Predicted Problems of Elementary School ESL Teachers: Implications For Teacher Education

Gary Barkhuizen

Rhodes University, South Africa

Introduction

The reports on the early induction period of novice teachers, including English language teachers, show that they are not always prepared to assume full teaching responsibilities (Barkhuizen, 1994; Featherstone, 1993; Johnston & Ryan, 1980; Veenman, 1984). A number of schools in South Africa are now responding to this dilemma by planning and implementing various induction programs, very much the way American schools have been doing for some time now (see Adkinson, 1985). These are programs that supposedly ease the transition into teaching for beginning teachers. New teachers will always experience some instability when they start to teach, but perhaps this condition could be prevented somewhat if potential problems received more attention during teacher preparation.

This article features ways in which preservice teacher education programs could work towards eliminating some of the anxiety first-year teachers feel about problems they may experience when they begin teaching. The suggestions and insights presented evolved from the results of a study in which preservice student teachers were asked to indicate what problems they were expecting to encounter when they start to teach English in South African elementary schools.

The Study: Background and Method

Preservice student teachers at three South African teacher preparation institutions (two colleges of education and one university located in the Eastern Cape Province) were asked to consider the problems they might experience when they start to teach. One hundred and twelve student teachers completed a questionnaire which was designed to investigate their expectations of the early part of their teaching careers. The questionnaire covered many aspects of beginning teaching, but two questions, which formed the basis of this study, probed the nature of the problems that the student teachers predicted they might experience in their prospective ESL classes.

All student teachers shared the following profile:
1. They planned to become elementary school English teachers.

2. They expected to teach English as a second language.

3. They were non-native English speakers. All, in fact, were mature speakers of Xhosa.

4. They were in their final year of study.

5. None of them had taught in full-time situations before. All had experienced some

    form of practice teaching.

The first of the two major considerations was an open-ended question which asked the student teachers the following: *What worries you the most about being an English teacher? Give at least three points.* Only responses which had to do with teaching English were analyzed. Other general problems such as "getting on with the other teachers" were not categorized. The responses were categorised according to common themes, and each instance of a specific problem was tallied. The nature of the problems were then described and ranked according to frequency.

The second question which respondents were asked to consider involved the following: Respondents were presented with a list of problems; they were asked to indicate a maximum of five problems which they predicted they might encounter when they start teaching (see Table 1 for the problems listed). Frequencies were tabulated and ranked. The responses to the first and second questions were then compared.

The Study: Findings and Discussion

The first question

Table 1 summarises the answers to the first question: "What worries you the most about being an English teacher?" nineteen problem themes were identified. The frequency refers to the number of times each problem theme was found in the responses. Sometimes a particular problem theme was mentioned more than once by individual respondents. Each of these themes can be subcategorized into more specific descriptions of the problem. In this section, the highest ranking problems will be discussed. The others will be considered where applicable.

Table 1

Rank	Problems	Frequency
1	Limited English proficient students	63
2	Attitude of students	35
3	Mother tongue interference	32
4	English proficiency of teacher	31
5	Teacher effectiveness	22
6	Inadequate facilities	14
6	No English practice outside school	14
8	Insufficient materials and textbooks	13
9	Current outdated teaching practices	7
9	Personal constraints	7
9	Relations with students	7
12	No student participation in class	4
12	Teaching in a multilingual setting	4
12	Time constraints	4
15	Ineffectiveness as change agent	3
15	Large class size	3
15	Relations with parents	3
18	Inadequate guidance and support	2
19	Syllabus constraints	1

The most frequently mentioned problem related to the limited English proficiency of the students. This problem theme was mentioned 63 times by the respondents. In answering this question, respondents referred to the entire range of language skills. The skills subcategory was listed 55 times. Other subcategories include: knowing no English at all (1), students' lack of confidence in using English or being shy (6), and lack of knowledge of literature (1).

It was surprising that the problem of prospective students' limited English proficiency should be ranked the highest. One would assume that since these student teachers are going to be teaching English they would be expecting to do just that. Furthermore, one would assume that they would also expect their prospective students not to be advanced speakers of English, especially in an elementary school ESL situation. Perhaps one explanation is that the teachers perceive English teaching as being similar to teaching "content" school subjects; that is, there is information to be passed on, stories to be read, compositions to be written and interesting topics to be discussed. They may ask themselves, "How is it possible to do all of this if the students can't speak English?"

Another explanation may relate to the problem theme, Personal constraints (7). Subcategories of this problem include comments such as "teaching will exert much strain" (1), English teachers "cannot be lazy" (1), they have to "deal with a lot of work" (4), and the "difficulty of teaching English" (1). The conclusion drawn is that the lower the level of the students' English proficiency, the harder the work will be for the teacher, and the more severe the Time constraints (see problem theme ranked 12).

The second highest ranked problem theme, Attitude of students, has, like the first problem, the students as its source. Of the 35 responses, 15 refer to the unwillingness to speak or fear of speaking (practising, using) English in class, as opposed to being unable to. Teachers obviously want their students to participate in classroom English activities; perhaps because of their familiarity with the communicative language teaching method. This lack of participation may also be a result of other attitudinal factors: unmotivated, uninterested or lazy students (10) and students having a negative attitude to the English language (8).

