

A Literature Review of Empirical Research into Pre-service EFL Teacher Education Abroad (2018-2022)

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Abstract

Pre-service EFL teacher education has received increasing attention from academics. Based on the analytical framework of “Teacher preparation research as historically situated social practice”, this study reviews empirical research papers on the pre-service EFL teacher education abroad from 2018 to 2022 and analyzes them in terms of overall trends, research quality, research subjects, research methods, researcher identities, and research themes. The study finds that the previous studies mainly discussed the aspects of professional knowledge, professional competence, sentiment, curriculum, practicum, and training environment. Finally, the study summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of study abroad on pre-service EFL teacher education and its implications for pre-service EFL teacher education research in China.

Keywords

Pre-service teacher, EFL teacher, Teacher education.

1. Introduction

The construction of the teacher team is the starting point and foundation of education development, and teacher education is a key part of the construction. In the context of globalization, the status of English as the lingua franca has been further consolidated, and teaching English as a second/foreign language is widely carried out around the world. China has long attached importance to English education, and a series of foreign language education policies have been formulated over the past 40 years of reform and opening up. Therefore, it is essential to cultivate high-quality English teachers. Because the professional development of pre-service EFL teachers is related to the future prospects of English education, the topic of pre-service EFL teacher training has received increasing attention from academics.

However, it must be addressed that the number of pre-service EFL teacher education studies is limited, especially compared with the studies about in-service English teachers. Therefore, attention to pre-service EFL teacher education still needs to be improved. The paradigms are mostly theoretical research but few empirical research. The quality of the previous empirical studies needs to be improved. There are only a few review studies pre-service EFL teacher education. Therefore, this study hopes to make up for the gaps in the current review studies by systematically sorting out the empirical research results of pre-service EFL teacher education in the past five years. It also hopes to provide possible research directions for future empirical research on pre-service EFL teacher education, and provides references for research of China in this field.

Teacher education research began in the 1950s, and its pace has accelerated since the 1980s, with research on a variety of topics and content, ranging from theoretical research to practical exploration of teacher education, from teacher preparation to teacher induction and post-service teacher growth and training, from teacher education curriculum reform to pedagogy improvement, and from developed to developing regions. In 2015, Cochran-Smith and Villegas consecutively published two highly influential and highly informative review articles on

teacher preparation, in which they reviewed more than 1,500 studies from 2000 to 2012, showing that the discipline of teacher education has gradually built up its intrinsic body of knowledge. In the decade or so since, several literature reviews have focused on various themes in teacher education, such as gender studies, sustainability, and practice mentoring. International research on teacher preparation is quite mature.

Research on teacher education in China started relatively later than the foreign countries' research. The Fourth National Conference on Teacher Education held in 1980 marked a new stage of teacher education in China, and scholars' research mostly pointed to developed countries in Europe and the United States to promote the development of teacher education research in China. After the 1990s, the number of research papers on the theme of "teacher education" gradually increased. However, in terms of research paradigm, theoretical discursive papers accounted for a large proportion, while empirical research papers were scarce. In the Decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education issued in 2001, the term "teacher education" was used for the first time instead of "normal education", which means that China has made a shift from normal education to teacher education, and teacher education has been further emphasized. In the 21st century, the number of studies in the field of teacher education has steadily increased, and the research methods have been gradually enriched. It is worth noting that the number of empirical studies has increased significantly for two reasons. On the one hand, the paradigm shift in research in education in China has shown a trend of quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, and action research methods being gradually familiar and applied by educational researchers. On the other hand, education policies and practices are increasingly supported by evidence-based research, and evidence-based policy decisions and educational practices are becoming a new consensus (Yang Shuo & Yu Kai, 2019).

