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From the Other Side of the Desk: Recent Master’s TESOL Graduates Speak from Community College ESL Classrooms

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Abstract

This investigation focuses on recent graduates of master’s TESOL (MA TESOL) programs, exploring what influenced their successes and challenges as teachers in community college ESL classrooms and what implications this has for their graduate preparation. Based on an online survey, in-person interviews, and a variety of documents, the interaction among influencing factors is explored. These various factors from before, during, and since graduate school are depicted in a descriptive framework. All these factors have been found to contribute to the teachers’ cultural situatedness.

Introduction

In the existing scholarly literature, master’s TESOL (MA TESOL) programs have been studied by eliciting feedback from currently enrolled students and student teachers during their practicum experiences, as if these teachers were decontextualized, free-floating subjects, able to assess their training immediately upon its completion. It is not until after graduation, when the teachers have had an opportunity to field-test their knowledge and skills in their own classrooms, that they can truly assess the effectiveness of their preparation. In this paper, it is argued that to fully understand the effectiveness of master’s TESOL programs for preparing teachers for the community college classroom, one must first understand “the teacher” as one unit in a much broader pedagogical process and extend this vision both backwards and forwards, i.e., back to the subject formation process through which the teacher entered the program and forwards to the social process in which the teacher is continually formed and reformed in the work place (Avery & Walker, 1993; Florez, 1997; Freeman, 1991; Fugate & Amey, 2000; Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Marks, 2007; Polio & Duff, 1994). Therefore, those who examine master’s in TESOL programs cannot simply gather data by asking currently enrolled TESOL students but must elicit systematic feedback from recent graduates who are currently teaching in the community college classroom.

In attempting to resolve the tension between how well prepared recently graduated ESL teachers feel to teach in community college classrooms and how well master’s in TESOL programs purport to prepare them for such work, this research study examines which factors appear to influence native-speaking recent graduates’ perceptions of their preparation for teaching in the community college setting and what the nature and sources of their successes and difficulties are.

1 The acronym MA TESOL will be used throughout this paper because it is perhaps the most common way master’s TESOL programs are referred to in the field.
However, not all the programs that the participants in this study have graduated from use this acronym: two use MAT ESOL and one uses MA TESL.

**Literature Review**

In the following section, a brief review of the relevant bodies of literature is given. For a fuller discussion, see Porter-Szucs (2007). The need for English as a second language (ESL) instructors in community colleges is growing nationwide due to the increasing number of immigrants and to the vital role that community colleges play in their English language education (The American Immigration Law Foundation, 2002; Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Kuo, 1999; Lo, 2001a; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Population Reference Bureau, 2003). Meanwhile, little is known about ESL teachers’ preparation for community colleges. Except for the occasional critique of the preparation of TESOL graduates for a limited number of work settings, such as for overseas institutions (Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey, 1999; Lo, 2001a, 2001b), for intensive English language programs (Perkins, 1997, 1998), and for the public schools (Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 2000; Lopes, 1997), the focus of scholarly discussions in the literature is centered less on the particular setting where graduates of teacher-training programs work and more on the actual TESOL program. Two aspects of the training of ESL teachers have received much of the attention: the curriculum and, in particular, the practicum. Many theorists, researchers, and practitioners have written about how the curriculum could be improved or where its emphasis should lie in order to provide the most useful education to TESOL students (Fradd & Lee, 1997, 1998; Freeman, 1989; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Muchisky & Yates, 2004; Reagan, 1997; Sachs, 1996; Santana-Williamson, 2000; Tedick & Walker, 1995; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). A much-critiqued aspect of the curriculum is the practicum. It is often thought of as the capstone experience, in which student-teachers are expected to apply the theoretical knowledge that they gain during the TESOL program to practice. However, it often fails to live up to this expectation, according to its critics (Greis, 1984; Janopulos, 1991; Johnson, 1992).

In an overwhelming number of these cases, TESOL programs have been examined by utilizing feedback from current students or those who were graduating at the time of the study (as opposed to former students who have completed their studies and were in charge of their own classrooms in a community college setting). This technique, albeit convenient due to ready access to study participants, is of limited value. Current students, or even those who are graduating, are not in a position to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of their training. That can only happen when the teachers have had an opportunity to apply the knowledge that they gained in the TESOL program to their own classrooms. In the literature there is, however, a dearth of information based on feedback gained from TESOL graduates. Even Gaies (1992), the author of one notable exception, who reported on a study that was on-going at the time, failed to make any findings available. Further exceptions can only be found in K-12 teacher education, where studies of the kind advocated in this paper are more common (see, for example, Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005).

