
THE INFLUENCE OF THE PRACTICUM COURSE ON EFL STUDENT TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study is to identify through the practicum course the desirable characteristics of the effective student teacher who is going to teach English as a foreign language as perceived by English language teacher trainer (the researcher), fellow student teachers, and the practicum supervisor. It involved a total of 103 female student teachers divided to 48 student teachers in fall semester and 55 in spring semester. Data was collected through observation and filling out a questionnaire, class log, evaluation performance and interviews. Although these student teachers taught at least twenty hours a week on average and often took on additional responsibilities which shows a giving rise to anxiety among some participants, it has led to greater self-awareness and increased confidence in participants' own ability and expertise, and an endorsement of their teaching style and practice. Furthermore, the challenges that these teachers faced were teaching methods, high-stakes testing, their language proficiency and ways to motivate their students to learn English.*

KEYWORDS: Practicum, peer- observation, student teacher, mediation between practice and theory.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is viewed as a continuous process of communication between the teacher who transmits messages and students who respond to these messages. Yet, in the last five decades the criteria for effective teaching have created a simple educational research question toward revealing and defining the characteristics of the “good teacher”(Allen, 1987). However, there is no agreement on the characteristics, desirable behavior, and qualifications for an ideal teacher. In fact, in Kuwait students spend twelve years studying English in primary, middle and secondary schools, but the results are questionable because Kuwaiti students' English proficiency is relatively low. We do not really know how the teachers who are trying to carry out teaching English as a foreign language view their effects on the learners or how the curriculum is being designed and implemented. Therefore, teaching practice through the practicum course for student teachers to be qualified, can help these student teachers to combine their knowledge classroom content, lesson plan content, and instructional pedagogy to reach an acceptable level for being an effective teachers. Although this is true, English teacher training for elementary school in Kuwait is offered by the College of Basic Education (CBE), a college that trains and graduates teachers mainly for primary levels; thus, a practicum program (course) has been designed within the major sheet for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in elementary schools to provide a structure for the implementation of practice and to ensure high-quality experiences for student teachers. This practicum course is school based which is considered a highly influential and central component in helping student teachers learn to teach (Al Sohmani, 2012).

Elements of practicum

Students in the CBE are expected to achieve an important aim once they finish their practicum course. Through the practicum student teachers are exposed to an experience that requires the practical application of theory. Furthermore, students enrolled in the practicum course are provided with opportunities to participate in supervised, professional settings by practicing teaching in real public elementary schools. Moreover, through the practicum, the principles and theories discussed in the classroom come to life through the integration and practical application of these theories and methods which are gained through the formal theoretical courses of study, allowing development of qualified competencies that boost personal and professional growth.

Rational

To achieve a better understanding of what language teacher education should be, it is important to take a closer look at the knowledge base of second or foreign language teachers of English, their pre-service education and in-service training (Cheng, Ren, & Wang, 2003). By doing this, it enables teacher educators to understand where language teachers are, what their professional needs are, and how they can be assisted to attain their professional goals in various teacher education programs.

Therefore, language teaching differs in essence from teaching other subjects, especially in terms of the nature of the process where the means of instruction is carried out. And because EFL teacher training programs are crucial for developing student teachers' pedagogical skills, the practicum course where this language is practiced is viewed as critical to the development of student teachers because it is their first hands on experience with teaching (Al Sohbani, 2012). Moreover, through an effective practicum feedback, the student teachers focus on the task and the associated learning outcomes and inform these student teachers whether they are on the right track or not. So, this paper aims to identify the desirable characteristics of the effective student teacher who is going to teach English as a foreign language as perceived by English language teacher trainer (the researcher), fellow student teachers, and the practicum supervisor. It is our hope that the findings of this study might help the upgrading of language teachers training programs in general and specifically, the program that is offered by the College of Basic Education (CBE) for the benefit of potential English teachers and learners.

