

Minjeong Son
UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Tove Holmbukt
UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Annelise Brox Larsen
UiT The Arctic University of Norway

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Theory-oriented teaching practice in a school-university partnership: Insights from student teachers of English

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how student teachers of English in a Norwegian teacher education program experience theory-oriented teaching practice within a school-university partnership. Data were collected from two sources: 1) a reflection session immediately following a teaching trial attended by both university and practice teachers, and 2) interviews with three participating students. The data analysis was guided by thematic analysis. One of the key findings is that student teachers experience a shift in focus towards their own learning when engaged in theory-oriented teaching practice. This contrasts with ordinary teaching practicums, where their focus is more directed towards pupils' learning. We argue that theory-oriented teaching practice makes the learner role explicit during teaching activities, enabling student teachers to cross boundaries between the fields of theory and practice. We conclude that a closer school-university partnership is an important premise for deliberately connecting English language teaching (ELT) theory with classroom teaching, allowing students to achieve a deeper level of reflection on their teaching practices. This study, therefore, contributes to the ongoing effort to bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher education. It offers an example of how theory-practice integration can be enhanced through a school-university partnership within university courses.

Keywords: teacher education for English, theory-practice integration, ELT practicum, boundary-crossing, productive reflection

Lærerstudenters erfaringer med teori-orientert undervisningspraksis i engelsk i et skole-universitetssamarbeid

Sammendrag

Denne kvalitative studien undersøker hvordan lærerstudenter i engelsk i et utdanningsprogram i Norge opplever teori-orientert undervisningspraksis i et skole-universitetssamarbeid. Data ble samlet inn fra to kilder: 1) en refleksjonsøkt umiddelbart etter en utprøving (teaching trial) der både universitetslærere og praksislærere var til stede, og 2) intervjuer med tre studenter som deltok i studien. Tematisk analyse ble anvendt i gjennomgangen av materialet fra disse to datakildene.

Et av hovedfunnene er at lærerstudentene i studien opplever et skifte i fokus til egen læring når de deltar i teori-orientert undervisningspraksis. Dette står i kontrast til vanlige praksisperioder i skolen, hvor fokuset i større grad er rettet mot elevenes læring. Vi argumenterer for at teori-orientert undervisningspraksis tydeliggjør studentenes rolle som lærende under undervisningsaktiviteter, noe som gjør det lettere for dem å krysse grenser mellom teori og praksis. Vi konkluderer med at et tettere samarbeid mellom skole og universitet er avgjørende for å bevisst knytte teori om engelskundervisning (ELT) til praksis i klasserommet. Dette vil legge til rette for at studentene kan utvikle et dypere refleksjonsnivå i sine undervisningsaktiviteter. Denne studien bidrar derfor til den pågående diskusjonen om å knytte sammen teori og praksis i lærerutdanning. Den gir et eksempel på hvordan teori-praksis-integrasjon kan styrkes gjennom et skole-universitetssamarbeid innenfor universitetsemner.

Nøkkelord: Lærerutdanning, teori-praksis integrasjon, engelskundervisning, teori-orientert undervisningspraksis, produktiv refleksjon

Introduction

This qualitative study investigates how student teachers of English in Norwegian teacher education (TEd) experience theory-oriented teaching practice under close school-university collaboration. By teaching-oriented teaching practice, we mean teaching practice that is grounded in course work on campus, aiming to integrate theoretical knowledge of English teaching with practical application to enhance learning opportunities. In this study, the student teachers' boundary crossing (e.g. Williams, 2013) between the spheres of theory and practice occurs within short-term teaching trials at practicum schools where they are tasked with applying course content in classroom teaching as part of their university course. We use the term 'teaching trials' to refer to small units of teaching activities where student teachers apply ELT theories (see also Holmbukt & Son, 2020). The term 'teaching practice' refers to the broader teaching experience while 'practicum' refers to mandatory teaching placements in schools that all student teachers fulfil as part of their teacher education.

Teacher education has long been criticised for the theory–practice divide where TEd programmes are too theoretically oriented with little relevance to student teachers' actual experiences in classroom teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Gravett et al., 2019; Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Lejonberg et al., 2017; Lillejord & Børte, 2017; Zeichner, 2012). Theory–practice integration has also been identified as a challenge in ELT courses in Norwegian TEd (Moi et al., 2014), and student teachers of English constantly desire more opportunities to connect the theoretical knowledge they gain from university courses to classroom teaching (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Resch et al., 2022; Larsen et al., 2024; Yin, 2019).

Learning how to teach English as a foreign (EFL) or a second language (ESL) is often perceived as more challenging and “fundamentally different” from other discipline subjects (Tedick & Walker, 1994, p. 301) for various reasons. First, the subject English in the

curriculum has a unique status not only as a discipline subject (e.g. mathematics), but also as a medium to “communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries” (Tedick & Walker, 1994, p. 301). The current English curriculum in Norway stresses the importance of developing intercultural competence through the English subject by giving pupils a foundation for communicating with others both locally and globally regardless of their cultural and linguistic background (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). This means that English cannot be seen merely as a language subject, but also as a tool for learners to gain knowledge and develop competencies necessary for living in a multilingual society and in a globalised world.

