

Going More Practical: Linking Theory to Practice in Pre-Service EFL Teacher Education in Egypt

By

Dr Mahmoud M. S. Abdallah

Professor of Curriculum & English Language Instruction (TESOL/TEFL)

Faculty of Education, Assiut University

Email: mahmoud.abdallah@aun.edu.eg

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6567-7651>

Mobile: (+2) 01011953743

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Abstract

This article addresses the critical need to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills in pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education in Egypt. It argues that a more practical orientation in teacher preparation is essential for addressing the specific challenges and opportunities present in Egyptian EFL education. The article explores various strategies and approaches to enhance the quality of EFL teaching and learning, including the role of the practicum, action research, continued professional development, integration of technology, collaborative partnerships, contextualisation of teacher education, and reflective practice. By synthesising insights from empirical research and theoretical perspectives, the article provides a comprehensive framework for fostering a more practically grounded approach to pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt.

Keywords: Pre-service EFL teacher education, theory-practice gap, practicum, action research, professional development, technology integration, reflective practice, contextualisation, Egypt, teacher education reform.

Introduction

In the context of pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education in Egypt, the imperative to equip prospective teachers with both robust theoretical knowledge and practical pedagogical skills is paramount

(Abdallah, 2011). The effective integration of these two domains – theory and practice – is not merely an academic ideal but a fundamental necessity for producing competent and confident educators capable of navigating the multifaceted realities of the Egyptian classroom (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Farrell, 2015). For example, academic writing in the realm of education, particularly in fields like EFL teacher education, serves as a cornerstone for research, the structured articulation of ideas, and the development of data-driven arguments rooted in logical reasoning (Hyland, 2019). However, the complexities inherent in academic disciplines, such as navigating vast amounts of information and intricate theoretical frameworks, often present significant challenges, especially for those preparing to enter the teaching profession (Burns & Richards, 2009).

Thus, this article addresses the critical need to strengthen the link between theory and practice in pre-service EFL teacher education programmes within the Egyptian context. Drawing upon a comprehensive analysis of empirical research and theoretical perspectives, this paper argues that a more practical orientation in teacher preparation is essential for addressing the specific challenges and opportunities present in Egyptian EFL education (Abdallah, 2019; El-Fiki, 2012). I will explore various strategies and approaches that can be implemented to bridge the persistent theory-practice gap, ultimately enhancing the quality of EFL teaching and learning in Egypt. This exploration will encompass the crucial role of the practicum, the potential of action research, the significance of continued professional development, the integration of technology and modern pedagogies, the imperative for collaborative partnerships, the contextualisation of teacher education for Egypt, and the importance of reflective practice and diverse assessment methods. By synthesising insights from diverse perspectives and research findings, this article aims to provide a rigorous and comprehensive framework for fostering a more practically grounded approach to pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt.

The Dichotomy and its Consequences: The Persistent Theory-Practice Gap

The tension between the theoretical underpinnings of academic knowledge and the practical realities of the teaching profession is a well-documented challenge in teacher education (Korthagen, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2014). This "theory-practice gap" is often experienced by both teacher educators and student teachers, leading to concerns about the effective combination of university-based learning and school-based experiences (Burns & Richards, 2009). The perception that the expertise of teaching practice resides primarily with experienced teachers can inadvertently diminish the valuable contributions and insights that university settings can offer (Ellis, 2010). Furthermore, student teachers may develop a narrow view of practice, focusing solely on techniques or skills rather than a more holistic understanding that encompasses intellectual engagement, relational dynamics, and personal identity within specific educational environments (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

In the Egyptian context, traditional pre-service teacher education programmes have been criticised for their dominant structure, often allocating a significant proportion of time to academic subjects (75%) with a comparatively smaller emphasis on pedagogy (20%) and languages (5%) (El-Fiki, 2012). This imbalance can exacerbate the theory-practice gap, leaving prospective teachers feeling ill-prepared to translate theoretical knowledge into effective classroom practices (Abdallah, 2011). Moreover, curricula at Egyptian universities may lack the necessary updates and innovations that foster critical thinking, reflection, and problem-solving skills – attributes crucial for bridging the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching (Gahin & Myhill, 2001). The prevailing instructional approaches, often characterised by fixed instruction and rote memorisation, further contribute to this disconnect by

failing to cultivate the dynamic interplay between theory and practical application (Ibrahim, 2016).