Research on pre-service EFL teacher education began in the 1980s, but research results are limited. Richards and Nunan (1990) stated that almost no one in the field of foreign language teaching had ventured into research on foreign language teacher education, and Freeman (1941) initially outlined six elements necessary for good language teachers. However, they were not implemented in a targeted way in pre-service teacher education, so research on foreign language teacher education is necessary. English teacher education and teacher development were emphasized at the 1997 International Association for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language Annual Conference. Richards explained the connotation of foreign language teacher quality. Foreign language teacher education in China also initially focused only on teaching theory and basic teaching skills to teacher trainees, but in recent years, due to many reasons such as curriculum reform and accelerated globalization, the issue of foreign language teacher education has received more and more attention. Studies have mainly discussed in-service EFL teacher education in terms of the current status of teachers, curriculum development, and teacher education philosophy.

Pre-service teacher education is an important part of teacher education. After 2000, the research results of domestic pre-service EFL teacher education have been gradually enriched, except for the development of professional knowledge, professional competence, sentiment and cognitive-psychological mechanism for pre-service EFL teachers, scholars have learned from Germany, Finland, Japan and other countries, and combining the actual situation in China, they rationally explore the cultivation model and cultivation paths of EFL teachers suitable for China. Regarding the cultivation model, researchers focused on integrating pre-service and in-service teacher education. For professional competence, more and more attention was paid to the cultivation of pre-service teachers' academic competence in order to promote novice teachers to turn to research-oriented teachers. With the continuous development of technology, the attention to pre-service EFL teachers' educational technology capacity, especially the cultivation of digital technology and information technology competence, has increased, and

the number of related articles has increased. For example, Li Mingzi (2020) took TPACK knowledge framework as a guide to investigate the current situation of information technology teaching ability of teacher-training students majoring in English in teacher-training colleges and proposed solutions. In addition, scholars have conducted a study on the current situation of information-based teaching ability in the context of new curriculum reform, core competence cultivation background, and the new policy of College Entrance Examination background. In addition to empirical research and theoretical research, there are also case study, action research, and narrative research. It shows that the research at home on pre-service EFL teacher education has made promising achievements gradually following the international research trends.

2. Analytical Framework

Bourdieu (2013) states that social practices are situated in social spaces and defined by the tug-of-war between different agents. If extrapolating this theory to the academic activities of the researcher, then research can be considered as a social practice. Cochran-Smith and Villa-gas designed “Teacher Preparation Research as Historically-Situated Social Practice” framework for analysis in a review of nearly a century of teacher education research. It consists of five dimensions: “how the researcher poses and frames the research question”, “how the researcher is positioned”, “how the research is designed”, “how the findings are presented and analyzed and what the implications are”, and “the assumptions behind the research and the logic of its argumentation”.

This study will refer to the analytical framework of “Teacher Preparation Research as Historically-Situated Social Practice” and analyze overall trends, research quality, research subjects, research methods, researcher identities, and research themes of the overseas empirical research literature on pre-service teacher education in the past five years. Hopefully, this systematic review of empirical research on pre-service EFL teacher education will deepen the understanding of the complexity of pre-service EFL teacher education and provide new directions for future research in this field.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research objectives and research questions

Based on the empirical research papers published in pre-service English teacher education between 2018 and 2022, this study aims to present the overall picture of overseas research in this field, to provide some reference for future research. In this study, there are two main research objectives. Firstly, to provide a descriptive analysis of overall trends, research quality, research subjects, research methods, researcher identities, and research themes in the studies. Secondly, to conduct a content analysis of the themes in the studies.

Based on the above research objectives, this study will specifically focus on the following questions:

1. What are the features of overall trends, research quality, research subjects, research methods, researcher identities, and research themes in pre-service EFL teacher education empirical research over the past five years?
2. What are the main contents of the empirical research on pre-service EFL teacher education in the past five years?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of pre-service EFL teacher education empirical research?
4. What are the implications for pre-service EFL teacher education empirical research in China?