Second, student teachers in TEd for English are expected not only to develop sufficient language skills to function as language models, but also to learn theories of language (e.g. grammar), second language acquisition, and language and culture teaching. They are also expected to develop skills to transfer such theoretical knowledge into classroom teaching, which Shulman (1986) calls ‘pedagogical content knowledge’, as part of their teaching competence. However, student teachers of English often perceive theories in ELT, particularly grammar, as being too abstract and difficult to understand, which makes English more demanding to teach than other subjects (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010; Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Holmbukt, 2024). Thus, there has been a strong desire among student teachers of English for better opportunities to make a deliberate connection between what they learn on campus and their teaching practices (see also Resch et al., 2022). They also wish to have more constructive reflections on their teaching experiences in connection to theory, which is reportedly lacking in ordinary practicums (Heggen & Thorsen, 2015; Holmbukt & Son, 2017).

To reduce the gap between theory and practice in TEd for English, we aim to develop English courses which integrate theory-informed teaching trials. The coursework is practice-oriented, as it increases opportunities for teaching experiences through structured teaching trials in authentic classroom settings beyond ordinary practicums. These teaching trials are more theory-oriented than traditional practicums, as student teachers are expected to apply specific academic content from their university course(s) in their teaching trials and reflect on them

under the joint supervision of university and practice teachers. The reflection sessions thus intend to facilitate the integration of multiple perspectives, aiding student teachers in co-constructing pedagogical knowledge for teaching English (see also Cuenca et al., 2011; Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020).

This paper presents an example of how we design practice-oriented English courses integrated with theory-informed teaching trials, based on the study conducted in 2020–2021. The goal was to align theory and practice more closely to help student teachers better understand the theory–practice interplay and perform reflective practice by critically evaluating their teaching experiences against ELT theory. We were particularly interested in investigating how student teachers of English experience theory-oriented teaching practice under a school–university partnership where both university and practice teachers are equally involved in planning, organising, and evaluating teaching trials. Thus, we formulated the following research question with three concrete sub-questions:

How do student teachers of English experience theory-oriented teaching practice under the school–university partnership?

1. *To what extent does theory-oriented teaching practice help student teachers of English see learning opportunities through teaching activities?*
2. *To what extent does theory-oriented teaching practice supplement ordinary practicums in strengthening theory-practice integration?*
3. *How does theory-oriented teaching practice under the school-university partnership facilitate productive reflection on teaching activities?*

Context

The latest reform of initial TEd in Norway has led to an integrated five-year master’s programme and emphasises a *shared responsibility* between institutions of higher education and schools to educate future teachers (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Smith & Ulvik, 2014). By integrating teaching practicums into TEd programmes, TEd in Norway is expected to

maintain close interaction with professional practice and the communities surrounding teaching practice schools (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Jakhelln & Postholm, 2022).

The present study is contextualised in one of the ELT courses in a Norwegian TEd programme for teaching pupils in years 5–10 (Master of Education Years 5–10). The primary academic knowledge that student teachers are expected to acquire in this course includes knowledge and skills to cope with a multilingual English classroom, various language teaching methods (e.g. task-based and content-based instruction), intercultural competence, and assessment. These topics are highly relevant to the current national curriculum for English in Norway which has been implemented since 2020. Intercultural competence and multilingualism in the English classroom, in particular, have gained increasing attention in the curriculum in response to the pervading presence of multilingualism in the lives of individuals and societies – not only in Norway, but also globally (see Krulatz et al., 2018). As these two topics are relatively new but are increasingly recognised for their importance in TEd for English, learning how to transform theoretical knowledge on these topics into classroom teaching is of vital importance in preparing students for teaching English to pupils from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This course is combined with a standard teaching practicum spanning a total of six weeks in the third year, integrated across all subject courses.

Theoretical background

Theory–practice dichotomy in Norwegian TEd

Despite the effort to resolve the long-lasting theory–practice gap in TEd through school–university partnerships in Norway, the theory–practice disjuncture is still perceived as a recurring problem, not only in Norwegian TEd, but also internationally (e.g. Arhar et al., 2013; Gravett et al., 2019; Jahreie, 2012; Korthagen, 2016; Lillejord & Børte, 2017; Solstad, 2010). There may be various reasons why theory-practice integration has been a strenuous effort in TEd. One reason could be how student teachers perceive theory and practice in their professional training. Student teachers often view university courses and practice schools as two separate learning arenas with different focuses, with field experience in the classroom being more important for their TEd than theoretical knowledge (e.g. Hellang & Rambø, 2017;

Steele, 2017). Theoretical knowledge is perceived only as a supplementary competence to what they learn through experiences in practice, and such practical experiences are believed to play a central role in professional learning and development (Allen, 2009; Hellang & Rambø, 2017).