The teacher education and TESOL literatures deal with the factors influencing the formation of teachers to a greater degree. It is clear from the K-12 literature that undergraduate and graduate pre-service teachers’ pre-conceived notions (i.e., beliefs
which precede the teacher training program) often prevail beyond graduate school. This may happen despite the training program’s influences (Avery & Walker, 1993; Florez, 1997; Freeman, 1991; Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Marks, 2007; Polio & Duff, 1994). The next phase of teacher socialization extends beyond graduation, according to Paese, for at least three years on the job (as cited in Mohr, 2000). There, the graduates may be influenced by new—occupational, professional, and societal—socialization mechanisms. These often competing influences of the workplace, cautions Lawson, may be in conflict with the philosophy of the training program, causing the graduates slowly to abandon what they were taught (as cited in Mohr, 2000). This phenomenon, also known as the wash-out effect, may be temporary or permanent (Hargreaves & Goodson, as cited in Vuorikoski, 2001). Meanwhile, the so-called “teaching self,” which Olson and Einwohner (2001) define as “one’s sense of self as a teacher” (p. 403), changes depending on how teachers are socialized by their institutions. This is confirmed by the higher education and workplace literature. Fugate and Amey (2000), for instance, in their study of 22 early career community college faculty found that the institutional support, especially during the first year, was crucial to the shaping of teachers. Often these teachers are marginalized adjunct faculty (Curry, 2001; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), whose training ranges from a K-12 certificate and 18 credit hours in a relevant field to a terminal degree in TESOL (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004).

While the findings of the study presented here confirm the aforementioned findings, they also go beyond them in a number of ways. This study focused on the classroom experiences of teachers who had graduated from a master’s-level TESOL program within five years and on the role that various factors (i.e., pre-TESOL, during TESOL, and workplace-related) played in their classroom experiences. In other words, this study not only examined one isolated stage of teacher formation, but the interplay of a number of factors (see the Revised Descriptive Framework in Appendix A) and how these factors influenced the teachers’ cultural situatedness.

The Study

The purpose of the present case study was to better understand 1) the classroom successes and difficulties of recent native-English-speaking graduates of MA TESOL programs and 2) what their classroom realities can reveal about their graduate preparation and other influencing factors.

Participants

The 97 online survey respondents consisted of ESL or TESOL professionals from across the state of Michigan. Sixty-seven of the respondents held MATESOL degrees; 20 held degrees in other fields; and 10 were in the process of earning a TESOL degree. Of the 97, 12 were selected for a full interview based on the following criteria: they were native speakers of English (definition based on Boyle, 1997), they had graduated from a TESOL program in the United States, they had completed student teaching, they had graduated within the last five years, and they were, at the time of the study, teaching or tutoring ESL students at a Michigan community college (see Table 1). Of the 12 participants—11 female and 1 male—6 were graduates of Eastern Michigan University, 2 of Michigan State University, 2 of Andrews University, and 2
of out-of-state institutions. Prior to graduate school, their teaching experience (in ESL, EFL, or another field) ranged from 0-9 years. All had studied a foreign language, and all but one had traveled or lived abroad. All interviewees chose their own pseudonyms, by which they are referred to in this study.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected by various means. The data collection instruments (an online survey and an in-person interview) were developed based on various bodies of literature, a pilot study, and personal experience. The questions were chosen to illuminate the participants’ perceptions of what factors they found to be influential in their development, successes, and challenges as teachers, and what these perceptions of their classroom realities can reveal of their MA TESOL preparation for work in community colleges. The online survey, which was administered in early 2006, served to provide descriptive statistics and access to potential interview participants. All teachers who volunteered and qualified according to the aforementioned criteria were interviewed. The twelve interviews took place in March and April of the same year. In order to assure completeness of the data, they were triangulated in the following manner: teaching settings at the community colleges were observed, paying particular attention to the physical surroundings and resources available to the teachers in the study and their students; artifacts were gathered such as lesson plans, syllabi, and catalogs; and the websites of the colleges and the teachers’ TESOL programs were also analyzed. (For further discussion of triangulation, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the semi-structured interview, whatever description the teachers gave of their classroom realities was followed up by further questions probing into the factors that may have shaped these events and perceptions of events. The questions were merely used as springboards for conversation. The teachers’ answers to the questions were then analyzed for examples of what factors the teachers cited (both intentionally and unintentionally) as having been drawn upon in their teaching. The interviews were then coded and analyzed for emerging themes as soon as data collection began. The descriptive statistical data were gathered on a four- rather than five-point Likert scale, where “1” meant strong disagreement with the statement and “4” meant strong agreement. The middle option of “neither agree nor disagree” was eliminated in order to reduce the potential for distortion from central tendency bias “since when using an odd number the respondent can avoid making a real choice by selecting the middle neutral category” (Dornyei, 2003, p. 37).