The consequences of this theory-practice divide can be significant. Student teachers may struggle to apply abstract theoretical concepts to real classroom situations, leading to feelings of inadequacy and a reliance on mimicking observed practices without a deep understanding of their effectiveness or underlying rationale (Korthagen, 2010). This can hinder the development of their own pedagogical identities and limit their capacity for innovation and adaptation in diverse teaching contexts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Ultimately, a failure to effectively link theory and practice in pre-service education can negatively impact the quality of teaching and the learning outcomes of EFL students in Egyptian schools (Abdallah, 2019). Research underscores the critical need to move away from viewing academic knowledge as the sole authoritative source and towards a more democratic interplay between academic, practitioner, and wider community expertise to create expanded learning opportunities for prospective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Zeichner, 2010).

The Role of Practical Experience: The Indispensable Practicum

The practicum, or teaching practice, stands out as an essential component in the training of future teachers, providing a crucial bridge between the theoretical knowledge acquired in university coursework and the practical skills demanded in real classroom settings (Wallace, 1991; Richards & Farrell, 2011). The practicum is not merely an application of theoretical concepts and strategies but an invaluable opportunity for future teachers to undertake research into the activity of teaching and reflect on their experiences, thereby merging and integrating theory and practice in a meaningful way (Burns & Richards, 2009). Research consistently highlights the necessity for teacher education programmes to design their practicum courses to provide student teachers with extensive exposure to the real teaching world and offer

substantial practical experience in classroom teaching (Nunan, 2003; Richards, 2008).

However, the effectiveness of the practicum hinges on several key factors. Firstly, the extent and duration of the field experience are critical. Programmes that require students to spend significant time in the field throughout their entire training, actively examining and engaging with expert practice in schools, are more likely to foster a strong connection between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Secondly, careful coordination between field experiences and university coursework is paramount. The theoretical knowledge imparted in university settings should be directly relevant to and integrated with the practical experiences encountered during the practicum, allowing student teachers to see the direct application of theoretical principles in real-world contexts (Farrell, 2015).

Thirdly, strong mentorship and supervision play a pivotal role in guiding student teachers through their practical experiences and facilitating the theory-practice link (Hobson et al., 2009). Well-trained mentors and coaches can provide constructive feedback, model effective teaching practices, and help student teachers reflect on their experiences in light of theoretical frameworks. Research from the University of Nottingham underscores the need for systematic networks of support, where all contributors are accountable to each other and, most importantly, to the student teacher (Hobson et al., 2009). Furthermore, providing mentors with development opportunities and fostering collaboration between university staff and mentors can enhance the quality of supervision and further bridge the theory-practice divide (Edwards & Collison, 1996).

In the Egyptian context, while the practicum is a component of pre-service teacher education, there are areas for potential enhancement (Abdallah, 2019). Establishing and maintaining strong institutional partnerships with schools

is crucial for strengthening the practicum experience and promoting a mutually beneficial relationship between faculties of education and schools (El-Fiki, 2012). Addressing logistical and administrative challenges in the organisation of the practicum is also essential to ensure its smooth and effective implementation (Ibrahim, 2016). Moreover, developing a clear induction process for student teachers entering the practicum and providing more systematic opportunities for them to publicly evaluate their lectures as well as their school experiences can contribute to a more reflective and practice-oriented learning process (Abdallah, 2011). The development and publication of a comprehensive practicum education guidebook, drawing on both local and international experiences, can provide valuable guidance and support for both student teachers and supervisors (El-Bilawi & Nasser, 2017). Incorporating post-lesson discussions using video to assist recall within school-based mentoring can also be an effective strategy for linking theory to observed practice (Farrell, 2015). Ultimately, by prioritising and strategically enhancing the practicum, Egyptian pre-service EFL teacher education programmes can significantly strengthen the crucial link between theoretical knowledge and practical teaching skills.