Hellang & Rambø (2017) speculate that student teachers' perception of the theory and the practice field being fragmented may be attributed to role shifting between 'a learner' and 'a teacher' across the two different learning sites, by referring to Nilssen & Klemp's (2014) observation. According to Nilssen & Klemp (2014), student teachers perceive themselves more as teachers than learners in practicums, while they clearly identify themselves as learners at universities. This suggests that student teachers fail to recognise the practice field as a learning site where they are supposed to deliberately exploit theory to plan teaching, justify their methodological choices, and evaluate their teaching experiences against theory. Failure to see the practice field as another learning arena for consolidating theoretical knowledge makes it difficult for student teachers to recognise the interplay between theory and practice in their professional development. For many student teachers, academic knowledge is only seen as a *prescribed* methodological tool that provides ideas about *how* to teach, which Kvernbekk (1995) calls 'tyranny of theory'. Furthermore, when reflecting on their teaching practice, students often fail to recognise the value of academic knowledge as a foundation for the didactic and methodological choices they make during instruction (Hellang & Rambø, 2017, p.18).

Another reason that student teachers put aside theory during practicums could be associated with the power of practice teachers in the school setting, who may play key roles in developing student teachers' professional skills. Findings by Allen (2009) revealed that student teachers feel reluctant to implement the types of strategies they are instructed to use by university teachers if practice teachers (same as mentor teachers in her study) are unaware of or disagree with them. Rather, they conform to the *status quo* with their practice teachers (Allen 2009, p. 651; see also Jahreie, 2012). Thus, "learning in teaching practices can often be superficial" with little connection to course work, "not moving beyond teaching activities and classroom routines (the *how* of teaching)" (Gravett et al., 2019, p. 4; see also Nilssen &

Klemp, 2014, p. 40). Student teachers may often end up reproducing mentor teachers' current practices, or what Korthagen (2016) calls "traditional habits and norms", without questioning the theoretical grounds for their instructional choices (Korthagen 2016, p. 321).

Research-informed professional practice

In TEd, teacher training needs to ensure research-informed professional practice, in which theory and practice have a symbiotic relationship (BERA, 2014; Holmbukt & Son, 2020; Jahreie, 2012). Knowledge gained from existing research will better equip practitioners with strong reflection skills required in "practical deliberation", which strengthen reasoning and professional judgement in their practices (BERA 2014, p. 6). Practitioners' experiences in research-informed practice will, in turn, enhance the quality of research by providing insights into the "challenges and complexities of educational practice" (BERA 2014, p. 21). Thus, enquiry-oriented, practice-based teacher training in the context of TEd aims to help student teachers develop the capacity for critical and productive reflection on their own practices, based on theory (BERA, 2014; Davis, 2006; Gravett et al., 2019; Resch et al., 2022).

By *productive* reflection, Davis (2006, p. 283) refers to student teachers' ability to "question assumptions" underlying their instructional choices, remain open to different perspectives, and integrate theoretical knowledge while critically evaluating their own teaching activities. Rather than simply judging teaching experiences in the impressionistic and superficial framing such as "I liked" or "It went well", productive reflection focuses on asking the *why* question of teaching, rather than the *how* question (Gravett et al., 2019). In ELT, productive reflection may involve reinterpreting and critically examining generalised ESL theories within real classroom settings, particularly where English is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language (e.g. in many Asian contexts see Yin, 2019). Yin (2019) emphasises that such reflection enhances practicum experiences by helping student teachers adapt ESL theory to EFL realities and deepen their understanding of theory-practice interplay. In Norway, English is increasingly recognised as a global language (or lingua franca, ELF), rather than a foreign or second language (e.g., Rindal, 2014). In multilingual classrooms, English is also referred to as an additional language (EAL, see Neokleous et al., 2022). This shift in the status

of English challenges traditional ESL/EFL distinctions and invites further research into how ESL theory applies in ELF or EAL contexts—an issue beyond the scope of this paper.

Yin (2019) further concludes that the reinterpretation and reflection process needs to be carefully guided by practice teachers under “a stronger connection between university courses and practicum” (p. 6). Such a guided reflection process is argued to be absent in her study. The gap between mentor teachers’ practices and idealised ESL theory created tension between the theory and its application in the EFL context, and this tension was not properly discussed during supervision. The study thus concludes that it is not sufficient with an increased number of “microteaching practices”. Instead, in order to “maximise the effects of the practicum”, it is vital to provide students with an opportunity to reinterpret and adapt ESL theory in accordance with the EFL classroom context under guided supervision (Yin 2019, p. 6).

Similarly, according to Solstad (2010), the gap between theory and practice in TEd arises not only from the theory field being far removed from practice, but also from the practice field being detached from theory in the process of reflecting on and evaluating student teachers’ own practice. The current study thus aims to make teaching practice more theory-oriented, firstly by better aligning English coursework with teaching trials, and secondly by providing a reflection session immediately after the teaching trials with teacher educators from both the practice and theory fields to ensure perspectives from both parties are incorporated in the reflection processes.