Research Questions

- 1) What level of difficulties student teachers are having in their teaching context through the practicum course?
- 2) What impact does the practicum course has on the student teachers?
- 3) What professional skills has the practicum provided for the student teachers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Any practicum program emphasizes on some features such as: personal characteristic, practicum requirements, pedagogical knowledge, and demonstrating and criticism factor. Each factor has its consequence in helping student teachers to progress their pedagogical skills (Ali and Al-Adawi, 2013)

Personal Characteristics Factor

Many researchers emphasized two factors contributing to success or failure of learning and teaching: the learners themselves, and the teachers (Colbert et al., 2008). According to Freeman and Johnson the most important factor in student learning progress is the teachers, and teacher quality outweighs other factors such as motivation, funding, materials and class sizes (1998). Colbert and his colleagues stated that improving student teacher quality is both common and necessary, and it depends not only on the college preparation courses, but also on professional development, which should create meaningful learning experiences for student teachers (2008).

Accordingly, qualified teachers from these student teachers can create the best environment for learning. As identified, English teachers use different modes of communications, i.e., their voice, body movement, and the audio and audiovisual devices, to convey ideas, concepts, and thoughts to their learners. Therefore, classroom communication is thus an intellectually, and linguistically complex process liable to break down. This broken down in communication results in poor teaching and learning (Smith et al. 2007). Furthermore, Curtain and Pesola suggested that foreign language student teachers should possess a combination of competencies and background that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers" (1994, p. 241).

Practicum Requirement Factor

Smith stated that the practicum is the most important module in teacher education (2010). According to Yarrow, student teachers regard the practicum component as the most important part of their course as it support them when they begin working in the "real life" (1992). Yarrow added that within the teacher training colleges' context, academics vary in their perception whether they do or do not value the practicum course. In general, they consider the practicum is the single most powerful intervention in professional preparation (1992). Smith and his colleagues showed that the practicum was an important element in teacher education (2007). Also, Price noted that student teachers see practicum as an important central part of pre-service teacher education and student teachers consider it the most important, satisfying, relevant, practical, feature of their pre-service education (1987). The student teachers believe they can gain from it, and it is the most realistic feature in their course in which they demand for increase quantity and quality of such course (Price, 1987).

Pedagogical Knowledge Factor

Freeman and Johnson argued that the core of language teacher education should center on the activity of the process of teaching itself, the teacher who does it, the context in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done (1998). Gladwell added the true expertise is achieved after an individual has invested 10,000 hours in learning and practicing (2008). However, while student teachers are required after graduating to participate in professional development activities, it is often the case that they are not involved in selecting and planning those activities, and that professional development may not be closely tied to classroom practice (Eaton, 2011). Eaton indicates that one of the critical flaws of education is the lack of emphasizing that learning must be done at all times and in all context: formal, non-formal and informal (2011). English language learning is obviously insufficient if it takes place only in the classrooms (Murphys & Calway, 2008).

The practicum course where this language is practiced is viewed as critical to the development of student teachers because it is their first hands on experience with teaching (Al Sohmani, 2012). For

example, some scholars talk about explicit and implicit in how to correct learners' error. For instance, Campillo clarifies the difference between explicit and implicit error correction, saying that the former means providing the right form soon after an error occurs while the latter suggests showing that a mistake has occurred and it needs to be corrected (2003, 10). Along with this, teachers' perceptions and preferences may differ in different contexts depending on the learners' and teachers' characteristics and ways of giving feedback. For instance, Sato discusses that teachers should choose errors to be corrected and should not focus on all errors as this may destroy motivation of the students (2003).

5.4 Demonstrating and Criticism Factor

Through the practicum course, the student teachers (trainees) are provided with effective feedback because their comments in the practicum is linked to their level of satisfaction (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). Student teachers usually receive immediately criticism on the problems they are encountering with their lesson through the practicum (Ali, Al-Adwi, 2013). Geringer and his colleagues suggested that the main reason for the practicum is to provide the student teachers with essential feedback in order to facilitate their professional development (2003). Mtika claims that through practicing practicum, student teachers shape their beliefs and thinking (2011). Furthermore, student teachers benefit from the concrete criticism especially around their style and what items they need to work on; as well as craft their own vision of good teaching (Moody, 2009). Moody added that through the practicum the student teachers have the freedom to develop their own teaching style. Also, when student teachers get feedback on their strength and weakness in a vivid way, they can improve their own teaching style and their anticipation and can examine their aims and fears (Moody, 2009). Moreover, White states that when observing student teachers in action followed by oral and written criticism can encourage their thinking and arouses their understanding (2009).

