of the Assessment System

The evaluation system is exam oriented so both teachers and learners teach and learn English from examination point of view. The learners learn just to pass the exam but not to gain practical knowledge and skills in English. In that respect, one of the participants P1s, teaching in M.Ed. programme claimed, “I am satisfied with the assessment processes of M. Ed courses and the classroom practices. There are both internal as well as external evaluation systems”. As P1 shared his experience of M.Ed. programme, in almost all subjects, there is both formative and summative evaluation so his view supported that students learn practical skill effectively in the existing M. Ed. that shared his experience. In this context, P2 had similar experience who stated, “As the courses require the engagement of the students in both types of tests in M.Ed. so there is a good relationship between teachers and students but there is only summative evaluation in B.Ed”. The statement made by P2 clearly indicates M.Ed. programme is effective as the students learn the skill of presentation as there is formative assessment and two way communication in the classroom.

The participants reported that testing system of pre-service programme for instance; B. Ed. is ineffective and does not seem to motivate the learners for learning English naturally as there is summative system of evaluation which is conducted at the end of the academic year whereas the assessment system of M.Ed. semester system is effective as it is formative.

Supervision and Monitoring

Majority of the teacher educators reported that pre-service programme cannot address and meet the real needs of learners. The process of need assessment and demand collection is not effective. The classrooms are not equipped with appropriate facilities such as projector, audio visual aids, training materials etc. to practice specific skills. Without strict follow up and monitoring mechanism on teachers’ teaching and students’ learning, pre-service programme cannot be effective. The authorities of the government neither make strict policy to reform the education system regularly nor, monitor and supervise the teachers for effective implementation of their knowledge in the institutions where they have been teaching.

In this regard, P3 asserted, “In the existing pre-service programme, student teachers learn designing lesson plan and materials for micro-teaching, peer teaching not only in practicum, but also in the class as a subject”. Her experience reveals that in the existing pre-service programme, student teachers learn many things related to practicum as a subject before they participate in practicum. However, P1 expressed the contrary view that “Practicum is done just for formality by administration, teachers and even by the students although there are strict rules and regulations, there is no effective implementation”. His view indicated that practicum is not implemented properly. In this context, P2 said, “There is no effective mechanism of regular and close follow-up support and supervision to give appropriate and timely feedback”. The statement reflects the need of effective mechanism of regular and close follow-up support. In this line, P4 viewed, “It is difficult to use student centred methods in crowded classes and there is no collaborative culture among teachers”. P4’s experience reveals that teachers are unable to use student centered methods and techniques
due to overcrowded classrooms. Moreover, there is no collaborative culture among teachers to share ideas. This raises questions about the efficiency of the programme.

The above views reveal the fact that there is no effective mechanism of regular and close follow-up support and supervision. Pre-service programme in Nepal does not have the authentic research and survey. We are making policy following the policy of foreigners. It is therefore, we are unable to stand on our own feet and satisfy the desires and needs of our learners. There is no provision of knowing how the trainees are doing in school after the training period is over (NCED, 1998). It reveals that without making strict policy for effective implementation of training knowledge with the provision of supervision and monitoring knowing how effectively the teachers are working in their working place, reform in the education system is like the nightmare. Therefore, monitoring and follow-up is another issue that prevails in pre-service teacher training programmes.

Accessibility of Resources to Students

Student teachers even do not have the access of minimum basic resources such as textbooks, teaching aids, CD, cassettes, multimedia etc. in the classroom to teach language effectively and purposefully. They do not read new and authentic materials to update their knowledge and awareness. In this context, P3 elaborates her views as; “A good way of learning is to read ELT magazine, journal or newsletters which offer practical tips and ideas to the students”. Her experience shows that reading ELT magazines, Journal or newsletters offer practical information to the students. However, P2 argued, “The prescribed textbooks seem to be adequate and sufficient to provide knowledge to enable them to communicate, however, majority of the students do not have the access of them”. In spite of adequate and sufficient printed materials majority of the students do not have the access of them.

The above evidences of the participants clearly indicated that students of pre-service programme do not read supplementary materials and there is no accessibility of adequate and sufficient resources to them to have knowledge, skills and practical ideas.

Students’ Participation and Motivation

Due to large number of students in the class, the techniques, like interaction, report presentation, group discussion, sharing from the students etc have not been employed in B. Ed. however, in the case of M.Ed. semester system, due to the small number of students, the techniques like group discussion, slide show, preparing report and presentation have been used by student teachers in some extent. In this line, a female teacher P3 expressed, “Students’ participation and motivation is high in M.Ed. programme as they are given opportunities to develop skills through observing their teacher, creating lesson plans, teaching lessons and experiential learning about classroom management but it is not in B.Ed.”. Her view indicates that students’ participation is high in M.Ed. as they are motivated in this programme whereas there is still lack of student participation in pre-service programme of B.Ed. so this programme is being less effective as learners are less motivated. The above expression has been true for the entire four participants as they agreed to it.

Effectiveness of class room instruction depends on students’ motivation. In response to the question on motivation, the teachers from the entire sample campuses had similar perception. The students in semester are more motivated than the students of annual system due to teaching techniques. Teachers adopted student centered methods like class assignment, class activities such as slide show, group discussion etc in the semester system. Therefore, students’ participation is high due to student centered methods in semester system.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study reveals that majority of the teacher educators involved in the study were found to have positive perception on EFL pre-service programme as it provides content-based and methodological knowledge to the pre-service teachers. However, almost all the participants reported that theory and practice are not integrated properly as the existing summative testing system of B.Ed. does not seem to motivate the learners for learning English naturally. The courses seem to be inadequate to address practical aspects of techno-based and learner-centered pedagogies to make them competent and proficient to implement the courses in practice. Therefore, they are not found to have the required practical skills as they are expected since they cannot address and meet the real needs of the learners. However, teacher educators teaching in M.Ed. semester programme claim these courses can produce skilled and trained teachers with academic excellence needed for educational field. However, they perceived that the existing EFL pre-service programmes are more theoretical than practical.

The study has some practical implications for classroom instruction. The examination system of pre-service programme needs to be revised and modified by practicing formative assessment in bachelor level as well. For this, there need to be provision of subject specific teacher mentors or supervisors to assist them grow up professionally. The teachers need to update and shift their traditional teaching pedagogies to learner-centered and techno-based pedagogies. Furthermore, courses of pre-service programmes need to be practical-based rather theoretical and they should be reformed and revised in order to improve overall quality of education and teacher educators should have positive perspectives towards student centered techniques. Like-wise, monitoring and follow-up in pre-
service teacher training programmes need to be implemented effectively. They should focus on the local constraints rather imaginary ideal situation in order to minimize the gaps between the theories and practice and provide realistic perception of the language teaching methods.

REFERENCES