Material and methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach to enable an in-depth exploration of a small number of student teachers’ experiences with theory-oriented teaching practices in a specific context. This approach facilitates a deeper and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The data were obtained from 1) the reflection and discussion session we carried out immediately after the teaching trial, – and 2) interviews with three student teachers who participated in the teaching trial.

Context and participants

This study was conducted under the research project LAB-TEd (Learning, Assessment, and Boundary crossing in Teacher Education), an internationally collaborative research project financed by the Research Council of Norway (2019–2023). The LAB-TEd project adopted formative intervention methodology, Developmental Work Research (DWR), developed by Engeström & Engeström (1986) and focused on university–school partnerships in supervising student teachers’ work with research and development (R&D) assignments and master’s theses in two TEd institutions in Norway. Under LAB-TEd, several practice teachers were hired in 20% positions at universities, two of whom were English teachers at two local schools at lower secondary level in the community where this study was carried out. Our study took advantage of the accessibility of practice teachers for the subject of English in building a stronger school–university collaboration in coursework and allowing student teachers more opportunities for teaching practice outside ordinary practicums. The participants of the study thus included a group of 3 student teachers who were enrolled in an English course in their third year in 2020–2021, one practice teacher participating in the LAB-TEd project, and three university teachers who were also participants in the same project. The student participants had completed a two-week ordinary practicum prior to the teaching trial, in addition to a total of 13 weeks of practicum during their first and second years.

Procedure

The university and practice teachers held regular meetings during the 2020 Autumn semester to discuss and plan teaching trials in concert with the English course taught by two of the university teachers. Questions regarding potential topics for students to try in teaching trials were discussed and negotiated with the aim of finding topics of common interest that would benefit both the university and school. The topics of interest for the teaching trials included teaching methods (e.g. task-based instruction, TBI), multilingualism, and assessments. In addition, to understand the conditions under which teaching trials would be conducted, information about the pupils at the schools was exchanged during the meetings, including the number of pupils, their levels of English proficiency, and linguistic backgrounds. Providing

background information about pupil groups is important in planning lessons, as student teachers often experience familiarity and relationships with pupils as important conditions for making their teaching experiences meaningful (Holmbukt & Son, 2017; Yavuz, 2011). In the description of the task for the teaching trial, students were asked to connect it to the competence aims of the university course which include, among other aims, to facilitate appropriate language learning methods, to reflect on one's own learning, and to see one's own learning in connection with pupils' learning in English (see Appendix).

Initially, all 13 student teachers enrolled in the course were to take part in two teaching trials in two different schools outside the ordinary practicum. However, due to COVID-19, the original plan was disrupted, resulting in one teaching trial in Spring 2021 via Zoom at one of the schools by one group consisting of three students. The participating student teachers were connected to the classroom via Zoom, while the pupils, who were aged 14-16, were physically present with the practice teacher assisting with various tasks prepared by the students. For group tasks, the pupils sat together by a computer and connected to the student teachers on Zoom. The digital session presented unforeseen challenges, such as delays in starting the Zoom programme and pupils playing with the camera. However, with the practice teacher present, the classroom situation was quickly brought under control. Owing to the multilingual backgrounds of pupils in the school where the teaching trial was carried out, the teaching scheme focused on TBI and multilingualism. The lesson lasted approximately 45 minutes, and a reflection session took place immediately after the Zoom teaching session, which was attended by both the practice teacher and the three university teachers.

The reflection session followed a semi-structured guide. The questions were broadly divided into two categories: the first part was directed towards evaluating and reflecting on the teaching trial, and the second focused on participants' experiences with theory-oriented teaching practice and their understanding of theory. The reflection session lasted approximately 50 minutes and was recorded. It was later transcribed verbatim by a transcriber hired for the LAB-Ted project and used as a basis to form questions for an interview guide.

After completing the course requirements, including the ordinary practicum, the three student participants who carried out the teaching trial were interviewed by two of the university teachers. We aimed to augment our data by asking clarification questions and filling the gaps in the initial dataset to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the student teachers' experiences. Since one of the students was unable to participate in the physical group interview, two students were interviewed first, and the third student was interviewed alone via Zoom three weeks later. Both interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and lasted approximately 35 and 44 minutes, respectively. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a transcriber hired for the LAB-Ted project. To ensure accuracy, the translated excerpts were returned to the student participants for verification.

The semi-structured interview guide was sent to the participants prior to the interviews to stimulate more reflective and nuanced answers during the interview. The questions in the interview guide included open questions regarding, for example, their view of the teaching trial(s) under the school-university partnership as part of their ELT teacher education, the role the student teachers play in an ordinary practicum, and the extent to which they make use of theory in teaching trials in comparison to ordinary practicums.