Action Research as a Bridge: Empowering Reflective Practitioners

Action research emerges from empirical studies as a potent mechanism for directly connecting theory and practice in teacher education (Burns, 2010; Wallace, 1991). It embodies the idea of teachers as researchers and self-reflective practitioners who can critically and systematically examine their own practice. By engaging in action research, pre-service teachers can move beyond simply applying prescribed techniques and instead develop a research-oriented attitude towards their work, characterised by analytical thinking, open-mindedness, drawing conclusions based on observations and experiences, and systematically developing teaching and learning environments (Borg, 2013). Action research, therefore, positions itself at the nexus of theory and practice, representing a continuous process of inquiry and

generating knowledge that empowers educator-researchers in their professional development (Burns, 2010).

The Middle East Institute for Higher Education (MEIHE) at the American University in Cairo (AUC) has initiated the "Action Research in All Schools (ARAS)" project with the vision of fostering knowledge creation around educational policy and practices through collaborative and action research (El-Deghaidy, 2015). This initiative, supported by agreements with national educational bodies and collaborations with faculties of education, aims to train graduate students in action research and facilitate their access to schools as primary research sites. Through ARAS, links between Egyptian ministries of education and higher education have been strengthened, fostering closer cooperation with faculties of education and government schools, providing opportunities for students to conduct action research at the school level as an integral part of their studies (El-Deghaidy, 2015).

Integrating research education into teacher training programmes and involving staff from partner schools in this aspect of provision is a key recommendation from educational researchers (Zeichner, 2010). Supporting faculties of education in developing cohorts of teachers engaged in action research and formally recognising postgraduate qualifications in education as a necessary step in teachers' promotion or career progression can further incentivise and embed a research-oriented approach within the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 2014). The inclusion of action research in the curricula of teacher education programmes facilitates the bringing together of theory and practice (Burns, 2010). Case studies from various contexts, including China (Wang & Zhang, 2014), Portugal (Vieira & Moreira, 2008), and the UK (Edwards & Collison, 1996), highlight the positive impact of school-university collaborative action research projects on teachers' practical skills, reflective experiences, and the development of inclusive practices. Moreover, involving pre-service teachers in designing assessments through action

research can enable them to document their learning processes more effectively, moving beyond formulaic essays based purely on subject knowledge (Borg, 2013).

Therefore, by actively promoting and supporting the integration of action research methodologies into pre-service EFL teacher education programmes in Egypt, educators can cultivate a generation of teachers who are not only knowledgeable in theory but also equipped with the critical inquiry skills necessary to continuously analyse, reflect upon, and improve their own practice, thereby forging a stronger and more dynamic link between theoretical understanding and practical application in the classroom (Abdallah, 2019; Burns, 2010).

Continued Professional Development (CPD) and its Connection to Pre-service Education: A Lifelong Learning Journey

Educational research underscores that teacher preparation is not a finite process concluding with graduation but rather a continuous journey of lifelong learning (Day, 1999; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Continued Professional Development (CPD) plays a crucial role in this ongoing development, building upon the foundational knowledge and skills acquired during pre-service education. Effective CPD programmes highlight exemplary instruction through curricula and pedagogy, equip educators with the knowledge and capacity to deliver such instruction, build practical skills through professional development opportunities, support educators with mentors and coaches, develop instructional leaders, and enable educators to learn from each other (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

However, in the Egyptian context, the culture of professional development and teacher preparation is noted as being weak, with continuing professional development being very limited (El-Fiki, 2012; Ibrahim, 2016). Furthermore, a

persistent challenge identified in empirical studies is the lack of clear connections between different stages of teacher development, particularly between pre-service teacher education delivered by faculties of education and in-service CPD provided by the Professional Academy for Teachers (PAT) and its regional branches (El-Bilawi & Nasser, 2017). This disconnect results in a fragmented learning journey for teachers, with insufficient focus on developing partnerships between schools and faculties of education that would allow for the enhancement of the practicum's quality and practical value through effective and relevant CPD for teachers already working in schools (Abdallah, 2019).

