

Online Field Experience- An Innovation in Globalizing Teacher Education

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Abstract

A challenge faced by online graduate students who are also in-service teachers is to complete the field experience hours required by their degree plans. This action research explored the effectiveness of an online field experience, which was tested in a globalized teacher education setting. Three groups of participants are involved in the study: one consisted of 17 graduate students from an online Educational Technology Specialist Master's program; the other was made up of 12 ELL instructors from a teachers' college in China, and small groups of students. In spring 2019, the candidates in the Educational Technology Specialist program completed their field experience by collaborating online with a group of ELL instructors in China. The American graduate students designed and delivered online workshops to train the Chinese instructors how to integrate technology applications into English language learning classes. This study explored the impact of this innovated global teaching and learning activity on the graduate students' motivation in the field experience and on their learning of pedagogical and technological knowledge. The effects of the online training on English language teaching and learning were also examined. At the end of the study, participants from both groups reported positive reflections on this collaboration.

Introduction

The Ed. Tech Specialist Program builds upon in-service teachers' initial skills and knowledge to further develop educational professional leaders who are committed to excellence, empowerment, diversity, and the best research-based teaching practices. Most of the students enrolled in the program are full-time K-12 teachers pursuing their master's degrees through this fully online program. Throughout the learning practices, the educational technology specialist candidates will gain a greater understanding of the teaching-learning process to develop skills in employing the most up-to-date technologies to enhance K-12 student performance. Therefore, designing and implementing technology integration activities to empower students and teachers

is a major focus of all the courses of the program. Toward the end of the program, these educational specialist candidates will complete a 20-hour on-task field experience to demonstrate their skills and qualifications as educational technology specialists. They design and conduct technology training workshops to teach K-12 educators how to integrate technology into their instructions in order to improve student learning in both cognitive and affective domains. Since these graduate students are also K-12 teachers, they usually complete the field experience in their own schools supervised and guided by technology coordinators from their respective school districts. There are inconveniences and problems associated with this field experience arrangement. For instance, it is usually difficult to find qualified technology professionals to serve as supervisors. Also, students' experience is not easy to control or assess by the field experience course professor. On top of that, some graduate students, the educational technology specialist candidates, are not highly motivated in doing the field experience because they have already conducted different technology-based PBL activities with their own K-12 students or collaborative activities with their fellow teachers required in different courses before they begin the field experience.

In order to solve the problems and get students better motivated and engaged in the field experience practicum, we decided to change the local school setting for the required assignment into an international teaching and learning practice. We turned the field experience practice into a cloud-based global collaboration with teachers and students in a foreign country without leaving their own schools. The graduate students, Educational Technology Specialist Candidates, worked together with a group of college English Language Learning (ELL) instructors in China to complete the field experience practicum online through internet. We considered it as an action research study that explored the impacts of the innovated global teaching and learning activity on our graduate students' motivation in the field experience and their pedagogical and technological knowledge. This innovation also provided our students an opportunity to “Coach teachers in and model engagement of students in local and global interdisciplinary units in which technology helps students assume professional roles, research real-world problems, collaborate with others, and produce products that are meaningful and useful to a wide audience.” (ISTE, *the International Society for Technology in Education*, Standard, 2019, 2c). Another purpose of the study was to examine how the technology training designed by the American graduate students and delivered online impacted the Chinese college instructors' teaching and if the technology

application helped the Chinese college students in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning classes. The third purpose of the study is to find out to what extent the Chinese scholars helped the American in-service teachers understand the needs of the English language learners in their classes and different strategies to help them overcome the language barriers and improve their academic performance.