**Findings and Analysis**

In this retrospective perception study, the respondents in both the survey and the interview were asked to reflect on how successful they felt teaching ESL in community colleges and, as a result, how satisfied they were with their TESOL preparation for this setting. All participants in the survey felt successful as teachers: 46% agreed and 54% strongly agreed with the statement. Specific examples of teaching-related successes from the interviews included observing tangible student outcomes (such as a higher score on a post-test than a pre-test, writing a paragraph with fewer mistakes, and giving an organized oral presentation); perceiving intangible student outcomes (such as eyes “lighting up” as a sign of understanding, students talking more, or students gaining self-
confidence); teachers receiving positive feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and the students themselves; and overcoming obstacles especially with uncooperative students. On the other hand, findings also indicate perceived inadequacies in the teachers’ readiness to perform certain tasks after graduation, such as teaching grammar, designing and implementing instructional activities, evaluating and marking papers, and maintaining classroom discipline. The focus of this paper, however, is not the analysis of these successes and difficulties but rather the factors cited by the participants as having contributed to the aforementioned teaching-related outcomes. Of primary interest was the perceived influence of their MA TESOL preparation. Of secondary importance were factors before and after graduate school that were also named as influential in shaping the teachers (i.e., shaping their cultural situatedness) and eventually resulting in these teaching-related successes and challenges.

The following section, thus, presents the teachers’ satisfaction with their preparation in graduate school. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the various factors that the interviewed teachers suggested as influential in their teaching. These factors are also depicted in the Descriptive Framework in Appendix A.

**Post-Graduation Outcomes**

In the online survey, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their preparation for the classroom (see Table 1). One question asked about preparation for teaching while another asked about preparation for non-teaching classroom duties. Participants were not provided with a definition of the latter, but the interviewed participants defined non-teaching classroom duties in the following way: classroom management, grading, record keeping, adjustment of activities and teacher talk to the students’ levels, cultural sensitivity, and curriculum design. As Table 1 depicts, the 23 survey respondents who worked at community colleges were generally satisfied with their preparation to teach; the mean of their answers was 3.1, or “Agree,” and both the mode and median answer showed agreement with the statement. However, graduates were slightly less satisfied with their preparation for non-teaching duties. The mean score dropped to 2.7 and the most frequently given answer was “Disagree.”

When only the answers of the twelve interview participants are considered, as depicted in Table 1 and Figure 1 below, the answer to both questions, or the satisfaction with preparation for both teaching and non-teaching duties in the classroom, is slightly lower. For question Q21 (preparation for teaching), the mode and median are still 3, but the mean is 2.9. For question Q22 (preparation for non-teaching duties in the classroom), the mean and median are 2.5, and the mode is 2 and 3. This suggests that the recent graduates who eventually participated in the interview tended to rate their preparation for classroom duties a little lower than those who were not interviewed. Similarly to all 23 survey respondents, the 12 interview participants rated their preparation for non-teaching activities slightly lower than for teaching. This is somewhat supported by the values for Teaching compared to Non-Teaching, respectively (mean: 2.9 vs. 2.5; median: 3 vs. 2.5);
Figure 1. Frequency of responses to questions Q21 and Q22

white = Program prepared them for teaching duties
black = Program prepared them for non-teaching classroom duties

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<th>Surveyed-Non-Teaching (Q22)</th>
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Legend: 1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Agree
4 = Strongly Agree

Table 1: Satisfaction with MA TESOL Preparation for Teaching and Non-Teaching
mode: 3 vs. 2. However, based on such a small data set, these findings are not conclusive but rather hypothesis generating.