To foster a more cohesive and impactful approach to teacher development, it is essential to establish stronger linkages between pre-service and in-service programmes (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The knowledge and skills imparted during pre-service education should lay a solid foundation for future professional growth, and CPD opportunities should be designed to address the evolving needs and challenges encountered by teachers throughout their careers (Richards & Farrell, 2011). This requires a more coordinated approach involving faculties of education, the Ministry of Education, and institutions like PAT to ensure a seamless continuum of learning and development (El-Bilawi & Nasser, 2017). Recognising postgraduate qualifications in education as a necessary step in teachers' career progression can also incentivise continuous learning and engagement with research and best practices (Borg, 2013). By viewing teacher development as a holistic and interconnected process, starting with a practically oriented pre-service foundation and extending through ongoing CPD opportunities, Egypt can cultivate a more dynamic and effective teaching workforce (Abdallah, 2019; Day, 1999).

Integrating Technology and Modern Pedagogies: Enhancing Engagement and Relevance

The integration of technology and modern teaching methodologies holds significant potential for enhancing the link between theory and practice in pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt (Warschauer, 2010; Nunan, 2011). Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered writing assistants, for example, are becoming increasingly important tools in academic writing, offering support with grammar, structure, citations, and adherence to disciplinary standards, thereby improving the efficiency and quality of academic work and allowing writers to focus on more critical and innovative aspects (Hyland, 2019). In the context of teacher education, technology can provide access to a vast array of authentic materials, facilitate collaborative learning, offer opportunities for reflective practice through video recording and analysis, and expose student teachers to innovative pedagogical approaches (Abdallah, 2011; Blake, 2013).

Several practicum student respondents in one study indicated a desire to use more technology at the university and in schools to make teaching more engaging (El-Bilawi & Nasser, 2017). The need for good-quality, up-to-date teaching materials and techniques was stressed, with a call for a shift towards more activity-based, communicative, and student-centred approaches rather than rote learning (Nunan, 2011). Projects like the Capacity Development of Faculties of Education (CDFE) have led to an enhancement in the use of technology in teacher education through practices such as running courses for teachers on technology use and including pedagogical and technical training in technology for teaching within practicum courses (El-Fiki, 2012). This has resulted in newly qualified teachers becoming technology-enhanced learning experts in their schools, demonstrating greater impact and sustainability (Warschauer, 2010).

However, despite the proven effectiveness of internet applications in education, empirical research notes that only a few teacher educators in Egyptian universities are fully incorporating literacies based on new technologies into EFL teacher education (Abdallah, 2011). Educational technology courses often still focus on general computer skills without practical relevance to English Language Learning (ELL) (Abdallah, 2019). To effectively bridge the theory-practice gap, pre-service programmes need to move beyond basic technology training and actively model and integrate technology-enhanced pedagogical practices across all areas of the curriculum (Blake, 2013). This includes equipping student teachers with the skills to use online resources for lesson planning, access authentic materials, engage in online discussions and collaborative writing, and utilise digital tools for assessment and feedback (Nunan, 2011; Warschauer, 2010). By embracing and effectively integrating technology and modern, student-centred pedagogies, Egyptian pre-service EFL teacher education can become more engaging, relevant, and better aligned with contemporary educational practices and the needs of 21st-century learners (Abdallah, 2019; Blake, 2013).

Shifting Paradigms and Collaboration: Fostering a Community of Practice

Educational theorists advocate for a fundamental shift in the paradigm of university-based teacher education, moving away from a model where academic knowledge is viewed as the sole authoritative source of knowledge about teaching (Zeichner, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2014). A more effective approach involves fostering a non-hierarchical interplay between academic, practitioner, and community expertise. Recognising the diverse aspects of expertise that exist within schools and communities and actively bringing them into teacher education programmes to coexist on a more equal footing with academic knowledge is crucial (Zeichner, 2010).