METHOD

Setting

Generally, the practicum course is scheduled to begin at or within one week of the beginning of the academic term for which the student teacher is registered for the course. The student teachers and the on-site supervisor appointed by the college jointly construct the practicum plan so that the student teachers receive tutor-written guidelines for their practicum for the first five teaching days of the practicum program and the rest of the semester would be teaching practice inside actual classrooms. For the practicum to take place in Kuwaiti public elementary schools, a formal approval of the school principal and the practicum program coordinator from the CBE should be submitted to the Ministry of Education which includes the names of the student teachers who are coming to practice teaching inside these public elementary schools. Also, all practicum requirements (hours, site visit, and required paperwork) must be completed and submitted by the last day prior to the final week in that semester. The practicum requires a total student time commitment of not less than 250 hours. For fall and spring terms, students worked 20 hours per week during a 12-week per term. In essence, although 250 hours is the minimum for completion of the practicum, the experience should involve extended contact and therefore should span the length of the term. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Education assigns the schools where the practicum course will be carried out. Three schools in each of the six school district, a total of 18 schools, were chosen to implement this study.

Participants

All participants were female in their senior year in college and have only the practicum course to pass before graduating and earning their degree in teaching English as a foreign language in primary public schools in Kuwait. It should be mentioned that the public schools in Kuwait are segregated by gender into all-girl and all-boy schools. Only female teachers at the elementary level teach both genders. There were 48 student teachers in fall semester and 55 in spring semester. A total of 103 participants were involved in this study. They all attended the class meeting during the first week of both terms. This session was held during the first week of both fall and spring semesters. During the two semesters, practicum students participated in the following activities:

- (a) observations and other activities that familiarized them with the classroom and its students
- (b) lesson planning and materials design
- (c) actual teaching
- (d) reflective self-evaluation

Data Collection

The data collection and some of the analysis were carried out over the fall and spring semesters of 2015. Data were gathered in three stages: first, class log writing through observation were analyzed, secondly, filling out a questionnaire, and thirdly, an interview where student teachers were asked to draw on what they have experienced during their time in practicum to reflect on their learning.

The statements analyzed in this case included:

1. The identification of specific skills the student teachers have developed during their practicum course.
2. The identification of what the student teachers have learnt from a personal perspective, during their practicum, including the possible identification of strengths and areas in need of improvement.
3. The reflection on the student teachers' overall experience and discuss how this might inform their future college studies or progression into their chosen career as foreign language teachers.

Participants' Questionnaire

Each participant observed her fellow English language student teacher for 45 minutes (a whole class period) as she was giving her lesson and then filled out the questionnaire (appendix A). The questionnaire consists of fourteen statements in a format of Likert Scale.

Participants' Observation

All participants in this study used also observation for their fellow student teacher. There are many reasons for the researcher to apply observation through student teachers in their practicum course. One purpose is to evaluate the teaching process. A second purpose is to learn to teach where student teachers "pick up the tricks of the trade" (Richards, 1999). A third purpose is to learn to observe. This process helps them to learn to collect, analyze and interpret descriptions of teaching in unobtrusive and nonjudgmental ways. Finally, the last purpose is to become more self-aware. As the student teachers were observing their fellow English language student teacher in action, they were writing their notes in their class log.

Participants' Class Log

The class log had an on-going record of daily or weekly tasks, accomplishments, questions, feelings, challenges, revelations, reactions, or modifications of their lesson plan. Moreover, the class log was kept at the English language student teachers' side during a lesson. The types of information they had to note was:

- 1) mistakes that student teachers make during the teaching process,
- 2) key points of the lesson that are difficult and need emphasis,
- 3) vocabulary or language features in the lesson that will benefit the student teachers to explicitly notice, and
- 4) interesting or useful language that will appear in the student teacher's procedural language.

Student teachers were strongly encouraged to maintain the class log daily or weekly and not expect to complete it at the end of the term. With host instructor permission, practicum students could review class logs with the host classroom student at the end of the class for which the class log was kept. Class logs were the focus for data analysis as these provided rich, self-reported insights into their practical learning experience (Smith *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, the participants submitted the practicum class log to the English language teacher trainer (researcher) by the final week during fall and spring terms.

Participants' Evaluation Performance

Two official written evaluations of the student teacher's performance by the On-site Supervisor were also completed, one at the mid-term and one at the conclusion of the practicum. The forms include qualitative evaluation of the student teacher's performance. Completed evaluation forms are shared with the student teacher before submission to the practicum instructor by the indicated deadline.

