



A SURVEY OF FULL-TIME TEACHING INTERNSHIP FOR ENGLISH EDUCATION MAJORS AT LOCAL UNIVERSITIES: A CASE STUDY OF ZHAOQING UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Teaching internship is a necessary part of teacher training. Zhaoqing University has jointly established Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones or Collaborative Education Cooperation Zones with seven counties. Some normal university students complete important pre-job training by interning at full-time teaching positions in these pilot zones. Through journal reviews, on-site visits, and focus group interviews, this study explores the problems encountered by English education majors during their full-time teaching internship in these zones and strategies to address them to provide references for the continuous improvement of full-time teaching internship.

KEYWORDS: English education majors, full-time teaching internship, teacher education, "promoting learning through competitions", Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones.

I. INTRODUCTION

Full-time teaching internship refers to the internship activities undertaken by senior normal university and college students who, after completing the school's required core courses and undergoing a series of pre-job training including public required courses for teacher education and professional required courses for teacher education, teach at rural primary and secondary schools with weak basic education. The difference between full-time teaching internship and other types of internship is that students fulfil all the responsibilities of their internship positions, which greatly enhances their abilities. Full-time teaching internship can most effectively and directly promote the professional development of normal university students and improve their comprehensive qualities (Luo, 2009).

In 2012, Zhaoqing University signed an agreement with the Huaiji County Government to establish the first Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zone. Subsequently, Fengkai, Guangning, and Deqing Counties set up county-level Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones. Zhaoqing University has jointly established Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones or Collaborative Education Cooperation Zones with seven counties/districts, set up 260 educational internship bases, and selected 1,600 normal university students annually to undertake full-time teaching internship (Xiao, 2019). Zhaoqing University has led in establishing a 'university + local government + primary and secondary schools' collaborative education model. For eleven consecutive years, the school has continuously been sending normal university students to full-time teaching positions at primary and secondary schools in remote rural areas. It has become an important component of the 'Zhaoqing Model' for rural teacher education reform for normal university students to undertake full-time teaching at county-level Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones.

Taking the 2022 graduating class of English education majors at Zhaoqing University as an example, this paper explores the problems encountered and strategies proposed by English education majors undertaking full-time teaching internship at the Fengkai County Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zone.



II. RESEARCH DESIGN

Pre-job teaching internship provides invaluable opportunities for teacher candidates to gain hands-on experience in real classrooms. However, adapting to full-time teaching responsibilities in rural schools poses unique challenges. This study explores the experiences of English education majors interning at Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zone in Fengkai County, aiming to identify common problems faced by interns and formulate some improvement strategies. The research design combines quantitative analysis of internship journals with qualitative insights from site visits and focus group interviews. Triangulating these data sources will provide a multidimensional understanding of interns' perspectives, revealing not just problems but also interns' solutions and growth.

A. Research Subjects

The research subjects were 19 fourth-year English education majors at Zhaoqing University, including 16 female and 3 male students with an average age of 22. They took an internship in primary and secondary schools in villages and small towns in Fengkai County. All the normal university students undertaking full-time teaching internship completed professional courses on English teaching in their third year, including Teaching Research and Design, English Testing Theories and Methods, Major Foreign Language Teaching Methods in Foreign Countries, etc. They possessed professional knowledge and skills related to English teaching. At the same time, these normal university students also completed courses at the teacher education platform, such as Fundamental Theories of Education, Professional Ethics and Regulations for Teachers, Secondary Education and Management, etc. They had had a certain degree of professional knowledge reserves regarding primary and secondary school teaching.

These 19 students were assigned to 9 primary and secondary schools in Fengkai County, one of the Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zone established by Zhaoqing University, to undertake 18 weeks of full-time teaching internship. They took on English teaching duties and headteacher duties, with the classes they taught ranging from 1 to 3. Due to the lack of teachers at rural schools, some interns also needed to teach other courses such as music, art, extracurricular reading, and local traditional culture.

B. Research Methods

This study adopted the methods of reviewing internship journals, on-site visits, and focus group interviews. The research subjects were required to submit internship journals on the school Alumni Platform. By studying 222 internship journals, common issues encountered during the internship were discovered, and attention was paid to how the students handled and addressed these difficulties during the 18-week internship.

On-site visits were conducted at three Fengkai primary and secondary schools to understand the actual circumstances, including teaching tasks, classes taught, working environment, living conditions, etc. Through discussions with mentor teachers and administrators of the internship schools, interns gained a comprehensive understanding of the English full-time teaching work. Regarding the difficulties mentioned in their journals, communication was carried out with the internship schools to explore solutions.