The problem theme, Relations with students (7), ranked 9, endorses these student teachers' concerned interest in their students. Subcategories in this theme reveal that they want good relations with their students (2), they want to be liked by their students (1), they want their cooperation (2), and respect (2), and they want their students to appreciate their teaching (1). Relations of this nature would obviously lead to an anxiety-free classroom atmosphere and thus one conducive to more effective teaching and learning.

The third highest ranked problem theme, Mother tongue interference at 32, also relates to the language learners. However, this time there is a move towards including teaching practice in the problem. Respondents here were concerned with the use of the mother tongue in English classes (21); in other words, they were worried that the students would not get enough practice using English, and would consequently not learn much English. This view is supported by their concern that their future students do not get much practice speaking English outside of the school; see problem theme No English practice outside school (14), ranked 6.

The next two problems, English proficiency of teacher (31) and Teacher effectiveness (22), ranked 4 and 5 respectively, redirect focus away from the students and onto the teacher. What the student teachers were concerned about here was their own lack of proficiency in English. Many acknowledged that because they were not native English speakers (20), they lacked knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language (3), and that they had "poor pronunciation" (8).

Being an effective teacher was also a high priority concern for the student teachers. The major subcategory in this problem theme was simply that the teachers were afraid of not being successful (12 of 22).

The ranking of problem themes progresses from a focus on the students, to the teacher and then onto facilities. This seems to be a move outwards: from the central purpose of teaching, to those who make it possible, to the hardware needed to make it successful. Inadequate facilities (14), ranked 6, refers to the lack of structural support in the form of adequate classroom space, libraries, and equipment and teaching aids, such as overhead projectors and video-recorders .

A problem theme related to facilities, and the final one to be discussed in this section, is Insufficient materials and textbooks (13), ranked 8. Once again, the student teachers predict that the materials they will require and the textbooks which they find suitable will either not be available or will be inappropriate to meet their needs and to support their teaching methods. Considering the state of textbook distribution in parts of the country and the financial situation of some schools, this is a very real problem indeed.

The second question Table 2 summarises the results of Question 2, which asked respondents to choose a maximum of five problems from a given list. Most chose five, but some of the teachers chose fewer. The table shows the number of times each problem was chosen (the frequency) as well as the percentage of respondents who chose each problem. For instance, the problem ranked 1, Teaching in large classes, was chosen 80 times by the 112 respondents, which is 71 percent of all respondents.

Table 2

Rank	Problems	Freq	%
1	teaching in large classes	80	71
2	teaching in multilingual classes	64	57
3	dealing with a range of English proficiency levels in the same class	52	46
4	explaining grammatical rules and structures	42	38
5	finding or designing suitable materials	36	32
6	teaching poetry	32	29
7	knowing how to use a particular method effectively	25	22
8	using the language textbook effectively	22	20
9	assessing students' written work	19	17
9	following the prescribed English syllabus	19	17
9	knowledge of subject matter: English	19	17
9	motivating students	19	17
13	planning and testing oral work	18	16
14	language testing and examining	15	13

It was surprising to find <u>Teaching in large classes</u> ranked so high since it was hardly mentioned in Question 1. On the other hand, research has shown that crowding and lack of space is not conducive to effective teaching and learning (Holahan, 1982), and at many South African conferences, teachers' meetings and in the media (see, for example, Garson & Mona, 1996) the problems teachers experience in overcrowded classrooms, which in less advantaged schools could consist of up to 80 students, are often highlighted and discussed.

Also highly ranked in Question 2 (in contrast to Question 1) is the problem of <u>Teaching in multilingual classes</u>. On another question in the questionnaire all teachers indicated that they expected to teach in ESL contexts (probably a group sharing the same mother tongue). When presented with the idea of teaching in multilingual settings (which in South Africa has typically come to mean having English mother tongue and non-mother tongue speakers in the same class), 57 percent of the student teachers felt that this would be a problem for them. This makes sense when one considers that two of the more highly

ranked problems in Question 1 were English proficiency of teacher and Teacher effectiveness.

There are two other problems which are related to the English proficiency of teachers. Firstly, Explaining grammatical rules and structures (38 percent): It would be difficult to do so if one were not sure of the rules and structures in the first place. This problem may be perceived to be a major one because of the emphasis in ESL classes on a grammar teaching approach to ESL instruction. Secondly, Teaching poetry (29 percent), English poetry, with its complexity of structure and intensity of the language, would certainly be difficult for limited English proficient teachers.

Dealing with a range of English proficiency levels in the same class is a common problem for ESL teachers (Pica, 1994), and it is therefore not surprising to see it ranked 3 (at 46 percent).

For most of the other problems ranked in Question 2, there is a fairly high correlation with the ranking of similar problems identified in Question 1. For example, Insufficient materials and textbooks (Question 1) and Finding or designing suitable materials (Question 2) are both in the top half of the ranked problems for each question. Concerns with the syllabus are in the second half, and worries about methods are in the middle.

