

CHAPTER 11: THE WAY TO THE CLASSROOM: EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

There is considerable research evidence to support the central role of school-based teaching practice in the professional development of pre-service teachers. By engaging in practical teaching activities in real classrooms, they are able to apply the theoretical knowledge and skills acquired in EFL teacher education programs. Extensive and well-supported student teaching experiences are key to a high quality EFL teacher education program at Nizhyn Gogol State University in Ukraine. The university has adopted the Core Curriculum for English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology at Bachelor's Level in 2020, according to which student teachers undertake school practice throughout the methodology course.

The present paper focuses on the three stages of school practice that EFL pre-service teachers go through on their way to the profession: guided observation, teacher assistantship and observed teaching. The role, organization and challenges of each stage are examined. Principles underlying the practice model are discussed.

Keywords: EFL teacher education, school-based teaching practice, student teaching experiences, guided observation, teacher assistantship, observed teaching

1. Introduction

School-based experience is an integral part of any teacher preparation program and is considered crucial for pre-service teachers' learning and development as it allows application theory into practice and helps to shape student teachers' professional competences and identity (Li et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2020). The exceptional role and importance of school-based teaching practicum for pre-service teachers' professional development is determined by extensive attention devoted to this aspect of EFL teacher preparation programs. A number of studies within EFL teacher education in a variety of national contexts focus on practicum looking into the effect of methodology courses and real teaching practice on student teachers' concerns about teaching (Yalcin Arslan & Ilin, 2018); the opinions of pre-service EFL teachers about

teaching practicum and self-evaluation of their performance (Can & Baştürk, 2018); the beliefs of ELT teacher-trainees about micro-teaching practices (Sarıçoban, 2016); teaching difficulties EFL students face and ways to overcome them during practicum (Marav, 2022; Riesky, 2013); complexity, dynamism and self-organization of pre-service EFL teachers' practicum experiences (Li et al., 2023); the impact of reflective journals on self-efficacy beliefs of pre-service English language teachers (Tavil, 2014); EFL student teachers' practicum expectations, attitudes and attainments (Ulum, 2020; Kazaz & Alagözlü, 2020); the impact of teaching practicum during COVID-19 on pre-service English language teachers' professional development and their views on teaching profession (Choi & Park, 2022; Reyes, 2023); the way practicum changes self-efficacy beliefs of English language teachers (Atay, 2007; Terzi, 2022), etc.

Li (2023) concludes that the practice of learning to teach is a multi-faceted process of 'situated interactions within the complex learning systems' between institutions, individuals, and social discourses. Several issues are reported to prevent school-based teaching experiences from being effective among which is a lack of cooperation between universities and schools often caused by inconsistency between theory-based teaching and practice-oriented teacher learning and results in an inappropriate preparation of EFL student teachers for classroom teaching when it comes to practicum (Li et al., 2023; Valencia et al, 2009). Another issue is related to the quality of supervision, guidance, and support of student teachers (Arshavskaya, 2016; Bailey, 2009; Farrel, 2008). Both university supervisors and school-based mentors are expected to equip EFL student teachers with strategies and tools to cope with the challenges they can encounter during their school experience as well as help them reflect on what they have learned and done in practice. Riesky (2013) looked into the teaching difficulties EFL student teachers face during the practicum and categorized them into three main types: student-related (e.g., students' low competence, lack of motivation, classroom management issues, etc.), self-related (e.g., lack of teaching strategies and ability to manage the class and resources, etc.) and supervising teacher-related (lack of guidance, imposing materials, etc.). The role of the EFL teacher education program is to minimize the above-mentioned difficulties and prepare prospective teachers for practical teaching activities in real classrooms.

Extensive and well-supported student teaching experiences are key to a high-quality EFL teacher education program at Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University (NMGSU) in Ukraine. The university has adopted the Core Curriculum for English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology at the Bachelor's Level (Bevz et al., 2020), according to which student teachers

undertake school practice throughout the methodology course which lasts three years. Carefully phased school experience aims to help student teachers enter the reality of the classroom first as observers (semesters 3 and 4), next as teaching assistants (semesters 5, 6, and 7), and finally as practicing teachers responsible for full-length lessons (semester 8). At each of these stages, there is a strong link between the ELT methodology course and school experience.