Literature review

“Globalization is a powerful and emergent influence on education...and is influencing teaching practices and teacher education” (Wang et al. 2011, p. 119). Therefore, schools need to develop new skills, new experiences, and new knowledge as required by global transformations and international standards. (ISTE, 2011, p. 2) Conversations should be encouraged among teachers about the role of global education in today’s world and the manner in which we may collaborate with others who may be geographically distant, but with whom we share common goals. K-20 students are already living in this connected culture; however, teacher practice has not kept pace with the global changes impacting our students’ everyday lives (Kleiman, 2004; Thomas & Brown, 2011). It is important for teachers to adapt themselves for this new reality and rearrange their skills to adapt themselves to new instructional designs and practice. Because globalization is gradually reshaping the world that our children will live in, teacher education faces new challenges as it now must prepare teachers to teach increasingly diverse student populations that will participate in and contribute to both their countries’ and a highly interconnected world (Zhao, 2010).

Research Method and Approach

This research study involved three subject groups. The first group consisted 17 American graduate students who were also full time K-12 teachers. They were taking online courses in the Educational Technology Specialist Program at a SUNY college in upper state New York. Another subject group was made up of 12 ELL instructors who were currently teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) at a Chinese college. The third group was the student body in the said Chinese college that these Chinese instructors were teaching. These students were pre-service teachers of different academic disciplines.

The American graduate students did an in-depth literature review to understand how the globalization, the knowledge age, the technology, and demographic changes affect adult learners. They joined discussion about the role of adult learners' motivation and reflected on their own experiences. The gained understanding of motivation helped them plan their training workshops. Since the training workshop was delivered online, the American graduate students took into consideration the complexities and factors of the second level of digital divide in regard to the Chinese instructors' technology background that influence their teaching practice (Reinhart, Thomas, & Toriskie, 2011). They conducted a needs assessment survey to learn about the Chinese instructors' technology background and what technology tools would best fit their needs. The 17 American graduate students were divided into 6 groups. Each group designed a 2-week lesson on Schoology, a free LMS, based on the results of the needs assessment to help them with lesson planning and design. The American graduate students participated in two unstructured interviews to talk about their experiences before and after working with the Chinese scholars. The Chinese ELL instructors were divided into 6 groups and each took one training lesson designed by one American graduate student group. Participants from both sides communicated and interacted through Schoology. At the end of week 2, the Chinese instructors reported their experience on using the technology tool they learned through the online learning workshop and provided evaluations. They also presented their plans in integrate the technology tool in their English language classes. After the online training, the Chinese ELL instructors tested the effectiveness of the technology applications with a small group of their own students as a pilot study. They first gave their students a pre-survey and a pre-test to determine the baseline of their students' perceptions of language learning and their language achievement level. At the end of the week, they gave their students a post survey and a post-test to find if any improvement was made in their attitude and performance. The ELL students had weekly quizzes too.

Rationale of the study

As previously described, the American graduate students were required to complete 20-hour field experience prior to graduation. The field experience format was restructured in order to improve the practice and help graduate students better demonstrate how their technology integration and application skills would potentially impact their future academic careers. The graduate students were also K-12 teachers who had ELL students in their mainstream classrooms.

The Chinese ELL instructors' language teaching experience would help these American in-service teachers understand their own language learners better and how technology helped the language learning and teaching. The Chinese EFL/ELL instructors all had large classes to teach every day and had little time to try out or practice technology-assisted language teaching and learning. The American graduate students' online workshops would present different technology applications and demonstrate the functions of each to empower the Chinese ELL instructors.

Research questions

1. How does the collaborative global teaching and learning experience impact the educational technology specialist candidates' motivation in completing the required field experience assignment?
2. How does designing and delivering cloud-based technology training workshops impact the educational technology specialist candidates' pedagogical and technological knowledge?
3. How does the collaborative global teaching and learning experience impact the educational technology specialist candidates' perception and skills in supporting ELLs in their classrooms?
4. How does the online technology training affect Chinese ELL instructors' instruction?
5. How does the implementation of the technology tools impact Chinese college students/pre-service teachers' motivation and performance in learning English as Foreign Language?