This shift necessitates the cultivation of strong and sustainable partnerships between universities and schools (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Collaborative networks between faculties of education and schools can enhance the relevance and integrity of university work to school-based reform (Edwards & Collison, 1996). Such partnerships can facilitate increased opportunities for student teachers to engage in meaningful practical experiences, provide school-based mentors with access to theoretical frameworks and research findings, and enable university faculty to stay informed about the realities and challenges of contemporary classroom practice (Korthagen, 2010). The development of cohorts of teachers engaged in action research, supported by both universities and schools, exemplifies this collaborative approach (Burns, 2010).

Teacher educators themselves play a vital role in bridging the theory-practice gap by actively connecting research-based theory to practical application in their teaching and supervision (Richards & Farrell, 2011). They need opportunities to reveal their own thinking and "lay theories" about learning to themselves first, enabling them to better explain these concepts to student teachers and challenge their own assumptions and practices (Korthagen, 2010). This requires fostering a culture of reflection and continuous professional development for teacher educators as well (Borg, 2013). Ultimately, by embracing a more collaborative and democratic approach to knowledge generation and sharing, involving academics, practitioners, and the wider community, pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt can become more responsive to the needs of schools and society, leading to more effective teacher preparation and improved educational outcomes (Abdallah, 2019; Zeichner, 2010).

Addressing Contextual Factors in Egypt: Tailoring Teacher Education to Local Realities

It is crucial to acknowledge and address the specific contextual factors that shape EFL teacher education in Egypt (Abdallah, 2011). These include large class sizes, an exam-oriented education system, potential resource limitations in schools, and the unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds of Egyptian learners (Ibrahim, 2016). Effective pre-service programmes must equip prospective teachers with the knowledge and skills to navigate these realities effectively. This necessitates moving beyond generic TESOL methodologies and actively contextualising or "Egyptianalising" the curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Abdallah, 2019).

This contextualisation involves several key aspects. Firstly, TESOL/TEFL methodology courses should explicitly address the specific challenges and opportunities present in Egyptian EFL classrooms (El-Fiki, 2012). Theoretical discussions should be linked to the local context through relevant examples, case studies, and opportunities for student teachers to analyse and reflect on their own teaching practice experiences in Egyptian schools (Abdallah, 2019). Secondly, pre-service programmes should utilise teaching materials and resources that are tailored to the Egyptian context and consider the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners (Nunan, 2003). Using culturally relevant themes and topics in writing activities, for instance, can enhance student engagement and make learning more meaningful (Davies & Elder, 2004). Thirdly, teacher educators need to provide practical guidelines and tips that are directly applicable to the Egyptian classroom and the real teaching situations that student teachers encounter during their teaching practice sessions (Thornbury, 2006). This includes equipping them with specific techniques for teaching language skills and addressing common learning difficulties within the Egyptian educational system (Abdallah, 2011). Finally, pre-service programmes should foster an understanding of the exam-oriented nature of the Egyptian secondary education system and equip future teachers

with effective strategies for preparing students for examinations while still promoting communicative language learning (Abdallah, 2019; El-Bilawi & Nasser, 2017). By thoughtfully and deliberately addressing the unique contextual factors of EFL education in Egypt, pre-service teacher education programmes can become more relevant, effective, and better prepare graduates to thrive in their professional roles.

Assessment and Reflection in Teacher Education: Cultivating Critical Engagement

Assessment practices within pre-service EFL teacher education should go beyond traditional examinations that primarily test theoretical knowledge and instead incorporate methods that evaluate the ability of student teachers to apply theory to practice (Borg, 2013). This can include performance-based assessments during the practicum, the development of teaching portfolios that showcase the integration of theory and practice, micro-teaching sessions with peer and instructor feedback, and action research projects that require students to investigate and reflect on their own teaching (Farrell, 2015; Wallace, 1991). Providing students with more systematic opportunities to publicly evaluate lectures as well as their school experiences can also contribute to a more reflective and practice-oriented approach to learning (El-Bilawi & Nasser, 2017).