Analysis

Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To avoid subjective bias, each transcript was read carefully by the three university teachers individually, using an open coding process. In the initial coding process, they met and discussed the results of the codes generated by the individual analyses. This process led to eight patterns: connection to student teachers' own learning, learning through theory–practice connection, continuity of teaching trials, experiences with tripartite collaboration, connection to R&D assignment, theory in ordinary teaching practicums, student teachers' role in practicums, and students' perception of theory. The generated categories and coded extracts corresponding to each category were then carefully reviewed several times and reconsidered through “hermeneutic cycles of close interpretative readings” (Allen, 2009, p. 649) to identify potential themes. As a result, three main themes emerged that were relevant to our research question: role shifting

between learner and teacher, the theory-practice gap in ordinary practicums, and productive reflection on ELT theory. The first theme was mentioned most frequently and was identified by all participants as something new and different from ordinary practicums. The second theme was also acknowledged by all participants, indicating strong agreement across the group. The third theme, although less frequent and identified by only one participant, was included due to its significance and relevance to the development of reflection skills we aim to foster among student teachers through theory-oriented teaching practice.

Ethical considerations

At the start of the LAB-TED project, all participants, including the practice teachers, signed an informed consent form. To ensure confidentiality, participants were anonymised by using alphanumeric codes (e.g. S1 for student teacher 1, UT2 for university teacher 2). The data from the reflection session and interviews were securely stored using an online storage system with two-factor authentication, ensuring access limited only to authorized researchers. The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). While researching one's own practice and students can present ethical challenges, particularly due to power dynamics that may influence participants' responses, the student teachers in this project were already engaged in open, critical reflection as part of the LAB-TED project. This established culture of critical reflection helped reduce potential biases. Additionally, a researcher with a more distant relationship to the students contributed to the data analysis to further enhance objectivity.

Results

The extracts that illustrate our findings are translated into English. Wordings in square brackets in presenting findings indicate added content by the university teachers to help clarify what the informants refer to and avoid potential ambiguity.

Role shifting between a learner and a teacher

The participants shared positive feedback about the theory-informed teaching trial, which helped them gain a deeper understanding of the academic content. A noteworthy observation

that seems to increase the value of teaching trials is the way students shift their attention to their own learning in the context of teaching activities. The students unanimously reported that the teaching trial in the current study was made unique because it allowed them to focus on their own learning, which was directly related to their coursework and integral to the task requirements (see Appendix). By shifting their focus more towards their own learning, they assumed the role of a learner rather than that of a teacher, the latter of which has been reported to dominate the practice field, according to Hellang & Rambø (2017) and Nilssen & Klemp (2014). In an ordinary practicum, students normally have a focus only on pupils' learning outcomes, presumably taking over a teacher role, and shifting the focus to their own learning was consequently experienced as something new and positive:

When we received this assignment [creating a teaching scheme as part of the course], we had to look at the course description, find our own learning outcomes, and connect them to our teaching scheme. I remember the learning outcome and feel that I achieved it better than just being introduced [to it] from the power point that our university teachers show. The learning outcome is better when we take it up and use it. (Reflection, S2)

Another participant supported the above remark by explicitly expressing that focusing on her own learning goal was something different from an ordinary practicum:

When you are in [teaching] practicum, you do not consider your own learning objectives. You think only about the pupils' competence aims [for English subjects], as we assume. This [focusing on our own learning aim] was completely new to me. (Reflection, S1)

This remark regarding the focus on student teachers' own learning was further elaborated on in the interview by the same student, who reported that focusing on student teachers' own learning outcomes in English made them more active students (or learners, according to our interpretation): "We were there to connect our learning outcomes to [...] competence aims of pupils. By doing that, we become more active students than passive ones who just sit there and receive theories." (Interview, S1)

Student 3 pointed out in the interview that there are learning goals that student teachers are expected to achieve during practicums, and which are used for evaluation by practice

teachers, but they are not connected to student teachers' learning outcomes from university coursework:

When you are in [teaching] practicum, you are provided with an evaluation form with many learning objectives that need to be met during the practicum, but it [the evaluation form] is not connected to our own learning outcomes [from university coursework]. (Interview, S3)

As mentioned above, there are evaluation criteria and learning goals that student teachers are supposed to fulfil during ordinary practicums, but those criteria and learning goals are not clearly linked to specific subjects (see Holmbukt et al., 2023). They are rather aimed at assessing school-related practical skills or general pedagogical competences.

When asked about their perceived role during the practicum, the informants indicated that their roles as learners and teachers were somewhat blurred: "I feel like I have a teacher's role when I am in the classroom. You are responsible for the pupils. However, one also has a learner role, since one asks for confirmation from the practice teacher and obtains tips and input" (Interview, S2). Here, the learner–role perspective, according to the informant, is based on practical and experience-based knowledge the student teacher can gain from her practice teacher who validates the student's teaching ideas or pedagogical decisions, but not from a theoretical perspective.