2. Guided Observation

Early field experiences have become an important element in almost all teacher education programs around the world, the aim of which is to prepare student teachers for their culminating teaching experience. This type of practicum provides student teachers with excellent field-based opportunities in which they apply theoretical concepts learned in their methodology courses at the university to classroom settings, observe the learners and a school teacher, and assist or even conduct research.

There is no denying that early field experiences play a crucial role in the preparation of student teachers whereas school teachers or - as they are called - mentors serve as models who guide them in the application of theory and instructional approaches introduced in university methodology courses. Freeman and Johnson (1998) suggest that teacher preparation should inevitably include experienced teachers as mentors. The findings of their research show that both pre-service and in-service teachers benefit from each other's classes and they can use the opportunity of being observed to become more aware of their teaching. Mentors' roles are the following: helping apprentices foster their professional skills, enhancing their grasp of subject matter, locating and acquiring resources, acknowledging and acting on the mentees' degrees of ability and willingness to perform, stimulating the mentees' creative and critical thinking, encouraging them to take informed risks, and helping them build the capacity to make perceptive decisions and take appropriate actions (Arnold, 2006; Boreen et al., 2009; Daresh, 2002; Portner, 2008). In collaboration with university teachers and mentors, the student teachers feel their level of readiness to begin their career in education first in student teaching, and finally in their classroom.

One more issue to raise is the transition in examining teacher students and their expectations of universities. Martin (2010) emphasizes that education systems do not foster collaboration between secondary schools and tertiary studies. However, the scholar identifies high school teachers as those who may have the most influence over the development of students' tertiary expectations. The importance of acknowledging this transitional space in which pre-service teachers find themselves is mandatory. A conscious awareness of transferring what a learner

has seen from one context to the other, as Lunsmann et al. (2019) have noted, is necessary to assist student teachers to define and manage the transition from pre-service to full-time teacher.

In teacher education, classroom observation is regarded as an effective teaching means (Blackmore, 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004) as it enables observers to identify the nature of teacher behaviour, analyse how classroom activities are structured, and watch the way the teacher and students interact. The literature reveals two methods of observing teaching by students within early field experience (Anderson et al., 2005). In the unguided approach, pre-service teachers have little or even no direction in what to observe while in the guided approach, pre-service teachers observe preidentified types of teacher and learners' behaviors. These two categories are continuous rather than discrete. Guided observation has advantages and disadvantages. Guided observation allows pre-service teachers to identify and focus on a single aspect of teaching. When pre-service teachers view classrooms through this lens, it provides them opportunities to draw conclusions that result in improved teaching practices. Yet, in viewing classrooms through a single lens, pre-service teachers may not see the larger context which can be a disadvantage (Anderson et al., 2005).

The EFL teacher education program at Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University typically includes early field experiences (guided observation and teacher assistantship) before final full-time student teaching (observed teaching) (Table 1).

Table 1. Structure of school experience (Bevz et al., 2020)

Semester	Module	School Experience	
		Stage	Frequency
3	1 Understanding Learners and Learning	Guided Observation	Once a fortnight
4	2 Preparing to Teach 1	Guided Observation	Once a fortnight
5	3 Preparing to Teach 2	Teacher Assistantship	Once a week
6	4 Preparing to Teach 3	Teacher Assistantship	Once a week

7	5 Specialised Dimensions	Teacher Assistantship	Once a week
8	6 Professional Development	Observed Teaching	Six weeks full-time

Guided observation practice takes place in Semesters 3 and 4 once a fortnight (one full day or at least four class hours) throughout Year 2. A regular semester is 16 weeks and pre-service teachers have to attend school 8 times per semester, 16 times per year. Each pre-service teacher is assigned to a school mentor with whom they are in close cooperation. One mentor can be in charge of one to five mentees and their cooperation is developmental in nature lasting for three years and going through the stages of observation, teaching assistantship, and finally full-time supervised teaching practice.