Primarily from the interviews, three sets of themes emerged as shaping the teachers’ classroom realities and subsequent opinions of their preparation for such work: influences prior to entry into the graduate program, those encountered during the MATESOL programs, and those relating to the institutional setting post-graduation. All three stages affected the two post-graduation outcomes under investigation (i.e. successes and challenges in the classroom as well as satisfaction with graduate school). A visually descriptive framework can be found in Appendix A, which depicts the interaction among these various themes. It displays the various factors which emerged mainly from the interview as having shaped the teachers to become the professionals that they are today. These factors were influential in the teachers’ cultural situatedness.

**Pre-Entry Influences**

Among the most important pre-admission factors that seemed to have shaped the teachers’ situatedness, or where they were coming from, were individual factors, prior education, and teaching experience. The first category contains multicultural and foreign-language experiences, family, and faith.

**Multicultural & Foreign-Language Experiences**

All twelve interview participants had some experience studying a foreign language and/or traveling overseas. When interacting with students, they frequently drew a parallel between their own difficulties and those of their students. Here is Suzy’s story (Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees, and identifying information has been omitted).

Because I took [foreign language]…classes and that was my major, I think to a certain degree I can really foresee some of the issues when teaching another language to the students. It helps me figure it out when I was learning [the foreign language], I had these issues. And when I lived in [two foreign countries] I had these issues. And I know that this was tough for me, so it’s possible that it’s tough for them when they’re learning English.

These experiences frequently increased the teachers’ empathy for their students. The teachers were able to connect with their students on a personal level in two ways: foresee their difficulties and offer personally tested strategies for overcoming these challenges. Palmer’s (1997) famous aphorism that we “teach who we are” (p.15) is highly relevant here. A frustrating and humiliating experience of not being understood and possibly even looked down upon leaves its mark on one’s identity, and it later manifests itself in how one teaches. Another teacher’s example not only underscores this sentiment but also demonstrates her desire to spare the students the pain that she had experienced. In the following excerpt, Aniko demonstrated how her personal experience informed her teaching.

When I’m in the classroom, I can tell them I know what it feels like to go into a grocery store and they don’t understand what I’m saying. They’re asking me to
repeat it and repeat it. And I know some of [the students’] hurt because what I found is when you need to repeat, people look at it as a form of ignorance; they don’t think you’re smart enough.

Both positive and negative multicultural and foreign-language-learning experiences left a deep mark on these teachers. These experiences shaped them to become the teachers that they are today. Understanding the teachers’ realities—how they viewed themselves in relation to their jobs, how they viewed their students, and how they viewed their roles in the classroom—was an essential first step in being able to answer the research questions.

Family

Family also influenced the teachers in a variety of ways. In some cases because the teachers came from families of teachers, this impacted their career choice. Later, their families served as mentors with whom teaching-related issues could be discussed. Most commonly, however, family-related experiences allowed the teachers to understand their own students’ situations more deeply than they would have otherwise. This was the most common way in which family influenced the teachers in the study. In the excerpt below, Sophia explained that one set of grandparents emigrated from Europe in the 1930s, and because of political and historical reasons, the family’s native language was lost.

[My mother] really grew up with [the language of the old country], [but] she wasn’t allowed to speak it because it was a stigma and because my grandmother was raised during World War II. And then nobody wanted to be [that nationality]. And how as an adult, [my mother] is going through like, “I can’t believe you didn’t teach us [the language].”…Her and my aunts really get mad at my grandmother sometimes, you know, because she didn’t teach them [the native language]. But for her it was a safety issue, better that they not have an accent.

Because her mother did not learn the native language, neither did Sophia and her siblings. Sophia, therefore, drew a parallel between the process by which subsequent generations lost the native language in her family and in those of her students.

So that’s what I see in my students’ future as you do get away from your culture to a certain extent, no matter what good intentions you have. You’re not in Mexico, so you can only hold on to it for so long. And then a lot of people are lucky to have a community. I wasn’t raised in a community.