A variety of variables shapes the identity of pre-service EFL teachers. In this section, this paper will review previous studies on the factors influencing pre-service EFL teachers' identity from both internal and external sources.

3.2. Research Methodology

This study used documentary analysis to collect and analyze data. The papers selected for this study are drawn from seven databases in the ProQuest Education Database: APA PsycArticles, Coronavirus Research Database, Ebook Centra, Education Database, Psychology Database, PTSDpubs, Publicly Available Content Database. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, the author completes the filtering and selection of the data information through the following two steps. First, searching for journal articles with "pre-service EFL teachers" in the title through Proquest, with a time limit of "last five years". 46 papers are searched by this method. Then, papers that clearly do not meet the search requirements (for instance, topic, type) are manually excluded, and 43 articles are selected.

3.3. Research Findings

3.3.1. Overall trends

The number of papers published in a specific time period reveals the development characteristics of the field. Importing the 43 papers into Excel can quickly calculate the number of papers published each year, and plotting a graph based on the annual number of papers can derive the trend of empirical research on pre-service EFL teacher education from 2018 to 2022. It can be found that the number of studies on the topic of pre-service English teacher education in the last five years is not high overall. The number of papers is around ten each year, with a downward trend in quantity since 2019. Among these 43 articles, 12 papers are included in seven journals in the SSCI, so the quality of the research is high and informative.

3.3.2. Research subjects

Among the 43 articles, the number of research subjects ranged from 1 to 120, and the categories were mainly pre-service EFL teachers, who were mainly students studying English language teaching at university. There is a small number of teacher educators and translation assignments of pre-service EFL teachers. It can be found that the sample size and categories of these studies could be more extensive. Therefore, the objectivity and generalizability of the experiments need to be improved.

3.3.3. Research methods

The research methods used are mainly qualitative and mixed methods. 39 of the 43 papers used qualitative research methods, and 4 papers used mixed methods. The specific data collection and data analysis methods included interviews, questionnaire, scaling, observations, reflective essay, document analysis, case study and narrative survey. Among them, semi-structured interview and questionnaire were used most frequently because qualitative methods help to open up the teachers' inner world and understand their honest thoughts and experiences, which makes the data reliable. Unfortunately, action research, an important research method in education, has been almost absent in the past five years.

3.3.4. Researcher identity positioning

The identity positioning of the researcher determines to some extent the topic and content of the research, as well as the research objectives and the intended audience of the study. The researchers of these 43 empirical studies are professors, associate professors, and research assistants from various universities specializing in education. It indicates that the researchers are highly professional and theoretical, but the type of identity is relatively homogeneous, so there may be a lack of studies conducted from different perspectives.

4. Analysis of Research Content

In their review of the literature on pre-service teacher education in China, Song Huan et al. (2020) drew on the Handbook of Teacher Education Research (Cochran-Smith et al., 2008) to develop a new theme of “what to educate”, drawing on the thematic categories of knowledge, competence, literacy, identity, and willingness to teach of pre-service teachers. Research on how pre-service teachers are selected, the pre-service teacher education process, and pre-service teacher self-learning is placed under the theme of “how to educate”. Research on the actual pre-service education environment (e.g., universities, primary and secondary schools) and policy environment are placed under the theme of “where to educate”. According to analyze 43 papers, it is found that the content of empirical studies can also be categorized in the same way, therefore, this paper will analyze and explain these three aspects of “what to educate”, “how to educate” and “where to educate”.

4.1. “What to educate”

What qualities and abilities the future English teachers should have is a topic worthy of in-depth consideration. Gong Yafu proposes the scope and content of professional standards for English teachers in view of the problems in the teacher education process and the actual situation in China. He believed that the standards should consider teachers’ language competence, language knowledge, teaching approaches and methods, learning process and learners, teaching curriculum, testing and assessment, educational technology, social culture, and thinking and cognition. In general, “what to educate” mainly includes the development of professional knowledge and professional competence, in addition to the inner thoughts of future teachers, such as identity, teacher beliefs, and motivation to teach, which will also be discussed in this section and will be collectively referred as “sentiment”.