The purpose of observation is to enable pre-service teachers to recognize the theory learned in their methodology course working in practice. This is achieved by exposing them to a wide range of teaching and learning experiences. It is important to note that the goal is not to rate or assess the teaching performance of a mentor. The role of a mentor or cooperating teacher encompasses various responsibilities. These responsibilities include but are not limited to, being observed while teaching primary and secondary school learners, guiding pre-service teachers during their observation experiences, and engaging in discussions about lesson- or observation-related issues. Additionally, at the beginning of the semester, school mentors need to meet with university supervisors to establish agreements on the list of students and their timetables. They should also become familiar with the students assigned to them for observation purposes and review observation tasks in advance. Furthermore, to facilitate a comprehensive classroom observation and ensure effective noticing practices, student teachers must become acquainted with the learners in the grade they intend to observe. This includes understanding their characteristics and needs, as well as their daily timetable, break and lunch times. Student teachers should also gain insights into the regular learning processes at the school, including awareness of any emergency measures implemented by the school administration and mentors.

Within a framework, classroom observation is regarded as a good way to refine teacher professional development by covering a wide range of skills and competencies in a variety of knowledge areas (see Table 2).

Table 2. Focus on guided observation for semesters 3 and 4 (Bevz et al., 2020)

Semester	Module	Unit	Focus of observation
3	1 Understanding Learners and Learning	1.1. Psychological Factors in Language Learning	• Learner types • Motivational strategies • Catering for different learning styles
		1.2. Second Language Acquisition (SLA)	• Opportunities for SLA • SLA boosting activities
		1.3. Developing Learner Autonomy	• Learner in focus • Teacher in focus
4	2 Preparing to Teach 1	2.1. Principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	• Features of CLT • Characteristics of a communicative task
		2.2. Teaching Grammar in Context	• Aspects of teaching grammar
		2.3. Teaching Vocabulary in Context	• Possible difficulties with vocabulary • Techniques for presenting vocabulary
		2.4. Classroom Management	• Seating arrangements for interaction • Interaction • Using the board • Teacher talk • Aspects of classroom management

To foster theory-practice connections once a fortnight for semesters 3 and 4, the students are given compulsory observation tasks based on the topics covered in the module according to the curriculum (Bevz et al., 2020). Each observation task within a module consists of two components: first, the so-called noticing task which focuses on the topic of the module and requires students to observe a lesson or a series of lessons and notice a particular aspect of teaching or learning; second, the observation summary or reflection which is based on what student teachers have learned about an aspect of teaching or learning from this observation and what implications for their professional development they envision (see Table 3). After each observation day at school, they submit a written report documenting their observations. Observation tasks during Modules 1 to 5 feed into continuous assessment.

Table 3. Task focus: Catering for different learning styles

Observe how the teacher caters to different learning styles during several lessons. Tick (✓) the instances that you observe. Make notes if appropriate.

Learning Styles	Techniques the teacher uses	✓	Notes
Visual	Charts, graphs, diagrams, and flow charts		
	Flashcards		
	Pictures and graphics		
	Maps		
	Silent reading		
	Written instructions		
	Videos		
	Other (please specify)		
Auditory	Discussion, dialogue, debate		
	Memorisation techniques		
	Reading aloud		
	Listening to recordings		
	Communication in pairs and groups		
	Other (please specify)		
Kinesthetic	Games		
	Role plays		
	Body language/gestures		
	Mime		
	Drama		
	Memorizing while moving		
	Other (please specify)		

Observation summary

What have you learned from this observation? To what extent did the observed techniques seem to help learners to learn?