Sophia’s example demonstrates an interaction of two factors: those of family and foreign language. In other cases in the study, this interaction occurred among other factors. For instance, if a missionary family spent years overseas, the influences of the family, faith, and foreign culture were intertwined. It was beyond the scope of this study, however, to investigate the weighting of each factor.

Faith
Another source of influence was the combination of family and faith. The teaching of three participants was directly influenced by their faith. All three, at some point in their postsecondary schooling, attended religiously affiliated institutions. Leah’s influence was the most clearly articulated.

My students all have purpose and they all have value. And they’re individual, distinct human beings that are just awesome. And for me as a Christian, I know how much God loves me, and he’s met me where I’m at, and he’s changing me, and that’s what he did with my students. That’s what I’m called to do, to meet them where they’re at. [In addition to faith,] probably family [was a source of influence on my teaching] as well, you know. The two usually are related in some way. I know…when I was in college [I] didn’t do well in all my classes and my parents always said, “You know we love you and you just do the best you can and that’s all we ask for.” That’s what I do with all my students, “Just do the best you can; that’s all I ask for.”

Leah stated that her purpose in teaching ESL was not missionary in the sense that she did not want to convert her students to her faith. However, her teaching philosophy was mostly influenced by both her faith and her family.

Prior Education

In response to a question about who or what has influenced the teaching of recent graduates, the majority of the responses named former teachers. Sophia’s response was a typical one: “Both positive and negative models: things that I absolutely avoid doing and things that I consciously…do, like that teacher that I had.” Among the models that the teachers strove to avoid perpetuating was the following experience in a foreign language class. Diana recalled having a teacher who would cover her ears accompanied by a pained expression on her face whenever Diana’s pronunciation was incorrect. Diana vowed never to humiliate her own students in such a way. On the other hand, these recently graduated teachers were also—to invoke Lortie (1975)—apprenticed by observing positive models. Dontaku (the only man in the study) mentioned several teachers who shaped him in his formative years; but this example best demonstrates the direct impact one particular teacher had on his teaching.

I had a math teacher in high school. If only one thing I remember about him…the guy was so patient. If you asked, he’d explain it on the board long form. Everybody would get it but a couple of us, [so the teacher would say] “OK, let’s do it again.” [He] erased the board and [would] do another topic. I just remember him catering to learning styles. I didn’t know what was going on when I was 16-17. I was thinking if I were to teach (because I didn’t think I’d go into teaching at that time), if I were to teach, I’d want to be like that.

At that time Dontaku was not considering education as a career and did not consciously model his teaching after his math teacher. It happened nevertheless.

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Prior Teaching Experience

Last, but not least, among the pre-entry influences were teaching or tutoring experiences. As reported in Porter-Szucs (2007), before entering the master’s TESOL program, three of the pre-service teachers had no experience in the classroom. One, on the other hand, was a veteran teacher in another field. This had a direct impact on their graduate school experiences and an indirect one on their post-graduation outcomes. Diana, for instance had less than 1 year of combined experience teaching or tutoring students prior to starting an MA TESOL. During the first semester of her program, when she was required to study theory, she failed to see its relevance to her goal of becoming a classroom instructor. Halfway through this first semester, she took a leave of absence and taught overseas. She shares the following: “It started to make a little more sense to me then. As far as the little bit of, six weeks of, graduate school that I had attended, it kind of made things a little bit more clear to me that I recall.” When prompted further as to whether she meant in terms of teaching, she continued: “Ah-hum. And knowing what my students were going through and I think I had a lot of questions about teaching after that.” Only while struggling in the trenches did she realize the importance of the theory that she had failed to appreciate prior to her trip. Upon return, she had a different perspective of the utility of theory classes and she approached graduate school with a new attitude and enthusiasm.