Focus group interviews were conducted after the on-site visits. Face-to-face exchanges were carried out with the interns to discuss the problems encountered during the full-time teaching internship and their causes from the perspectives of the university, internship schools, and individuals. The author conducted two focus group interviews. The first had 4 participants and lasted 1.5 hours. The second lasted 40 minutes with 2 participants. The interviews were conducted while walking around campus, creating a relaxed atmosphere for the interviewees to speak freely.

C. Research Steps

(1) Determine research subjects: The author guided the English education majors to undertake internship at the Fengkai Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zone. The 19 Zhaoqing University English education majors assigned to Fengkai for full-time teaching internship became the research subjects for this study.

(2) Full-time teaching internship: Zhaoqing University arranged transportation to send the students to various primary and secondary schools in Fengkai County. The interns undertook one semester of full-time teaching internship. During the full-time teaching internship, the internship schools assigned a mentor teacher responsible for guiding the interns' specific teaching and headteacher work. The School of Foreign Languages of Zhaoqing University also assigned an instructor responsible for tracking and guiding the interns.



(3) Teacher guidance: As the university instructor for the interns, the author needed to urge the interns daily on the school Alumni Platform to clock in and review the internship journals submitted by the students. The interns' teaching designs and teaching reflections were reviewed regularly, and guidance was provided. By reading these written materials, problems encountered by the interns during the internship process were discovered promptly, which helped determine the priorities for on-site visits and outlines for the interviews.

(4) On-site visits and focus group interviews: Two on-site visits and interviews were conducted during the mid-point of the internship period. Regarding problems discovered earlier, communication was carried out with the interns, school leaders, and mentor teachers to discuss common issues during the internship and strategies to address them.

(5) Analyze results: All the internship journals, on-site visit records, and interview notes were reviewed. The problems raised by the interns and their performance were analyzed according to Zhaoqing University's latest graduation requirements for English majors to discover deficiencies in the full-time teaching interns during the internship process and explore strategies to address them.

III. RESULTS ANALYSIS

Teaching internship allows teachers-to-be to apply academic knowledge to real classrooms. However, rural schools present contextual factors, like student demographics, infrastructure limitations, and community values, that interns may not have encountered before. Negotiating these realities while balancing full-time teaching duties benefits interns' adaptability and resourcefulness. By elucidating interns' thought processes and actions confronting contextual constraints, this study seeks to highlight areas for better preparatory training. The goal is not to criticize struggling interns but to formulate constructive recommendations so future interns can thrive in rural placements.

A. Lack of Understanding Towards Full-time Teaching Internship at Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones

The school requires interns to submit at least 1 internship journal entry every two weeks. During the first week of the full-time teaching internship, the 19 students submitted 0 journal entry; during the second week, 1 entry was submitted; during the third week, 7 entries were submitted; and during the fourth week, 3 entries were submitted. The number of journal entries submitted by the students fell far short of the minimum requirements. The submitted journals showed that the interns lacked understanding of undertaking full-time teaching internship at rural primary and secondary schools in the mountains and had difficulty adapting to the environment at the full-time teaching internship schools. Starting in the fifth week of the full-time teaching internship, reminded by the author, the interns began to successively submit overdue internship journals, with the most frequently mentioned issue being their lack of adaptation to the full-time teaching internship at rural schools.

Intern 1: The environment at this town's central primary school was acceptable, but after a few days, the school had no running water because the town's water supply was insufficient. An enormous difficulty all of a sudden!

Intern 2: I already understood this town's circumstances earlier, knowing that it is located deep in the mountains with relatively poor economic conditions, but I still felt quite disappointed when I first arrived here.

Intern 3: The first night here, our entire dormitory collectively suffered insomnia because it was too hot!

Intern 4: When I first arrived at the internship school and saw the living conditions, to be honest, I collapsed.

Intern 5: This remote place is surrounded by mountains and rivers. You have to take a boat to get to another prosperous town. There is no vegetable market, no supermarket, no bus, it's like being cut off from the world.

Regarding the situation where the interns only started becoming familiar with the full-time teaching internship in the fifth week, an analysis of their teaching journals revealed that the cause was their lack of understanding towards undertaking full-time teaching internship at the Fengkai Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zone prior to the internship. Fengkai County is a county in northern Zhaoqing City. Compared to other internship locations in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, it has a relatively remote location and relatively lagging economic and educational development. "The phenomenon of inverted educational resources is severe: the more remote, the more rural, the worse the allocation of educational resources, and the more unfair the education received by rural students (Fang, 2015)." The state advocates paying attention to the development of rural teacher education and revitalizing rural education. Since 2012, Zhaoqing University has successively established teacher education innovation experimental zones in counties and districts such as Huaiji County, Fengkai County, Deqing County, etc.,



and continuously selected normal students for internship in these innovation experimental zones, gradually forming the "Zhaoqing Model" for revitalizing rural education (Xiao, 2021). These innovative experiences in teacher education were affirmed and praised by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education and other normal schools at the "Guangdong Province 'New Normal' Construction Summary Conference" held on November 19, 2021.