Regarding the observation summary, it can play a pivotal role in fostering students' observational and noticing skills throughout the whole course of methodology. Each observation task undergoes assessment by the university instructor, who provides responsive feedback. This feedback not only aids in refining their comprehension of teaching methods but also facilitates a more profound understanding of learners, learning, and teaching practices. Mentees are advised to compile a list of challenges or unique learning contexts encountered during guided observation experiences. These situations are subsequently deliberated within student groups in methodology classes. Group-based activities encourage students to share their observations, collectively brainstorm, and formulate effective strategies. Collaborative engagement enhances their ability to derive optimal solutions or recommendations. Student reflective feedback underscores a prevalent issue though – often, observation summaries lack thoroughness and structured reflection from pre-service teachers. It is often difficult for them to draw connections between what has been observed on the topic in focus and their learning and constructing their knowledge about teaching and learning. Frequently, their reflections merely encompass aspects they found favorable or unfavorable in the observed class. This discrepancy emphasizes the imperative for them to cultivate an encompassing reflective approach as they develop their professional identity. This responsibility partially rests with the university supervisors who gradually help pre-service teachers master the art of reflection and become reflective practitioners supervising and aiding not only guided observation but also guided reflection. Pre-service teachers' reflections become more specified and professional within each stage of their professional development as they notice much more teacher-learner interaction during the teaching and learning process.

Building upon the aforementioned considerations, the practice of guided observation, which involves various aspects and educators, is intrinsically geared towards affording student teachers the chance to delve into the teaching profession during the early stages of their academic journey. This practice enables them to assume the role of an observer within a classroom, viewing it through the lens of a teacher. It also entails interactions with the

classroom teacher to engage in dialogues concerning classroom-related matters. Furthermore, it involves the pivotal step of reflecting upon observed lessons in alignment with assigned observation tasks.

3. Teacher Assistantship

In Semester 5 students start their teacher assistantship practice during which they act as teacher assistants immersing in real teaching though in a limited way and gaining the necessary professional development. This approach supports Bolitho's (2002) idea that teaching is a 'doing' profession where choices are guided by thinking rather than being strictly dictated by theoretical inputs on pre-service courses and where teachers' theories of teaching are naturally developed from years of practice and make it possible to find a balance between theory and practice.

The learning experience of a teacher assistantship is an important strategy tool to enhance professional preparation and significantly contributes to all aspects of future teachers' education. This type of practical preparation is structured around the needs of the curriculum and students' learning outcomes. They can still observe experienced teachers conducting lessons, but the focus is gradually shifting towards teaching: planning lessons together with their school mentors and teaching small parts of lessons, for example, an activity from the lesson plan. At the beginning these lesson fragments can be as short as five minutes, gradually increasing to 20 minutes by the end of this stage in Semester 7. Besides, students get acquainted with school policies and requirements and may also be engaged in some other aspects of classroom work (preparing handouts, supplementing activities to those in the coursebook, checking attendance, marking homework, etc.) and in school life (extracurricular activities, conferences, meetings, etc.). This practice lasts till semester 7, and students spend one day per 2 weeks (and later per week) at schools.

Teacher assistantship practice is closely oriented to the methodology course. The focus of this stage is on such themes as Teaching Language Skills, Planning Teaching, Working with Materials, Error Analysis and Dealing with Errors, Testing and Assessment, Teaching Young Learners, Catering for Special Educational Needs, Developing Intercultural Competence, Classroom Action Research, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Learning and Teaching English. By the end of this stage, students are supposed to be able to understand the principles of designing effective lesson plans, get experience in planning fragments of lessons in the specific teaching context, select and evaluate materials and resources for the classroom, take into account factors that influence learner behaviour, such as social and family

factors, abilities, special needs and learning styles, cater for individual needs in the planning and conduct of fragments of lessons, provide feedback on learner participation, manage activities accurately and fluently in English as the language of the classroom, give clear instructions, have criteria for using L1 and L2 appropriately in the lesson, be familiar with and understand the specific application of different forms of assessment, use an assessment scale and grade learners' work in the four skills and pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, write simple test exercises, analyse errors and provide feedback on errors to learners, use reflective practices, observe lessons and learn from other teachers.