Another participant identified herself as a teacher in the practicum by taking over duties as a teacher. She reported that student teachers' learning tended to be set aside during ordinary practicums:

One will try to jump into another person's [teacher] role and take on everything from observation to teaching and meetings [...] and I believe it is easy to feel almost like you put your own learning to the side, but at the same time, that is why we are here [in the practice field]. (Interview, S3)

Student 3 implies here that taking over a teacher role is why student teachers participate in practicums at schools, which indicates that the practice field is perceived only as an arena where they practice their role as English teachers. The lack of focus on students' own learning

of theory in an ordinary practicum is further supported by the participants' unanimous view regarding the lack of theoretical discussion in the school setting. This point is elaborated in the following section.

Limited focus on theory in ordinary teaching practicum

As the informants shared their experiences with the theory-oriented teaching trial, we asked them to compare it with an ordinary practicum for English. All informants agreed that there was limited focus on theory in ordinary practicums, not only for English, but also for other subjects (see also Holmbukt & Son, 2017). Instead, their learning in ELT during practicums was mostly experience-based, primarily derived from hands-on teaching experiences and practical engagement in classroom settings. If student teachers are supposed to justify any of the teaching activities in the English class, they do not base their reasoning on ELT theory but on experiences, for example, on how pupils respond to English lessons. There are a number of extracts where the informants stress the importance of *experience*. Below is one example:

When we write about 'what, how, and why' questions for our lesson plan [that we need to fill out for any lesson during teaching practicums], we are supposed to justify [our lesson plan] asking the 'why' question. The 'why' question is certainly connected to the university perspective, [namely that] theory will be integrated, but it is not like that. The 'experience' is more counted [when we answer the 'why' question]. (Interview, S1)

In the interview, Student 2 implicitly relates the focus on theory to the learner's role, although the word 'learner' is not made explicit. She mentions that while student teachers take on a learner role when there is a clear focus on theory at the university, theory is not often discussed during practicums in the school setting: "There is a lot of focus on [ELT] theory when we are at the university, and we are in a way in that [learner] role. When we go out to school, we do not talk about it anymore, nor do we use theory [we learn at the university]." (Interview, S2)

The extract above thus indicates that the notion of *theory* correlates closely with the learner role in the university setting.

Student 3 speculates that the reason theory is rarely brought up in the supervision of the practice teacher could be associated with the lack of practice teachers' overview of the reading materials or theory taught at the university, as illustrated below:

It is possible that it [the reason theory is not discussed during supervision] has something to do with the fact that they [practice teachers] do not have an overview of what we have in the reading list and theory [for the English course]. It is not natural to discuss theory. (Interview, S3)

Thus, the uncertainty of whether practice teachers are aware of the theory to which they want to refer makes them hesitant to initiate theoretical discussions during their supervision.

Productive reflection on ELT methods

During the reflection session, when the participants were asked to evaluate their teaching, their evaluation initially focused on general classroom or time management: "It was really time constraints that put some pressure on us, and things didn't go entirely according to plan when it comes to timing" (Reflection, S1). However, when the university teachers encouraged the student teachers to link their teaching activities to theoretical concepts – such as the rationale behind selecting specific language teaching methods – one participant mentioned an unexpected consequence of employing two contrasting teaching approaches. The dialogue below illustrates how the students were encouraged to connect theory with teaching practice in their reflection:

- To what extent do you think the choices you made in your lesson had theoretical foundation? (Reflection, UT2)
- When we planned it, we intended for it to be task-based instruction. Generally, in English classes with task-based language teaching, the goal is to get pupils to speak English. But now, since the theme was [also] multilingualism, I think it doesn't really matter if they used Norwegian and other languages, because that was the whole point [in a multilingual approach]. So, I don't think it was something we considered when we chose task-based, which is primarily aimed at [speaking] English. But instead, many more languages were used [by the pupils]. (Reflection, S2)

This reflection on the contrasting consequences of using two different approaches offers students the opportunity to learn about the opposing assumptions underlying these language teaching methods—assumptions they were previously unaware of or had not fully considered. Below is another example where a student referenced specific theoretical concepts during the reflection on the selection of the tasks assigned to the pupils; “We had some reasoning-gap and information-gap tasks, where they [pupils] could help each other solve the tasks or use skills they already have, like searching and reading up on things” (Reflection, S2).

Reasoning-gap and information gap tasks are typical examples used in TBI (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), indicating that the student teachers had a solid understanding of the instructional principles they learned during the course.

Discussion

Better learning opportunities through theory-oriented teaching practice

The findings of the present study suggest that there seems to be a correlation between the perception of student teachers’ roles as learners and a deliberate connection to theory in teaching practice. The student teachers were positive about the theory-oriented teaching trial, given that they were able to focus on their own learning, taking on a more active and explicit learner role than in an ordinary practicum. Focusing on students’ own learning was brought about by a task which asked them to connect their teaching trial to competence aims for the university course in an attempt to make a deliberate connection between academic coursework and teaching practice. When one of the student teachers mentioned having a learner role during ordinary practicums, this learner perspective appears to be grounded more in practical and experiential knowledge—typically acquired from practice teachers—than in theoretical understanding (see Hellang and Rambø, 2017; Kvernbekk, 1995; Yavuz, 2011).