Whether the amount of instruction and practical training they received in the graduate program was too little or too much, or whether classes were relevant or irrelevant, seemed to have been influenced by each teacher’s pre-entry teaching background, as also demonstrated in the following example. Joan was the most experienced of the interviewed teachers, with nearly 10 years of teaching another subject prior to enrolling in the TESOL program. I wish the practicum would have been a little longer. Not for me. Really. But for my partners…who were…from another country…and probably needed more time in the classroom. I have a state teaching certificate…and I’ve been in front of a classroom. And there is a huge difference between being a student and being in front of a classroom as a teacher. And six weeks was fine. I got a feel for the practicum and knew what I was doing in terms of teaching English, but my partners…could’ve used more time. And for anybody who has not had teaching experience, that practicum, that six weeks, is probably not enough. Joan’s comment referred to the different needs that she and her co-teachers had during the practicum. She started out by only focusing on the nonnative-English-speaking TESOL students but closed by generalizing her comment to everyone without a teaching background. Her observation was echoed by other recent graduates in the study. For another example, Kathy, who had less than two years of private tutoring, faulted the inadequate amount of practical training during TESOL for her struggles after graduation. She struggled not only with theory but also the application of theory to practice: “Oh my gosh, I don’t know this, and I don’t know how to present this in a way that will be good for them.” When further prompted to explain how these challenges could have been avoided, she said, “I think for me having more experience in the classroom.”

To summarize the findings thus far, as depicted in the Descriptive Framework (Appendix A), several factors that existed prior to entry into the master’s TESOL program influenced the teachers’ successes and difficulties post-graduation as well as
their satisfaction with their master’s training for the community college setting. Some of these factors, such as the influence of former teachers and of foreign-language study, appeared to have a direct influence, as cited by the teachers. Others, such as teaching experience, were mentioned to have both a direct and an indirect effect: they influenced not only the decision that the teachers made in class but also how the teachers understood their graduate education, which in turn shaped their experiences in the classroom after graduation. Having explored various influencing factors prior to MA TESOL study, the focus now turns to those encountered during graduate school.

**MA TESOL Influences**

When the teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences *during* the TESOL program, the strongest theme that emerged was related to theory versus practice. Within this theme, the clearest subset was related to the practicum.

**Theory vs. Practice**

Several teachers mentioned how important it was that theory and practice be in balance, although they disagreed on what that meant and whether their TESOL program met this expectation. Some wanted more content and more pedagogy; others would have preferred less theory overall and more practice. Some wanted more theoretical preparation in specific areas; still others initially did not appreciate theory and felt it was overemphasized in the program—yet in hindsight, they wished they had paid more attention to it. As Barbara put it:

> Back then I was probably like a typical student and a lot of times thought, “Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to read all this? Why do I have to study all this? Why are you putting me through all this torture?” Now, when I think about [it], I wish I had done more. I look at my transcripts, and I say that is not nearly enough to know everything I need to know coming into a class when teaching. It just isn’t enough.

The interviewed teachers struggled to determine not only the appropriate balance between theory and practice but also the appropriate sequencing of the two. In the following excerpt, Sophia was contemplating whether taking a practically-oriented class at the beginning of her studies was the right approach or whether she should have studied theory first.

> And then the observation class was helpful too. I liked that. And to me it was connected to the research…I almost wish that we did [it] in reverse, where I had learned more of like the research, like the different types of research before I took the observation class. But then maybe I just would have been too crowded with focusing on an approach or stuff like that, instead of just relaxing and listening to what a teacher is doing.

What the teachers seemed to be struggling to conceptualize and verbalize was their observation that theory and practice should be integrated throughout the program. In every class, as much as possible, the two should be connected. Although the teachers
differed in specifics, they were unanimous in their concern with the theme of theory and practice. They viewed the practicum as the capstone experience, in which all that had been learned in theory and practiced in isolation would come together. This, however, did not always happen.

*The Practicum*

The clearest theme surrounding the practicum was the teachers’ dissatisfaction with practicum supervision. There was some variation among the five programs as to how, when, and what kind of feedback the student teachers would receive. Even within the same program, there were widely divergent practices. Teachers whose classes were off campus received the least amount of supervision due to their professors’ schedules. One teacher, Kathy, for instance, was observed only once and even then toward the end of the semester. At the other end of the continuum, one teacher was observed every time and had regular pre- and post-class conferences with the supervising professor. The teacher in the following example was dissatisfied because of, what she perceived as, largely negative feedback from her supervising professor.