The interns were unaware that Zhaoqing University had jointly established a Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones with Fengkai County, and they were confused about why they were assigned to undertake internship at schools with challenging conditions in rural areas. In contrast, some classmates could intern in economically developed cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen instead. Therefore, during the first 4 weeks of the internship, many interns expressed sighs of speechlessness or chose not to write journals to convey their feelings of disappointment. As the university instructor reviewing journals on the Alumni Platform, the author guided each student, telling them that what they were doing was very meaningful and that they needed to integrate into the life and work of the internship schools as much as possible.

B. Weak Classroom Management Skills

It was learned from the internship journals and focus group interviews that the issue mentioned most frequently by the students was the difficulty of managing classrooms, especially primary school English classes. In the focus group interviews, the interns stated that they had encountered situations where the classroom was noisy and ineffective teaching could not be done. The English foundations of rural primary school students are weaker compared to city students, so their enthusiasm for English classes is not high, and various distractions or disruptions tend to occur in English classes.

Intern A: I teach English to 3 classes, almost all 5th-grade English classes in the primary school. Since the primary school lacks music teachers, I must also teach music classes. When I walk into the classroom, students ask me, 'Teacher, what class are we having today?' As soon as I say it's an English class, the classroom instantly becomes very noisy, with sighs, chatter, and noise blending.

Intern B: I feel powerless sometimes because the students don't listen to me, and it is difficult to manage discipline. Some don't do their homework, fail in the exams, and even plan to drop out. Many are left-behind children without parental supervision at home.

Intern C: Teaching primary school students requires an effective and powerful control in the classroom!

Intern D: I teach 7th-grade English. The students have just become self-conscious in early adolescence and are curious about many things but not very interested in learning English.

Intern E: They talk loudly in class. Sometimes, seeing their cheeky looks, I just want to scold them.

When the author asked what methods could be effectively used to manage classrooms, these interns said they yelled loudly and pretended to be very angry initially to deter the classroom. Later, they would buy prizes to award well-behaved students and punish disruptive children by making them stand or copy out the text, but this could not thoroughly change the students' inattentive and unenthusiastic condition..

C. Overwhelming Workload

Some interns mentioned in their diaries and interviews that their teaching tasks were too heavy, such as multiple classes, many class hours, multiple subjects, a large amount of homework correction, and morning and afternoon reading and dismissal queues, which prolonged their daily working hours.

Intern A: I have to teach three classes and three courses. I teach 16-17 class hours a week, and I'm a bit overwhelmed. Students don't listen well, and I must correct their homework at night. After a week, I'm exhausted!

Intern B: I watch 30 minutes of morning reading before class in the morning, 10 minutes of afternoon reading in the afternoon, and lead the dismissal queues at noon and in the afternoon. I go back to correct the test papers of two classes. I'm pretty tired after a day's work.

Intern F: I'm not used to teaching other courses, but there is no art teacher, so I grit my teeth and do it.

D. Improvement Needed in Headteacher Working Ability

In addition to undertaking English teaching tasks, interns also need to undertake headteacher work with the help of guidance teachers. In the two field investigations, the author asked the same question to the leaders and mentor teachers of the internship schools: "What aspects do you think our English Education Majors need to improve during



the internship?" Their answers focused on the need to improve headteacher working skills. The mentor teacher of Fengkai Central Primary School advised English Education Majors to "get closer to the students and understand their thoughts to improve their headteacher working ability. Good headteacher management of the class can also promote students' learning." The principal of LD Middle School suggested that interns "interact more with other teachers in the school, discover and solve problems through communication, and gain valuable experience in teaching and headteacher management, laying a solid foundation for future work."

In the focus group interviews, the author asked the interns the same question: "What aspects do you think you need to improve during the internship?" Four of the six interns who participated in the interviews said that headteacher working ability needed improvement.

Intern C: I'm not very good at managing students. I only know to act very fiercely, so the students fear me. If I'm very gentle, they won't listen to me. Many left-behind children in the class don't do their homework, and I don't know how to care for them either. Their grades are so bad! Some are even ready to drop out.

Intern F: Two very naughty boys are not afraid of standing punishment or scolding. They even smile at you! I don't know how to manage these students.

Intern D: A girl is in a romantic relationship and has no interest in studying. What should I do?