Participants' Interview

Student teachers were also invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to:

- 1) probe and clarify responses (Cameron-Jones & O'hara, 1999),
- 2) allow student teachers to further elaborate on the key themes and
- 3) validate the analysis of the observation from the class log.

DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION*Student Teachers Expectations from the Practicum*

One of the values of the practicum practice is that one student teacher's values, beliefs and practices was in some ways different from those of the host instructor and the other English language student teachers, after all they were not always in harmony about what the best teaching is, but they were still able to work respectfully together and follow the instructions given in teaching methods courses. In fact, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education has been giving assistance to teachers by already setting up English resources and instructional workshops in many educational school districts. Some of the student teachers quoted that:

"by following the already constructed lesson plan was difficult for the first few days, but to have the opportunity to rework made every step valuable and useful. They added that they learned a lot and will be able to put the whole procedure into practice in the future".

Through the observation, frequent negative reactions seem to stem from the student teachers' failure. Some student teachers quoted that:

"they always fear of embarrassment if the way they teach is wrong."

The on-site supervisor added that:

"as observer I am never able to observe a natural, undisturbed lesson because the student teachers may well conduct their lessons which takes place differently than the usual practice".

The on-site supervisor added,

"Usually the classroom dynamics and the interactions between teacher-student and student-student will always be affected by the presence of another person".

The researcher noticed how the on-site supervisor focused on specific points and how she discussed these points with the student teachers. Some of these points are:

- the use of communicative activities based on oral work with slow unmotivated learners, and
- how to integrate the four skill (listening, speaking, reading and writing) of the English language within the topic of the lesson throughout grades 1-5.

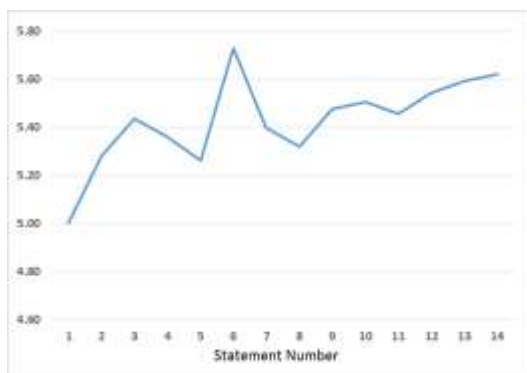


Figure (1) shows the average answer per statement for all Student Teachers

The researcher also noticed that of the class sizes (40 children) are difficult for the student teachers to handle; as well as, there is a lack of suitable teaching materials and other teaching aids.

Giving the fact that every teaching- learning situation is unique, and that the student teachers differ from one another, there are teaching behaviors that are considered to be effective in one setting yet less effective in another. According to responses to question 2- "what impact does the practicum course has on the student teachers?"- A great majority of the student teachers (%85.5) followed the principle application of the theories they gained from the classes they were enrolled in by following exactly how to implement the lesson plan from A-Z.

Problems Involving Student Teachers

One highly-rated problem involving student teachers is their insufficiency in the knowledge of English language. Although student teachers in the CBE have studied English for 4 years, their basic skills are very limited. Again, they seldom have exposure to or practice of English outside class. In the researcher's view, most of the student teachers had three hours of English per week, resulting in forty-five hours per semester or ninety hours per year. Archibald et al. stated that *"Learning a second language for 95 hours per year for six years will not lead to functional bilingualism and fluency in the second language. Expectations must be realistic"* (2006, p. 3).

Another problem is when it comes to error correction, English language student teachers addressed the problem with only to the learner who produced the error. This procedure was wrong because if one of the learners made the error, it's very likely that others would make the same error, so when the whole class reviews and follows the correction, the whole class will benefit together from this practice. Some of the errors:

- they likes and they don't likes,
- he is always likes,
- he don't like eating fruits,
- he doesn't like eating fruit,
- he have got healthy teeth,
- I will let the student "song" for "sing" with me,
- "bairs" instead of "pairs",
- "combarajon" instead of "comparison",
- "yogreat" instead of "yogurt",
- "desert" instead of "dessert",
- "vavorite" instead of "favorite"
- "borger" instead of "burger".