And the experience that I had with Professor [name of professor in the program] was not, I don’t want to say it was a negative experience, but I don’t feel that it was a positive, reinforcing kind of experience. I didn’t feel a lot of positive reinforcement. I heard a lot of negative stuff, like “Well, you know, could have done this, da-da-da-dah,” not “Oh, you did a really good job doing this, did a really good job doing that.” So coming out of that whole practicum experience I didn’t feel like I knew very much. Like I wasn’t a very good teacher [her voice trails off].

As this was the last class in Kathy’s master’s program, the unpleasant memory of it still lingers. She felt as if she had failed to integrate the various elements of her training and that she was not ready to be in charge of her own class.

In summary, as the Descriptive Framework depicts (see Appendix A), of all the experiences during the master’s TESOL program, the most influential ones were the practicum and other aspects of theory and practice. The programs’ instructional processes and philosophy as well as the student-teachers’ effort and interactions with their professors all contributed to the teachers’ experiences during graduate school. This, in turn, influenced their challenges and successes with their own classes after graduation and their perceptions of their TESOL programs. As Barbara’s example demonstrates, it was only after graduation, when she was teaching in her own classroom, that she realized that her preparation in teaching various skills was inadequate. In light of this, she and many other teachers in the interviews reassessed their perception of their graduate preparation.

*Post-Graduation Influences*

The last stage of the teachers’ formation that was found to influence their classroom experiences and their retrospective satisfaction with their training were various *post*-graduation influences. In this area, two closely related themes emerged:
employment and institutional situations. The former refers to part-time or full-time employment; the latter includes institutional resources and support from key personnel.

Employment Situation

Eleven of the twelve interview participants were employed part-time at their community colleges. Although they all seemed to be committed to teaching and to their students, nearly all of them mentioned the various difficulties they experienced as adjunct instructors. Kathy elaborated on one reason why being a part-time instructor was challenging.

[Y]ou feel like you’re not a real member of the college. You got faculty, you got administration, you’ve got, you know, the paraprofessionals, the classified staff, or whatever you call that. They’re in. And then you’ve got adjuncts, you got the part-time, you get bumped out of your classes, you never know what you’re teaching from one semester to the next. It’s really sort of, you feel disposable because there’s always somebody willing to come up behind you. If you don’t want it and you’re not happy with that situation, “Oh, well, too bad; somebody else will teach it for you.”

Every one of the adjunct instructors that was interviewed had the necessary qualifications needed to obtain a full-time ESL teaching position at a community college. They were as well-educated as their full-time colleagues. Still, they felt inferior to the full-time faculty and marginalized by the college. The practice of being offered “leftover” classes (the ones that no full-timer wanted) and of being “bumped” (having to surrender a class if a full-timer’s class did not fill but the part-timer’s did) were perceived as demeaning practices by these professionals.

Institutional Context

Due to the fact that the majority of the participants were part-time teachers, they experienced additional difficulties. For example, their physical needs were often unmet. Barbara summarized the office situation in the following way.

We have this little office over here for the part-timers and our division is huge and I think there are 4 or 5 computers in there and just as many places to sit and... on a Monday afternoon you’ll never get on a computer in there, and you’ll never even get a place to sit down and work on your, you know, if you wanted to work on something. And so we complain about that regularly. We want to meet with students but we’ve no way we can meet with students because if we bring students in there, other instructors complain.

Only two of the twelve interviewed teachers were fortunate enough to have space of their own. For the others, the lack of an office was only the most obvious manifestation of their unmet needs. They often did not have a place to leave their books, their coats, and their purses; they did not have phones; and they did not have a quiet place in which to reflect on their teaching. These recent graduates were also frequently early-career teachers—only one had more than 5 years of teaching
experience—and, as such, were in need of support from relevant colleagues and supervisors. However, they rarely were able to interact with their full-time colleagues. Often, the reason given was that their schedules were incompatible. Part-time faculty tend to teach classes that full-timers choose not to—usually in the evening. Adjuncts often do not schedule office hours because they might be teaching another class at another school immediately before and/or after their classes at the community college, so they are simply not in one place for extended hours. Other times, even if they spend some time in the adjunct office, the location of the full- and part-time offices might be quite distant from each other. Further, they might not meet at staff meetings, either, due to scheduling conflicts or because adjuncts are forced to teach at multiple sites in order to earn an equivalent full-time salary. For all these reasons, part-time and full-time teachers rarely cross paths socially or professionally. This means that adjuncts are on their own and left to feel unsupported.