4.1.1. Professional knowledge

Professional knowledge of English teachers refers mainly to systematic knowledge of the English language, including specifically the body of knowledge of phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as the semantic and pragmatic features of English. In the last five years of empirical research abroad, scholars have studied the language knowledge aspects of pre-service EFL teachers encompassing two aspects: grammar and pronunciation. Specifically, one of the researches aimed to shift pre-service teachers from a traditional to a pragmatic view of grammar by the implementation of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based instruction in grammar courses. In another study, pre-service EFL teachers were asked to self-assess their pronunciation. The third research examined the impact of formal learning opportunities at the beginning of teacher education on pre-service EFL teachers’ pedagogical knowledge. The results of the analysis prove the effectiveness of teacher education on the development of EFL professional knowledge.

4.1.2. Professional competence

In terms of professional competence development, overseas studies have addressed the dimensions of language competence, teaching ability, information technology competence, assessment competence, and intercultural communication competence development.

Language competence is a crucial professional competence that pre-service EFL teachers need. Among the 43 papers, the relevant studies are as follows. Firstly, in the context of COVID-19, teachers and students entered emergency distance education environment, and maintaining the quality of education during this transition period has become a challenge. Therefore, Tuçe and Tuncer explored the impact of EDE teaching on teachers’ language competence development and proposed countermeasures to the problems arising in the EDE teaching approach and suggest countermeasures to the problems that arise under the EDE approach. Arslan and Kavaklı (2019) investigated the translation assignments of 30 pre-service EFL

teachers through literature analysis and found that the errors in their translations were classified as structural, lexical and interpretative errors, and finally, pedagogical insights relevant to the field were drawn.

Teaching ability mainly includes two aspects of teaching methods and teaching implementation. In order to enhance the teaching ability of pre-service EFL teachers, a study reported how an educator assisted 48 Thai pre-service English teachers to learn how to teach English writing in the writing instruction course. Ard and Soontornwipast (2022) designed Screencast-Assisted Written Feedback (SAWF) Model to examine the impacts of integrating screencasts with word-processed marginal comments in written formative feedback on Thai pre-service EFL teachers' ability to write a lesson plan effectively.

With the development of technology, digital technology and information technology are more widely used in teaching and learning, so it is vital to develop teachers' educational technology capacity. Researchers have explored pre-service EFL teachers' attitudes toward computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs, the current status of pre-service EFL teachers' digital literacy, and an exploration of pedagogical models for developing teachers' Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) competence, for example, Baz et al. promoted ICT integration based on SAMR model (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) and pre-service EFL teachers found SAMR model beneficial and held positive attitudes towards using SAMR in their future classes.

Other professional competence relates to testing and assessment competence and intercultural communication competence. Liu, Li explored the relationship between pre-service EFL teachers' scoring judgments and their writing proficiency. The findings highlighted the particular role of pre-service EFL teachers' writing skills in assessing students' writing. This study informed teacher education and the development of assessment competence in classroom assessment contexts. Arcagok and Yılmaz identified the cross-cultural sensitivity of pre-service EFL teachers through a mixed-study approach. They found that volunteer work by pre-service teachers in any NGO was a factor that increased their sensitivity. This study concluded with a discussion of the findings that provide a basis for intercultural competence and communication in foreign language teaching. Mighani and Moghadam increased the intercultural sensitivity of pre-service EFL teacher education by making them complete interactive culture-focused speaking tasks.