Another problem that was facing student teachers was the impracticality of the guidelines for managing activities the curricula had too much to cover for a short time, and had difficulty to understand the details in it, and the curricula was not up-to-date and student teachers lacked opportunities to choose their own.

In addition, %14 of the student teachers used materials that are not up to date and presented their explanation by not using technology. Furthermore, %11 of the student teachers were having problems in asking and adapting questions to the learners, compared to %23 where in this procedure. This problem was due to the use of the code-switching between the target language and the mother tongue language, Arabic, which in return confused the learners.

Problems Concerning class log

One of the problems facing student teachers is their class logs. Class log as a teaching tool will only work effectively in small groups (classes less than 10 students). This is because with more than 10 students, even the most experienced teacher is so busy with classroom management issues that she cannot attend to the correction sheet and teach at the same time. Even though the percent of the student teachers who had problems in holding learners' attention and controlling them was %18, however, the learners were interested in how these student teachers provoked strong external actions to invite these learners into doing certain tasks. This percent was due to the fact the classes had 25-35 learners in each class. However, in small classes, the student teacher can simply note a word or two on the sheet at the moment some interesting language is produced and then get on with the lesson. As for the classes observed by the participants, they kept their class logs with details as following: (a) most student teachers' actual class procedures differed from the planned lesson, (b) the student teachers didn't think of appropriate ways to respond to learner errors, or even help manage error correction. For example, one student teacher in her class log wrote, "even though all the student teachers we had to observe as they were practicing their teaching, they always had great ideas on teaching and very creative." Another

student teacher commented, "having to look at our fellow friends as they were individually practicing teaching taught us to be sensitive toward the learners' needs."

The student teachers moderately agreed with the problems involving themselves. The top five highest ranks of their problems were concerned with 1) teaching writing, 2) their own minimal use and/or exposure to English, and 3) using games and songs effectively in English classes.

The student teachers agreed at a high level that learners were a problematic factor in the success of their teaching. The highest problems included 1) learners not having enough practice in English on their own, 2) learners' insufficient knowledge and skills of English, 3) learners talking in Arabic (the learners' first language) before translating to English, 4) learners having problems with writing, and 5) learners lacking confidence in speaking English.

Observation Notes

Some of the observed notes in the area of teaching that student teachers have perceived for their fellow student teachers who were in the practicing practicum are:

- little time the student teacher waited after asking a question and getting a response,
- the student teachers mainly were asking either a Yes-No questions or a Tag questions,
- the student teacher didn't use the classroom space well. She was always in the front of the class, didn't walk among the learners and her eye contact was mainly toward the front seaters,
- giving instructions was mainly orally, and have the learners repeat (parroting) everything she says,
- the student teachers gave around 10-20 minutes time to learners to stay on activities during group work,
- almost all student teachers used certain praises (well done, clap for X name, and you are excellent) for correct response.

Through the practicum, the student teachers found that their role in the classrooms was to:

- provide useful learning experiences,
- provide a model of correct language use,
- answer learners' questions by speaking out and not afraid of making mistakes,
- correct learners' errors.

The most common theme from the observations was that the atmosphere in the classes was very exciting. There were a lot of activities designed to arouse the learners' interest. During the lessons, most of the student teachers used songs or games to teach and entertain the learners.

The student teachers' non- verbal cues %52 was exploited effectively, whereas %12 spent most of their time sitting at the teachers' desk, looking at the book and talking. %9 of the student teachers voice tone was not raised to attract the learners' attention compared to %91 of them had different voice tone. However, one of the items arising from the observation and the questionnaire is that %51 of the student teachers provided clear instructions compared to %12 didn't model the task with an example before applying it to the whole class. Moreover, figure 2 shows how close the items in each statement for all student teachers' practices. It shows that the fluctuation for the answers of the statements are so

significant and close that all students had practiced and delivered their lessons in an identical way to each other.