Successful implementation of teacher assistantship practice requires keeping to the procedure. At the beginning of each theme, students should be provided with the tasks for teacher assistantship and informed about the time and place of their teaching and the way they can get help and advice in lesson planning. Students' fragments of lessons must be observed by the school-based mentor, the latter understanding the importance of non-judgmental and supportive feedback and showing empathy.

After teaching a fragment of a lesson and discussing it with the mentor, students are required to complete a post-teaching reflection task (see Table 4). In this task, students give essential information about the teaching context and their feelings before their teaching and immediately after it, describe what went well in that part of the lesson, what teaching experience they gained, how the discussion with the mentor contributed to their professional development, what aspects of their teaching they should pay attention to next time they plan and conduct their parts of lessons. This form, a copy of the lesson plan, and any handouts or materials should be kept in their School Experience files as evidence of their teaching endeavours. These materials may be useful to them in doing their assignments later, they may become the basis for discussions of students' classroom experience with their university teachers when they return to their methodology classes.

Table 4. Post-teaching reflection task

This form is for you to complete after teaching a part of a lesson and after you have discussed the lesson with your mentor.

Your name		Your mentor	
Date of class		Class name	
Time of class		No. of learners	
Topic			
1. How did you feel before you taught?			
2. How did you feel immediately after your teaching?			
3. What went well in your part of the lesson?			
4. What did you learn from this short teaching experience?			
5. What did you learn from your discussions with your mentor?			
6. What aspects of your teaching will you focus on next time you teach?			

Studies on this type of teacher practice seem to be scarce and this model can be considered innovative. Further, the implementation of this model of practice at Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University in Ukraine is observed to give positive results. To ensure it, several conditions should be met. Namely, in teacher assistantship practice, school mentors need specific preparation for this kind of professional activity; otherwise, the interaction between the preservice teachers and school teachers is likely to be influenced by the latter's professional experiences; collaboration of university teachers, school mentors, and student teachers should be provided; it is beneficial if special relationship is built between school teachers and student trainees.

4. Observed Teaching

Observed teaching is the final phase of the pre-service EFL teachers' school experience continuum taking place in semester 8. A total of 9 credits (270 hours) is allocated to this practicum which means student teachers spend 6 weeks at schools having work-related experience under the supervision of school-based mentors and University supervisors. EFL

student teachers are expected to participate in everyday school life and to conduct all English lessons in the assigned primary and secondary classes 8 of which are assessed (6 by the school-based mentor and 2 by the university supervisor). Assessment criteria are shared and explained to student teachers before the practicum in ELT Methodology classes as well as in orientation sessions on day one of observed teaching practice.

Observed teaching requires structured practice in a teaching context where student teachers apply new knowledge, solve challenging tasks, reflect on their teaching, and demonstrate an investigative approach to teaching practice. Prospective teachers are expected to integrate teaching principles and practices that are based on language acquisition research including principles of planning interactive lessons and activities (curricular and extra-curricular, on- and off-line); identify learner needs and shape instruction accordingly, assess achievement of learner outcomes. This observed teaching experience aims to inform pre-service teachers' further professional development.

The objectives for the observed teaching practicum are aligned with the program outcomes. Upon successful completion of the practicum, student teachers will:

- demonstrate a strong background in the systems, functions, and acquisition of language and apply that knowledge to instruction;
- transfer theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to practice, use best teaching practices, including technology, in the construction of learning;
- connect theory to practice by creating lesson plans to respond to particular learner needs and social contexts;
- choose methods of teaching and develop instruction and assessments to the national curriculum requirements;
- evaluate and adapt materials to specific educational contexts and learner needs;
- reflect on evolving beliefs throughout the practicum to improve teaching and identify their beliefs about language teaching and learning to inform their practice;
- research issues related to educational practice and theory to inform further professional development;
- actively engage in building communities of teachers and learners.