**Concluding Remarks**

Teaching English as a Second Language, more so than teaching another subject, requires that the teacher be able to communicate across multiple cultures as exemplified by the various well-known manifestations of “culture”: national, ethnic, linguistic, class, socio-economic, racial, power, age, gender, educational, role, and so forth (see Fuery & Mansfield, 1997; Hall, 1953; Hunt, 1989; Rosaldo, 1989; Turner, 1990). It is necessary for teachers to shift perspectives or cultural boundaries. In order to do so, teachers must be able to see themselves as culturally situated individuals and view their own boundaries from a distance. It has been argued that, in addition to the aforementioned cultural influences, the definition of cultural frame must be broadened to include one’s personal cross-cultural, foreign-language-learning, classroom observation, and actual teaching experiences (Porter-Szucs, 2007). Those future teachers, for instance, who have no teaching experience prior to entering graduate school, in contrast to those who do, are situated in different ways, culturally. Their experiences seem to influence their approach and attitude toward theory and practice specifically and graduate school in general. This difference, in turn, determines their approach to teaching later on. The earlier example of Diana’s attitudinal transformation demonstrates this. Prior to TESOL, she had no teaching experience. When she started taking graduate classes, from her vantage point, classes on the theory of second language acquisition and linguistics bore no relevance to her goal of becoming a classroom instructor of English as a Second Language. After a several-month-long leave of absence to teach English overseas, where she struggled to answer student questions, she returned to graduate school with a different attitude. The actual teaching experience changed her cultural situatedness, as it did with her approach and attitude toward theory and practice.

A broadened definition of culture, however, goes beyond teaching experience. It must include the experience of observing teaching as well. The findings of this study corroborate those of others (Lortie, 1975; Jackson, 1968; Marks, 2007; Polio and Duff, 1994) that the process of teacher formation starts years before the teacher training program and continues for years past it. All teachers-in-training arrive in their TESOL program with assumptions about the nature of teaching and the role of the teacher which have been shaped by their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie,
1975, p. 61). In other words, by having observed their own teachers, they have formed opinions regarding what constitutes “good” or “bad” teaching or a “good” or “bad” teacher. One participant, for instance, realized that she was trying to avoid becoming her French teacher while another was trying to imitate her Italian teacher. Many of these assumptions, or experiences, or (in this broader sense) cultural markers are unstated and shape teachers’ behaviors subconsciously, continuing to do so for years after graduation. However, if these preconceived notions that are based on their cultural backgrounds are not addressed specifically during graduate school, and are not replaced by theory-driven concepts, they are likely to be perpetuated and remain strong influences beyond graduation.

The above issue has considerable implications for teacher trainers in MA TESOL programs. Given that among the factors that influenced the teachers’ classroom successes and difficulties were several that were experienced prior to enrollment in the graduate programs, it is evident that these influences have long-lasting effects, even years beyond teacher preparation in TESOL. Therefore, if TESOL programs hope to pass down their philosophies to their graduate students, they should consider building ways for reflective practice to take place in every course in order to encourage students to question and possibly override undesired pre-graduate school influences which are highly resistant to change.

This study has further implications for researchers. Given that the process of teacher formation is ongoing before, during, and after the teacher-training program, focusing on one stage of this process without due attention to the totality of the students’ experiences will result in an incomplete and rather skewed picture. Many of the insights from this study could not have been gained if the participants had not had some distance from graduate school and some experience with teaching. Thus, above all, researchers must continue to listen to the voices of recent graduates. Those researchers who do should disseminate their findings, so that others may build on their scholarship.

**Author Note**

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Appendix A

Revised Descriptive Framework

1. Pre-Admission
   * Individual Factors
   * Education
   * Teaching Experience

2. Master’s TESOL Experience
   * Instructional Processes, Philosophy
   * Interactions with Professors
   * Student Effort
   * Practicum

3. Work Setting
   * Nature of Work Setting
   * Fit Between Work & Preparation
   * Fit Between Work & Personality
   * Full-Time/Adjunct Status

4. Post-Graduation Outcomes
   * Ability to function in the classroom
   * Satisfaction with the graduate program