Images of Teaching and of Problems

The 112 student teachers who responded to this questionnaire were all in the final year of their preservice teacher preparation. The following year they were expecting to go out into the real world of elementary school English teaching. With them they would take their memories of their own experiences as language learners at school, the knowledge and skills they had acquired in their years of teacher education, and their expectations or perceptions of what they are going to encounter and experience in their future classrooms.

These expectations or perceptions have been referred to in a number of ways. Barnes (1992, p. 16), for example, uses the term "frame" to refer to "the clustered set of standard expectations through which all adults organise, not only their knowledge of the world but their behaviour in it." Calderhead (1988) talks about the "images" that teachers have about teaching, and about the images that student teachers have which are then taken with them into the classroom when they start to teach. These images which are like mental pictures or conceptions of teaching "seem to be quite powerful influences" on teachers' developing practice (Calderhead, 1988, p. 54).

This research has shown that student teachers have, as part of their image of teaching, ideas about the kinds of problems they expect to experience when they start teaching. Strong sources of these images are no doubt the teachers' own experiences of being

students in schools and student teachers in teacher education programs. The question which needs to be asked is: What effect will these images of problems have on the teaching of student teachers when they actually start to teach? One possibility is that the teachers may be so concerned about the predicted problems that they may focus only on these, ignoring or neglecting other areas of teaching practice. Another possibility is that their image of problems may change dramatically when they enter the school: They may, for example, find that their predicted problems may not exist at all or may not be as serious as they thought. The question could only be answered by further research; by following, for example, student teachers into schools, by observing them teach and by talking to them about their teaching experiences.

Implications for Teacher Education

Intervention at the stage of preservice teacher education could help student teachers to come to terms with their images of problems they may have. By including in the teacher education program the following, teachers may develop different, less threatening images of problems and a more positive attitude towards coping with them:

1. *Raise an awareness of problems which English teachers may experience in elementary schools.* Ask student teachers to project themselves into their future lives in schools and to predict what sort of problems they might encounter there. Encourage student teacher to think back to the times when they were school children; have them recount their observations of teaching in action. Student teachers could, while on teaching practice, be asked to note problems they themselves experience or they could observe or talk to other teachers in the school. The problems listed in Tables 1 and 2 in this paper could also serve as a useful source.

2. *Examine the nature of the problems, their possible causes and the extent of their negative effect.* Individually, student teachers could be asked to reflect on these issues in assignments or journals. Together, pooling of ideas and experiences in groupwork or whole-class discussions is an effective way of broadening the range of problems under investigation and for examining in more detail their nature and influence. Once again, observation exercises could be devised for student teachers to work on while on teaching practice in schools. They could "self-observe" their own classes (see Richards & Nunan, 1990, for examples) or those of experienced teachers. Once problems have been identified in this manner, a closer analysis should be undertaken to reveal a more in-depth understanding of the problems. Guidelines in the form of worksheets, questionnaires or observation instruments could be provided by course instructors (or developed by the student teachers themselves before the practice teaching session) to systematise the investigation.

3. *Consider, practise and evaluate strategies which could be effective in coping with the problems when they are encountered.* Once the problems have been identified and analyzed, student teachers should begin to ask themselves what they are going to do about them when they start to teach. For example, if they have identified as a problem the students' use of their mother tongue in the classroom, they will need to consider what they are going to do about it. Will they limit the use of the mother tongue? How will they do so? How will they monitor its use? What will happen if the learners insist on using their mother tongue?

The coping strategies should not be in the form of "recipes" provided by instructors, where step-by-step procedures are listed for application in specific circumstances. This type of prescription would be difficult to apply since the circumstances in which the problems are located will no doubt be different each time. Furthermore, the prescriptions may limit the freedom of the teachers to come up with more suitable coping strategies of their own. Instead of recipes, I suggest that "maps" are used. By maps I mean rough drafts or conceptualisations about the way problems are solved. Whereas recipes are inflexible and limit freedom, maps allow the teacher flexibility in working out alternative routes (coping strategies) in case the original ones are problematic.

Closing Comments

This article reported on a study which aimed to identify the problems student teachers expected to encounter when they start teaching ESL in elementary schools. Because beginning teaching can often lead to instability-generating experiences (Barkhuizen, 1994), it was suggested that some form of pre-emptive intervention be included in preservice teacher preparation. I described a three-point approach to the examination of problems, whereby student teachers identified predicted problems, analyzed them and then planned coping strategies for dealing with them in their future teaching lives.

This is not to say that student teachers should be provided with alternative images by teacher educators. Instead, they should be given the opportunity to build their own images, and to see themselves as self-reliant thinkers and practitioners. This could be achieved if student teachers firstly, are aware of any potential problems, and secondly, have developed ideas for how to deal with them.

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About the Author

Gary P. Barkhuizen is a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Rhodes University, South Africa. He has an MA (Applied Linguistics) from Essex University and a D.Ed (TESOL) from Teachers College, Columbia University. He has taught ESL to adults and school children in the U.S. and in South Africa. He is currently involved in ELT teacher education and has research interests in sociolinguistics and language planning.