Assessment is cumulative, i.e., each task is assessed in the three domains of the practicum (subject, pedagogical, psychological). Pre-service teachers are required to complete all the tasks listed and get at least 60% to get their credit. Only grades of “3/satisfactory” or better are

acceptable toward graduation. Assessment evaluation criteria and assignment completion guidelines are provided by supervisors at the orientation session before the practicum.

The six-week observed teaching practicum has three stages. Week 1 is dedicated to completing some organizational (preparatory) tasks such as clarifying assignments and consultation hours with supervisors, meeting mentors at schools and discussing further cooperation, observing the assigned classes and mentors teaching, further familiarizing with the school culture and regulations, planning teaching and extra-curricular activities, starting teaching journal, etc. During Weeks 2-4, student teachers plan and teach lessons in the assigned classes according to the timetable, write a reflective report on one of the lessons, conduct extra-curricular activities, make ongoing retrospective field notes in the teaching journal, complete pedagogical analysis of a critical incident in the classroom as well as a psychological profile of a student. In Week 6 student teachers have to finalize and prepare to submit assignments in an agreed format and to get written feedback and marks from school-based mentors.

To get student teachers' feedback on the practicum they are asked to fill out a survey when their observed teaching is over. These surveys reveal most of the problems and difficulties pre-service teachers face while teaching at school, which in turn helps to improve practice-related organization, content, and interactions. In the 2022-2023 academic year, 29 student-teachers volunteered to fill out the form, 96,6% of which (28 out of 29) recognized the value of pre-practice orientation sessions as a reliable source of information about the practicum. 75% of student teachers found assessment criteria fair and clear though a few students reported a lack of guidelines on writing reports. 69% of pre-service teachers reported having difficulties while teaching, including a lack of some EFL methodology skills, psychological issues, and too much workload. Some students found it difficult to teach both primary and secondary school learners at a time. Frequent air raid alerts frustrated most student teachers as they disrupted the flow of the lesson and teachers often could not meet the aims of the lesson having to resort to plan B. Another big challenge for the pre-service EFL teachers was blended learning when they had to shift off- and online lessons. The latter format appeared to be more difficult in terms of managing student engagement in the lesson especially when it came to young learners. In offline learning, 48.3% of student teachers found classroom management the biggest problem while 27.6% found it difficult to apply all the strategies they were taught in methodology classes into practice. 86.7% of pre-service teachers were completely satisfied with their university supervisor's cooperation as they were given all possible support and help. Only 6,9% of students reported a lack of expected mentor-teacher support. This relatively low percentage is because

mentor teachers take on this important role voluntarily fully recognizing their leading role in the framework of teacher training in NMGSU. They start cooperating with pre-service teachers before observing teaching practice and are well aware of the requirements of the EFL teacher preparation program as well as methods, approaches, and strategies student teachers are taught to use in practice.

In general, pre-service teachers reported positive results of their school practice: 69% admit that observed teaching practice met their expectations; 65,5% of participants acknowledge reinforcing necessary skills for future work at school; 55,2% received the opportunity to put into practice knowledge and skills they obtained at university; 51,7 % believe that the practicum proved that they are capable of working as teachers and for 27,6 % the practicum was another argument in favour of their choice of profession. For 31% of student teachers, school practice revealed some gaps in their preparation, which in turn can inform their further professional development. In the survey there are some open-ended questions, for example, *What would improve the quality of your school practice?* About half of the student teachers would like to have a longer period of school-based practice to be able to experiment with different teaching techniques to use them confidently and effectively. Another reason for this necessity is that pre-service teachers need more time to complete their action research which is not assessed within observed teaching practice but the 'intervention' part of which is done while teaching one of the assigned classes.

Another survey is normally carried out to reveal the problems of the practice as seen by the university supervisors and school-based mentors. In the 2022-2023 academic year, these problems included but were not limited to the following list: lack of skill to differentiate instruction in mixed ability classes, especially in groups with SEN learners; lack of flexibility in using different modes of interaction and keeping a balance between teacher and student talking time; doing activities which are not aligned with lesson objectives; lack of communicative tasks; difficulties in giving instructions and managing time in the lesson, etc. Both university tutors and school mentors emphasize the creativity of student teachers and the way they use different learning aids including ICT and work with materials.