Thus, our findings suggest that intentionally connecting ELT theory with classroom teaching clarifies the often obscure role of student teachers as learners during their teaching practice. This deliberate effort to bridge ELT theory and teaching practice dissolves the existing boundary between the practice field, “which is motivated by the performance of teaching”,

and the theory field, “which is motivated by learning” (Jahreie, 2012, p. 15). This suggests that crossing boundaries between these two learning sites is an important premise for reducing the recurring theory–practice gap and for making student teachers better aware of learning opportunities for theoretical knowledge through teaching practice (see also Tsui & Law, 2007; Wang et al., 2022; Williams, 2013). In other words, theory-oriented teaching practice does contribute to enhancing learning opportunities for student teachers by shifting their focus to their own learning (assuming a learner role), which answers the first research question: *To what extent does theory-oriented teaching practice help student teachers of English see learning opportunities through teaching activities?*

Theory-oriented teaching trials as a supplement to ordinary practicums

The participants’ reports on ordinary practicums suggest that the analysis or evaluation of teaching practices within the school setting is still driven by the view from “the self-efficiency of experiences (or tyranny of experiences)” (Kvernbekk, 1995, p. 89), which prioritises field experiences over theoretical knowledge. If student teachers are expected to justify their pedagogical choices during teaching practicums—by addressing the *why* question in the sense of Davis (2006)—their reasoning tends to rely more on classroom experiences, such as pupils’ reactions to lessons, rather than on ELT theory. This trend is contrary to the intention of Norwegian TED which aspires for “research-based clinical practice” (Holmbukt et al., 2023; Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, p. 13). One of the reasons why theory (of ELT) is not adequately integrated in ordinary practicums is that the assessment criteria for teaching practices do not adequately address student teachers’ learning outcomes connected to specific subject courses such as English and Mathematics. Instead, the assessment of teaching practice primarily focuses on evaluating practical skills, such as class management, relationships with pupils and general pedagogical skills. Therefore, to promote better integration of theory and practice in ordinary practicums, it is essential that the assessment criteria for teaching practice during ordinary practicums encourage student teachers to actively apply theoretical knowledge in their fieldwork.

The inability to transmit what students learn on campus into their field experience may also stem from power dynamics with practice teachers, as also reported in previous studies (e.g. Allen, 2009; Yavuz, 2011; Yin, 2019; Holmbukt et al., 2023). Our findings show that student teachers feel reluctant to refer to theory because of the uncertainty of having common ground for theoretical knowledge between them and practice teachers. This attitude is comparable to that described in Yin's (2019) study, in which student teachers of English did not seem to question or challenge their practice teachers' practices that did not conform to the ESL theory they were taught at the university.

The lack of theoretical discussion in ordinary practicums is in accordance with what Jahreie (2012) observed in the interaction between practice teachers and student teachers; their talks primarily dealt with "methods that work", without making an explicit connection to theoretical knowledge, and "student teachers are presented with the way teachers think and act on an everyday basis" (Jahreie, 2012, p. 2). Such experience-based knowledge, not moving beyond the existing state of affairs, constrains learning opportunities for student teachers (Gravett et al., 2019; Holmbukt & Son, 2020; Jahreie, 2012; Yin, 2019), given that they lose the opportunity to further expand their theoretical knowledge based on teaching experiences.

Theory-oriented teaching practice within a school-university partnership may thus play a crucial complementary role in bridging the gap between ELT theory and practice often observed in ordinary practicums. This answers our second question regarding the supplementary function of theory-oriented teaching practice to ordinary practicums in enhancing theory-practice integration. Our findings indicate that the student teachers were capable of making use of ELT theory (e.g. TBI) in reflecting on their teaching experiences; they were able to question the assumptions made in TBI and multilingual pedagogy during the reflection session, recognising contradictions between these two teaching approaches through teaching experiences. In TBI, the use of the target language, English, is central, while multilingual pedagogy challenges the target-language-only principle commonly found in ESL theory, by permitting the use of any languages with which pupils feel comfortable (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2013; Krulatz et al., 2018; Slaughter & Cross, 2021).

Guided reflection on teaching experience in the presence of university teachers
Our last research question asks: *How does theory-oriented teaching practice under the school-university partnership facilitate productive reflection on teaching activities?* When the student teachers were asked to evaluate their teaching experiences, their reflections initially centred around practical challenges such as time constraints or class management. However, more critical and productive reflection was facilitated through the guidance of the university teachers. As previously discussed, when one of the university teachers encouraged the participants to evaluate their teaching scheme in light of ELT theory and justify their methodological choices, one student teacher was able to draw connections between two contrasting ELT approaches, TBI and multilingual pedagogy. The student critically questioned the assumptions underpinning these two approaches. The presence of the university teachers also legitimised the reference to ELT theory by the student teachers during the reflection process, unlike in ordinary practicums (see also Holmbukt & Son, 2017). This underscores the importance of guided supervision by university teachers in order for student teachers to engage in critical thinking and productive reflection on their teaching experiences (see also Yin, 2019; Smith & Ulvik, 2014 for empowering mentor teachers).