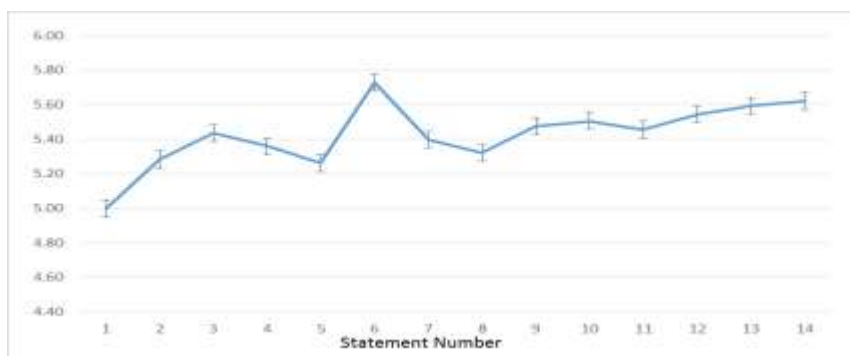


Figure 2 The Standard Deviation for Each Statement

CONCLUSION

Kuwait is one of the Arab countries that emphasize on educating its children in English both domestically and abroad. Therefore, qualified English language teachers is always in demand and through the teacher training colleges, effective English language teachers should be provided. This indicates that to upgrade professionally teachers of English in Kuwait is an urgent need and requires the teaching context where these student teachers teach should not involve very large classes, and have the choice to use imaginative technique to convey their lessons.

In this paper, mainly the English language student teachers focused on how they teach English in the classroom. This required them to refer to theories of second language acquisition or methodological models, but their focus was more on how they teach language than how they believe language is structured or acquired. All English language student teachers exerted a concerted effort to picture the practices that they use to bring their values and beliefs to life in the classroom. Of course this would have been more difficult if these English language student teachers had limited teaching experience.

In addition, to graduate qualified teachers, it is widely understood that what is expected from student teachers these days is multi-faceted. They are required to teach effectively in challenging environments and to cater and deal effectively to a variety of countless administrative tasks.

Consequently, most English language student teachers, especially the ones in their practicum period had to teach at least twenty hours a week on average and often took on additional responsibilities outside regular school hours such as social and security supervision. Because of overloaded burden, their teaching styles started to fossilize into ones of rote-learning, teaching grammar and translation with Arabic as the medium of instruction, teacher-centered classroom activities, spoon-feeding, and so on.

Moreover, in this study, the researcher found out that the class size should be reduced to facilitate the effective use of language activities, the need to increase the time offered for English language teaching so that the learners' skills could be advanced, and the student teachers had a positive, truthful and

respectful attitude toward their fellow student teachers and the on-site supervisors. As the student teachers finished their teaching period, they discussed their English language teaching problems realistically with their on-site supervisor.

Also, through the practicum the researcher found that peer teaching and peer- observing to be an excellent introductory process for the practicum course. It leads the student teachers quickly into the teaching role in a relatively relaxed situation. In addition, the researcher found out that the teaching practice by the student teachers are interesting and enjoyable. The challenges that these teachers faced were teaching methods, high-stakes testing, their language proficiency and ways to motivate their students to learn English. Therefore, it is not only necessary but also crucial in language teacher education programs to be conducted in the EFL context to achieve an understanding of language teachers' knowledge base to get a sense of where they are, to comprehend their teaching context, and to know their professional development needs.

Furthermore, this paper had concluded with certain believes about the practicum program as seen in the following statements:

- student teachers tend to work in isolation from each other,
- student teachers don't have much understanding of the overall philosophy of the practicum course,
- there is no proper method form placing student teachers into the most appropriate grade level,
- the curriculum is based on communicative approach and the integration of the four language skills; however, the student teachers' English language competencies was low for these two items to take place.

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Index (a)

Student Teacher Lesson Appraisal Guide

Observe your fellow student teacher carefully during the lesson and then complete the Lesson Appraisal Guide. Put a ring round the number which most closely indicates your view of the student teacher's performance. 1 is a low score and 7 a high score.

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| 1. Skill in gaining the learners' attention | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 2. Skill in explaining and narrating | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 3. Skill in giving directions | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 4. Skill in asking and adapting questions to the learners. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 5. Skill in recognizing learners difficulties of understanding | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 6. Quality of voice and speech habits | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 7. Use of non-verbal comes (e.g. gestures and facial expressions) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 8. Skill in encouraging appropriate learner responses | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 9. Skill in holding learners' attention | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 10. Skill in gaining the participation of the learners | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 11. Skill in controlling the learners | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 12. Use of aids (Whiteboards, data show, illustrative materials etc.) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 13. Allocation of time for learner learning | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 14. Lesson planning and structure as performed-by the student-teacher | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |

Comments:-----