All participants engaged in the practice highly value pre- and post-lesson conferences as potent tools for the professional development of student teachers who receive dedicated teaching-related support and encouragement. Pre-service teachers are both anticipated and actively urged to engage in comprehensive discussions regarding their lesson plans with mentors, enabling them to articulate their ideas and occasionally engage in negotiations about

lesson delivery. However, some of the former occasionally disregard this essential communication process or find themselves time-constrained due to last-minute preparations before the lesson. Nonetheless, the post-lesson conference with peers, mentors, and/or university supervisors remains an indispensable requirement. The post-lesson analysis plays a pivotal role in shaping student teachers' perception of their teaching competence and provides invaluable strategies for enhancing their teaching practice. Mentors are anticipated to assist student teachers encouraging them to envision their potential for success. Nevertheless, they frequently find themselves in contradictory positions, being required to guide while also carrying out evaluative responsibilities. In other words, they are tasked with not only offering support but also delivering critical feedback and constructive assessments of the student teachers' teaching capabilities (Hoffman et al, 2015). Previous research suggests that greater educational progress takes place during lesson conferences when mentors permit student teachers to take the lead in determining the topics to be addressed (Futter & Staub, 2017). Consequently, student teachers need to have an open mindset to actively participate in their professional growth by formulating and presenting their own learning needs during lesson conferences.

5. Conclusions

School experience emerges as a vital and foundational component of EFL teacher education at Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University. Being structured and developmental in nature, it allows pre-service teachers to gradually assume greater responsibility on the way to independent teaching and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Student teachers are presented with the invaluable opportunity to learn both *for* and *from* teaching being involved in a dynamic, interactive process that thrives within the classroom first in the role of an observer, next a teacher assistant, and finally a full-time teacher. The classroom environment introduces lots of variables, from diverse student learning needs, styles, and intelligences to the art of communication and engagement, offering prospective teachers the chance to witness and experience the complex interplay of these factors firsthand.

The school experience at NMGSU is built on the following principles underlying the practice model:

- School experience is integrated into an EFL teacher preparation program to bridge theory and practice. This integration is crucial for cultivating flexible and adaptable teachers who can navigate the real challenges of English language instruction in actual classrooms.

- School experience is developmental in nature which allows for gradually increasing student teachers' responsibilities in the classroom, beginning with observing and assisting, then progressing to independently conducting lessons as well as doing action research which can enhance their experiences and expand their perspectives.
- School experience cultivates reflective practice encouraging pre-service teachers to critically analyze classroom techniques, strategies, and approaches to refine them and build a strong foundation for continuous professional development.
- School experience fosters cooperation and collaboration between all stakeholders laying great emphasis on mentoring. School mentors play a leading role in the EFL teacher education program guiding the development of student teachers, highlighting areas for improvement, and evaluating their outcomes. Collaboration between EFL pre-service teachers, their mentors, and university supervisors ensures that the practice aligns with the curriculum, teaching goals, and students' needs.
- School experience is purposeful with clearly defined objectives and expectations for EFL pre-service teachers. This helps them understand what is expected of them and what they should aim to achieve during each phase of practice. Clear objectives doubled with regular constructive feedback, both formative and summative assessments can help inform their progress, build on past experiences, and enhance professional growth.

Student teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes are built over years of studies and school experiences, the latter having a powerful impact on their professional identity growth. Meanwhile, pre-service teachers are supported and guided in an effort to create the knowledge that can constitute their dominant discourses about teaching and being a full-time teacher.

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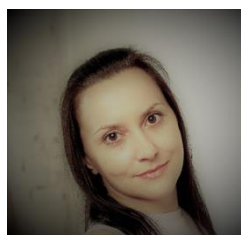
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