4.1.3. Sentiment

Teacher identity is both their evaluation and recognition of the intrinsic value of their future professional work, emotions, and attitude toward the process of learning to become a teacher. In the study, Kılıç and Cinkara used a critical incident analysis perspective to summarize the impact of critical incidents on the teacher identity of 49 pre-service EFL teachers throughout their English learning process on their teacher identity. The results showed that pre-service EFL teachers' early learning experiences included some critical incidents that could be categorized into three themes: person, context, and outcome. New EFL teachers experience a change in identity as they transition from the pre-service to the novice stage. Lianjiang et al. used structural and social representation theories of imagined identity to examine this process, which ultimately identified identity shifts as four distinct trajectories, i.e., renegotiation, evolution, establishment, and sustainment. To be specific, the identity shift of beginning EFL teachers is not a linear process whereby imagined identities created in the pre-service stage are transformed into practiced identities in the novice stage, but rather a dynamic process mediated by individual beliefs, prior learning experiences, teaching practice, and the institutional exam-oriented culture.

4.1.4. Teacher belief

Teacher belief is constantly formed, changed, and negotiated within their own experiences. Among this 43-article literature, there are a number of studies on teacher belief. In order to understand how Turkish pre-service EFL teachers are developing professionally as future teachers, Ataş examined how their beliefs about their school experiences have changed over time. The findings showed that pre-service EFL teachers have various opinions on how to approach foreign language teaching and learning in general, how to use language in the classroom, how to manage a classroom, and how to teach grammar. The findings also pointed to a shift in their perspectives on the teaching profession, the use of technology in the classroom, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Moreover, there is a study about pre-service pre-primary EFL teacher beliefs about teaching English to very young learners. The findings of the study suggested that curriculum designers need to reconsider the ability of educational programs to meet the needs of pre-service EFL teachers and pre-service EFL teachers need additional training in English content knowledge and pronunciation. The polarized view of native language and EFL instruction should be reconsidered in light of current perceptions of bilingualism and bilingual education. Farkas designed a new reflective tool and experimented with the beliefs and experiences gained with pre-service English teachers teaching.

4.1.5. Motivation and self-efficacy

Guijarro and Manuel investigated the “Emotional Intelligence” construct (emotionality, self-control, wellbeing, sociability, self-motivation, and adaptability) of EFL pre-service primary teachers, and the findings revealed that relationships with coworkers and context-appropriateness are crucial to the development of emotional intelligence and teacher wellbeing. Levy and Popa explored the primary driving forces behind pre-service EFL teachers’ decision to enroll in teacher education as well as their perceptions of the significance of a number of internal and external factors, including self-efficacy, the availability of a support system, and program satisfaction, concerning their choice to pursue a teaching career.

4.2. “How to educate”

4.2.1. Curriculum

The research on curriculum focused on the content, pedagogy, and selection of teaching materials for teaching pre-service EFL teachers. In this aspect of content, scholars believed that adding intercultural training and debates into English teaching and teacher training curricula helped to improve pre-service EFL teachers’ related competence. For pedagogy, it was found through empirical studies that cooperative learning helped to improve self-efficacy of pre-service EFL teachers and blended collaborative writing contributed to argumentative essay writing. Digital game-based language learning had a positive impact on pre-service EFL teachers’ language competence and language learning strategies. In terms of materials selection, Dennis analyzed the readability and understandability of second language acquisition materials for pre-service EFL teachers. He reminded EFL teacher educators of the importance of readability and understandability for the selection criteria of materials. In addition to this, Hadi explored the nature of the curriculum through interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations, ultimately finding that problems with the curriculum included a lack of ELT competencies, a lack of balance between theory and practice, and a lack of facilitation of contextual and integrated learning experiences.

4.2.2. Practicum

Most language teacher education (LTE) programs worldwide include practicum as a crucial component. The goal of the practicum is to allow teacher students to apply the theories they have learned while getting a taste of the authentic teaching environment. Therefore, he

investigated and summarized pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of their practicum. The results showed that most participants were dissatisfied with their practicums, describing them as inadequate, brief, poorly structured, and impractical. Mudra concluded the obstacles experienced by those teaching English in rural schools during their Teaching Practicum Program (TTP). El Masry and Saad examined the experiences and tensions of five pre-service EFL teachers who participated in a Community of Practice (CoP) during the practicum stage.