From our experiences with supervising teaching practicums in the past years, student teachers do not seem to demonstrate independent reflection skills in their teaching by making an explicit reference to the theory they learn at university. They need sufficient scaffolding within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) to be able to move beyond and expand their theoretical knowledge in ELT through a deliberate connection between theory and its application in real classroom teaching (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Jahreie, 2012; Kessels & Korthagen, 1996; Yin, 2019). According to Kessels & Korthagen (1996), the task of the teacher educator is not only to provide conceptual, theoretical knowledge in teaching, but also to assist student teachers in exploring and refining their theoretical knowledge through *deliberation of their practical experiences* (p. 21). The latter task may require a systematic, well-organised arena in which student teachers are encouraged to make a connection between their conceptual knowledge of ELT theory and teaching activities. This was showcased in the current study in the form of a theory-oriented teaching trial under a

school-university partnership, which allowed student teachers to cross boundaries between the fields of theory (driven by learning) and practice (driven by teaching). By navigating between these two fields, teaching activities became a tool for deepening the understanding of ELT theory, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice and enhancing learning opportunities for student teachers of English.

Conclusion

Merely observing and experiencing teaching or increasing the amount of teaching practice does not necessarily lead to professional development (see also Korthagen, 2016); “the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (Dewey, 1933, p. 25, cited in Gravett et al., 2019). To maximise student teachers’ teaching experiences, it is vital to guide them to actively exploit their theoretical knowledge (in ELT), both in teaching performance and reflection on it. Such a deliberate connection between theory and practice in teaching practice would help student teachers understand how ELT theory and practice can enrich each other. The current study intended to provide an arena in which both teaching practice and reflection on it are closely linked to ELT theory under the guidance of teacher educators, both from universities and schools. By making the connection between ELT theory and teaching activity more explicit, we showed that the student teachers were able to cross the boundary between the field of *learning* and that of *teaching*, expanding learning opportunities for conceptual knowledge of ELT theory while engaging in teaching practice. According to Cabaroğlu and Öz (2023), most studies of ELT practicums indicate that student teachers’ reflection on their teaching practice normally stops at a descriptive level, which Davis (2006) calls “unproductive reflection” (p. 282), and thus further research is needed to find ways to enhance the quality of reflection on teaching activities. To make an explicit connection to ELT theory in their teaching practice, the current study indicates that student teachers need guided supervision, which helps deepen the level of critical and reflective thinking in their teaching performance. In this study, such guided supervision was enabled through close collaboration between the university (theory field) and the school (practice field). This underscores the importance of

school–university partnerships as a foundational component in facilitating productive and reflective teaching practices among student teachers of English.

Limitations and future research

This study’s qualitative research was executed with a limited number of student participants, which makes it difficult to generalise its findings to the general population of student teachers specialising in English in Norway. However, our study offers valuable insights into the complexity of student teachers’ perceptions of theory and their experiences in integrating theory and practice in TEd for English. To enhance the credibility and transferability of our findings, we have provided detailed descriptions of the research context, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The translated extracts were also returned to the student participants for member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Nonetheless, to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of theory-oriented teaching practices in consolidating theoretical knowledge in ELT and reducing the gap between theory and practice in teacher preparation for English, more research should be conducted. This research should involve a larger population of student teachers of English with more frequent teaching trials than those attempted in the current study. Another limitation of our study is that the online teaching trial may have influenced the participants’ overall teaching experience and their reflections on it. Being physically distant from the pupils likely made it more difficult to interpret classroom dynamics and respond to pupils’ reactions to the tasks—factors essential for meaningful reflection and theory-practice integration. Additionally, the findings are based on a single teaching trial due to COVID-19 restrictions, which makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about the extent to which theory-oriented teaching practice enhances teaching competence in English. However, our previous studies with different student groups, based on physical teaching trials, revealed that theory-informed teaching experiences do positively contribute to the development of student teachers’ pedagogical competence in ELT, particularly when they engage in multiple teaching trials followed by critical reflection under the supervision of university teachers (see Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Holmbukt, 2024).

About the authors

Minjeong Son is an associate professor of English at the Dept. of Teacher Education at UiT - The Arctic University of Norway. Her main research interests are theory-practice integration in teacher education for English language teaching, multilingualism in the English classroom, and intercultural communicative competence.

Tove Holmbukt is a professor of English at the Dept. of Teacher Education at UiT - The Arctic University of Norway. Her research interests are theory and practice integration in teacher education programmes, student-centred teaching, and interdisciplinarity in teaching and learning English.

Annelise Brox Larsen is an associate professor of English at the Dept. of Teacher Education at UiT - The Arctic University of Norway. Her research interests are practice-oriented teacher education for English, student-centred English teaching, literature teaching, drama methods, and cultural diversity.

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