Intern A: Today, I encountered a very naughty student. He didn't listen in class and fought with others during class. Other teachers told me that this boy has a terrible family background and complicated family circumstances. I feel despondent!

E. "Promoting Learning Through Competitions": Aiding the Growth of Education Majors

After the internship ended, students' internship reports reflected a typical situation where the teaching competitions during the internship had a positive impact on them. The 19 interns had all participated in open-class competitions organized by the internship schools. Some competitions were formal, while others were more like internal exchanges, but they were still competitions. All interns gave positive evaluations of the classroom competitions, believing they were a "test of the knowledge they had learned," "training before taking up a teaching post," "able to motivate themselves to improve various teaching skills," and the "best opportunity to learn from other teachers."

"Promoting learning through competitions" is an educational concept of using competitions for training and improvement during teaching or internship. It can facilitate the rapid growth of English Education Majors in theory and practice. First, when preparing for the competition, students will apply the theoretical knowledge learned at school to instructional design. This process is equivalent to reviewing and combing through the theoretical knowledge, constructing a theoretical framework suitable for the course, and selecting teaching methods and activities in a targeted manner so that book knowledge is internalized as students' "scaffolding." Then, in the competition class, students can demonstrate their professional knowledge, educational theories, teaching skills, personal qualities, etc. This output process transforms students' theoretical knowledge into practical teaching, allowing them to experience the difficulties and joys of teaching. Finally, the judges' comments play an important role in improving students.

"Promoting learning through competitions" sublimates the internship process. The competitions provide students with enjoyable experiences and opportunities to fill in gaps, increasing their confidence in embarking on a teaching career.

IV. DISCUSSION

Internship experiences shape teacher identity and instruct beginning teachers on navigating complex school environments. However, simply documenting problems fails to capture interns' resilience and growth. Surveys of interns' challenges should adopt an asset-based mindset, acknowledging interns' self-reflection and solutions alongside difficulties. Analyzing interns' experiences through a solutions-focused lens provides a roadmap for improving rural teacher training while respecting the capabilities of pre-service teachers. The goal is to develop institutional supports that build on interns' strengths so they can become effective and compassionate teachers meeting the needs of rural students.



A. Viewing Internship Problems from the Graduation Requirements of English Education Majors

To some extent, the problems encountered by English teacher-training interns reflect gaps between the actual performance of English teacher-training interns and the graduation requirements of the 2023 Talent Training Program for English Majors in Zhaoqing University. The graduation requirements of the 2023 Talent Training Program for English Majors in Zhaoqing University have eight significant aspects: teacher ethics, educational passion, subject literacy, teaching ability, class management, comprehensive education, reflective thinking, and communication and cooperation. The difficulties encountered by the English education interns in this study reflect that they need to improve their abilities in class management and comprehensive education.

B. Strategies

At the level of normal universities, before students undertake internship, universities should explain to students the significance of Zhaoqing University setting up the Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones with Huaiji, Fengkai, and other places so that students fully understand that undertaking internship at rural schools is an integral part of revitalizing rural education in China, which allows them to accept the critical meaning of undertaking internship in harsh environments ideologically and emotionally, cultivates noble educational sentiments among normal university students, and enables them to take on internship positions with positive emotions, proper attitudes, and correct values. It can also significantly shorten the time for internship students to adapt to teaching work in rural areas. In addition, during pre-job training, increase the number of courses of and strengthen training on classroom management skills and analyze cases of educating left-behind children in rural areas to help internship students quickly master classroom management skills so they can concentrate more attention on teaching.

At the level of internship schools, internship schools should consider the actual circumstances of interns and arrange teaching tasks appropriately. The principle of two-way selection should be followed in teaching arrangements to avoid assigning work tasks that exceed interns' abilities. Sufficient guidance should be provided for interns at the beginning of the semester, and work should be arranged step by step after interns become familiar with the environment.

At the individual level, during university studies, interns should participate more in social practice activities, including tutoring and volunteer teaching related to educational practice to exercise actual teaching abilities and interpersonal communication skills. In addition, establish the concept of "promoting learning through competitions," actively participate in teacher skills competitions, and use competitions to test one's knowledge and improve practical teaching skills.

V. CONCLUSION

Through investigating the common issues encountered by English education majors undertaking full-time teaching internship at the Fengkai Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Pilot Zones, the results show that there are still specific gaps between English education majors and graduation requirements regarding emotional attitudes, classroom management abilities, and headteacher work. Given the above circumstances, it is recommended that universities optimize teacher training programs, internship schools actively communicate with universities, and students actively participate in teaching practice and social activities in their college life, jointly improving teacher education and assisting teacher candidates in smoothly embarking on teaching positions within a short period of time.

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