Findings

This field experience was a 7-week project. From week 1 to week 4, the American graduate students did literature reviews, planned, and designed their online lessons. They also administered needs assessment as a pre-survey to help them make decision on the technology tools to use and how to teach them to the ELL faculty members in China. During week 5 to week 7, the Chinese ELL professors participated in the online training and practiced the technology skills they learned with a small group of their students to see if they should and how they would implement it in their teaching. Both the American graduate students and the Chinese ELL instructors participated in discussions and completed pre/post surveys as reflections on the collaboration before and after the field experience. The Chinese instructors' responses to the surveys helped the American graduate students improve their technology training skills.

Finding 1: the graduate students are highly motivated in this globalized field experience.

It is the first time for the educational technology specialist candidates to design and conduct an online technology training workshop for educators in a foreign country. They were excited and serious about the opportunity. Although they were fully occupied in their own school responsibilities as K-12 teachers, they managed to find time to collaborate in groups after work to gather and analyzed needs assessment data, select and tested technology tools accordingly, create a workshop lesson plan and video lessons, conduct the workshop, and provide online technique support. In their reflections and discussions, they expressed that “this experience gave insight to the role of educational technology specialists and the importance of adult learning pedagogy”.

Finding 2: the educational technology specialist candidates have shown pedagogical improvement at the end of this globalized field experience

The graduate students of the workshop spent time unpacking the learning objectives and stimulating prior knowledge by incorporating engaging discussion forums. They planned their lessons focusing on teaching the ELL instructors in China how to use the technology tools. The educational technology specialist candidates also demonstrated their skills in the specific scaffolding and modeling videos, screenshots, and step-by-step instructions throughout the training to provide learner guidance to ensure understanding and successful application. This leads to the third part of the lesson where the Chinese instructors implement the technology application with their students. Throughout the workshop lessons, discussion questions, assignments, and assessments were used to elicit performance. In interviewing these candidates and through their own reflections of the experience, they expressed their confidence in assisting ELL instructors in meeting their learning goals through the implementation of technological tools. Planning and conducting the workshop was a fulfilling experience for the educational technology specialist candidates. This experience instilled the value of collaborating with colleagues, adult learning pedagogy, and individualized differentiation. Throughout the process, it was evident that the candidates felt equipped to develop a workshop that met the needs of the ELL instructors. Through strategic planning, scaffolding, and modeling, the candidates were able to provide effective instruction of the technology tools and the implementation in the classrooms.

Finding 3: The educational technology candidates improved their perception of ELL students in their own classes when working with the ELL instructors in China

Throughout the field experience, the candidates of the educational technology specialist program continuously learned the needs and learning styles of students whose native language was not English. They also learned new techniques teaching and supporting ELLs in their own classes such as flexible seating to engage ELLs in problem-based-learning projects to make them feel comfortable. Most of the ELLs were shy in speaking English in public, so it would encourage ELLs to talk freely without interrupting them with frequent corrections for their grammatical errors. Another skill they learned was to team native English speakers who were patient and cultural tolerant with the ELLs to lower their anxiety. Student-centered learning environment and relating more to students' own life experience were also helpful techniques for the candidates. This allowed the ELLs to show their strengths and helped them build confidence.

Finding 4: The ELL instructors in China embrace well the online technology integration training provided by the American educational technology specialist candidates

The 6 groups of the American graduate students in the Educational Technology Specialist Program designed 6 online workshops to teach Chinese instructors how to use 6 technology applications/tools to help increase the Chinese students' motivation and understanding in their English language classes. All the online workshops were game based and web-based. They were formed as mini online courses on Schoology to include various discussion forums, video tutorials, and helpful tips, along with a pre- and post-survey, quizzes, and an assignment to complete a final report based on each participant's own experience using Quizlet Live with their students. Each participant was an English instructor currently teaching two classes of undergraduate students (approximately 50-60 each) that were pre-service K-12 teachers. To meet the needs of adult learners, the mini online courses were designed to provide continuous support and interaction through discussion forums and to include video tutorials with information that was immediately useful to the participants. All content and instruction were planned to be provided in a clear, concise, and respectful way.