Reflective practice is another crucial element in fostering the link between theory and practice (Farrell, 2015). Encouraging student teachers to critically reflect on their teaching experiences, analyse their successes and challenges in light of theoretical frameworks, and identify areas for growth is essential for their professional development (Richards & Farrell, 2011). This can be facilitated through various activities, such as reflective journals, online discussion forums where students can share their experiences and insights, and the use of video recordings of their teaching for self-analysis and peer feedback (Burns & Richards, 2009). Engaging in collaborative reflection with mentors, peers, and

teacher educators can further deepen understanding and facilitate the integration of theory and practice (Farrell, 2015). The development of a model where pre-service teachers become reflective practitioners and researchers themselves is a key aim of many teacher education programmes (Zeichner, 2010). By embedding diverse and practice-oriented assessment methods and actively cultivating a culture of reflective practice, pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt can empower future teachers to become lifelong learners who continuously strive to connect theoretical understanding with effective classroom practice (Abdallah, 2019; Farrell, 2015).

Conclusion and Recommendations: Charting a Course Towards Practical Excellence

The imperative to strengthen the link between theory and practice in pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt is undeniable. By equipping prospective teachers with the practical skills grounded in sound theoretical understanding, Egypt can cultivate a more effective and adaptive teaching workforce capable of meeting the diverse needs of its learners and contributing to the ongoing improvement of EFL education. Drawing upon the wealth of insights from empirical research and theoretical perspectives, several key recommendations emerge:

- **Enhancing the Practicum:** Extend the duration and intensity of field experiences, ensure careful coordination with university coursework, provide high-quality mentorship and supervision, integrate theory and practice through intentional pedagogical design, embed opportunities for reflection and research within the practicum, and foster robust and sustainable partnerships between universities and schools (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Farrell, 2015; Richards & Farrell, 2011).
- **Promoting Action Research:** Actively integrate action research methodologies into pre-service programmes, provide adequate training and support for student teachers to conduct classroom-based research, encourage collaboration with school teachers and university faculty in

action research initiatives, and recognise action research and postgraduate qualifications in education as valuable contributions to professional development and career progression (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2010; Wallace, 1991).

- ***Strengthening the Connection Between Pre-service and In-service Development:*** Foster greater communication and collaboration between faculties of education and institutions responsible for CPD, design pre-service programmes that lay a solid foundation for lifelong learning, and ensure that CPD opportunities are relevant, accessible, and build upon the knowledge and skills acquired during initial teacher education (Day, 1999; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Richards & Farrell, 2011).
- ***Integrating Technology and Modern Pedagogies:*** Move beyond basic computer skills to actively model and integrate technology-enhanced pedagogical practices across the curriculum, equip student teachers with the skills to use online resources effectively, promote student-centred and activity-based teaching methodologies, and emphasise the use of authentic and engaging materials (Abdallah, 2011; Blake, 2013; Nunan, 2011; Warschauer, 2010).
- ***Fostering Collaboration Between Universities and Schools:*** Cultivate genuine and reciprocal partnerships between faculties of education and schools, create opportunities for dialogue and knowledge exchange between teacher educators and school-based practitioners, and recognise the valuable expertise that exists within both academic and practical settings (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Edwards & Collison, 1996; Zeichner, 2010).
- ***Contextualising Teacher Education for Egypt:*** Deliberately address the specific challenges and opportunities of EFL education in Egypt within pre-service programmes, utilise locally relevant examples and case studies, provide practical guidelines tailored to the Egyptian classroom context, and equip future teachers with strategies for navigating the

exam-oriented system while promoting communicative language learning (Abdallah, 2019; El-Fiki, 2012; Ibrahim, 2016).

- **Emphasising Reflective Practice and Diverse Assessment Methods:** Embed activities that promote critical reflection on teaching experiences, such as journals, discussions, and video analysis, and utilise a range of assessment methods that evaluate the ability of student teachers to apply theory to practice, including performance-based tasks, portfolios, and action research projects (Borg, 2013; Farrell, 2015; Wallace, 1991).

By embracing these recommendations and fostering a culture of collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement, pre-service EFL teacher education in Egypt can move towards a more practically oriented model that effectively bridges the gap between theory and practice, ultimately empowering future generations of teachers to excel in their profession and positively impact the lives of their students.

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