4.3. "Where to educate"

The discussion of the role of diverse settings in teacher education has been a part of the development of formal teacher education for almost all of its history. In the papers of the last five years, scholars have focused on the different roles of university, primary and secondary school settings in teacher education, and community settings have also been mentioned. Universities mainly provide platforms for pre-service teachers to learn professional content and develop professional competence, while primary and secondary schools and communities provide environments for students to practice.

5. Discussion

5.1. Strengths and weaknesses of study abroad on pre-service EFL teacher education

In the past five years, overseas empirical studies on pre-service EFL teacher education have gained rather a good production. There are places worth learning from, such as rich theoretical support. The research methods are mainly qualitative and mixed studies, which are conducive to an in-depth understanding of pre-service English teachers, and the addition of quantitative research methods enhances the objectivity of the study. Attention is paid to the pre-service training of teachers who teach different age groups and students. In addition to the familiar pre-service teachers in primary and secondary schools, there are also pre-school pre-service teachers, and pre-service teachers for the elderly, which carries out the idea of lifelong learning. However, there are some shortcomings in the study. Regarding research subjects, the sample size of the 43 studies was small. For research methods, there is no application of action research, which is an important research method in the field of teacher professional development. The direction of the research was mainly "what to educate" and "how to educate", but few studies have been done on "where to educate". From the point of "what to educate", there is a lack of research on the cultivation of pre-service EFL teachers' academic ability and thinking ability. Therefore, in future research, the discussion on how to cultivate pre-service EFL teachers into research-oriented teachers and the attention to the cultivation of their thinking ability, especially higher-order thinking ability should be increased. In "how to cultivate", there is a lack of research on integrated pre-service and in-service education modes. In terms of "where to train", research has been conducted mainly in primary and secondary schools and universities, and there is a lack of research in community settings and policy.

5.2. Implications for pre-service EFL teacher education research in China

Research needs to be locally based and enriched with research themes. Firstly, research on pre-service EFL teacher education in China can be in line with policy changes, such as the new College Entrance Examination, the new curriculum reform, and the new curriculum standards, so that teacher education and student cultivation can be mutually reinforced. Secondly, researchers could focus on urgent practical problems. For example, there is no formal teaching and curriculum outline for pre-service EFL teacher education in China, and there is no corresponding guidance document for curriculum development. Therefore, Discussing this issue thoroughly and developing a curriculum for pre-service EFL teacher education that is appropriate for the actual situation in China and to standardize teacher education is needed.

Finally, being in line with the trend of the times and training pre-service EFL teachers with digital literacy and higher-order thinking ability as well as research-oriented teachers to promote teacher transformation. This is because as technology advances, educational technology becomes a hot topic in education and will require higher educational technology competence from teachers in the future. Research-oriented teachers should be cultivated because the new curriculum reform of basic education has given teachers new missions and responsibilities, and teachers need to become researchers. However, the current pre-service EFL teacher education is still challenging to foster English teachers in basic education who can adapt to the requirements of the new curriculum. The theoretical property and generalizability of empirical research need to be enhanced. By combing the empirical research papers of pre-service EFL teachers in China, it could be found that the empirical research has a single theoretical support and a small number of research subjects, so when doing experiments, finding different theoretical frameworks to discuss problems and solve them from different perspectives and increasing samples to improve the credibility are necessary.

6. Conclusion

Pre-service EFL teacher education is a complex system, and a full understanding of it requires more diverse methods and theoretical support. Although this study analyzes papers from academic journals in the ProQuest Education Database in the past five years, it does not cover monographs, research papers, and dissertations, and the period needed to be larger. Therefore, the study has limitations, and future research needs to collect and analyze more extensive literature data to obtain more reliable and accurate conclusions.

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