During the first week, the ELL instructors introduced themselves in a discussion forum and with an original video, participated in an initial discussion forum, watched three tutorial

videos, and completed a short quiz and discussion forum post to reflect on their learning. In the second week, participants integrated the technology tool into their classroom instruction. Following the implementation of the new tool, the Chinese participants completed a Workshop Effectiveness Survey and submitted their reflections to discuss their experience in using the tool with a small group of students as a pilot study. Throughout the process, there was an open forum available for the Chinese participants to ask the American graduate students questions and receive timely guidance. There were also resources providing additional tips and suggestions available on each online course.

This was a good opportunity for the college ELL instructors to use the application to differentiate instruction for their students. Through implementing the technology application with a focus group, they demonstrated a strong understanding of the video tutorials and materials provided. The participants spoke highly of the technology tool in terms of student engagement and motivation. Based on their Workshop Effectiveness Survey responses, the Chinese instructors planned to use the technology in a large scale.

Finding 5: Chinese students in the focus groups have positive impression in using the technology tools to help improve their English language learning skills

The Chinese participants collaborating with the American graduate students were college ESL instructors. After they completed the online technology training, they conducted a weeklong pilot study to test the effectiveness of the technology applications/tools with a small group of their students in each of their classes. Throughout the week, they observed, randomly interviewed, and quizzed their students to see if they would feel and learn better with the help of the technology application. In their reflection responses they reported that their students found the tool “interesting” and “fresh”. They also noticed that most students enjoyed being able to collaborate in teams and work on their communication. Additionally, some students discussed the potential benefits of using the technology tool on their learning. One group of students using Quizlet indicated that the cooperative approach to memorizing words could get everyone involved in this activity and contribute to their relationship at the same time. One student said, “I think this method of memorizing words is very interesting and can facilitate the communication among the members of the group”.

Implications, recommendations, and limitations

This innovative field experience practice involved both the candidates of the educational specialists of the online master's degree program and the ELL instructors from a prestigious teacher preparation college in China. Through the online training, the Chinese instructors learned to integrate a technology tool in their language teaching. They also did a pilot study to test the effectiveness of the technology tool they learned with a small group of students. Throughout the 3 weeks of field experience, the participants designed and participated surveys, observations, and interviews from which the researchers learned that the participants from both sides had benefited from the practice. The American graduate students were actively involved in designing and implementing the training lessons. They developed pedagogically and academically during the practice. They also demonstrated professional skills as educational technology specialist candidates. Meanwhile, they showed their knowledge of working with adult learners and prioritizing content that was relatable and authentic to enrich their partners' existing experience.

On the other hand, the Chinese scholars responded to the technology integration positively. They agreed the integration was an engaging way to encourage students in learning the English language. As one Chinese ESL instructor put it, "the integration of technology helps us bring more vibe to class and give students more opportunities to communicate in class". The instructors also reported after their pilot study with a small group of Chinese students that students were better engaged as they found the technology games "attractive" and "interesting". Some said the technology activities were good because they improved their teamwork. They all felt it was "a fresh way to learn English" and "an interesting way to memorize English words". Most of the Chinese instructors collaborating with the American graduate students would implement the technology tools they learned with the whole class next semester. Each of the Chinese instructor group would conduct a large-scale research study to explore the effect of technology integration on their students' English learning motivation and performance.

Apparently, this is an eye-opening global collaboration, which we highly recommend other educators to integrate into their teacher preparation practices. The conversation between the educators in the two countries benefitted not only themselves but also the students they teach. As Priyanka, (2017) pointed out when she discussed the impact of globalization in education that globalization inspires and supports educators for the purpose of rethinking education and encourages the exchange of ideas and experiences in the use of educational technologies.

Globalization also promotes experimenting the potential of technologies and communications to support effective learning. Sharing and exchanging knowledge, skills, and intellectual assets globally multiplies developments at different levels. To make the collaboration more effective, we suggest giving both sides of the participants more time to interact and practice on the new technology tools. As the Chinese instructors indicated their students needed longer time to get a better feel of the technology program, future practitioners need to take that into consideration. In addition, to make sure the technology integration is a success, a reliable internet connection is required and important.

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