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Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the quality of a training course on English Language Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate perceptions of pre-service teachers of English on the quality of a training course on English Language Teacher Education. Thirty-nine pre-service teachers who had just completed their training program at a university participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The results show that the pre-service teachers on the whole showed a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the training course. However, the results indicate certain variances in the way the pre-service teachers responded to the issue of quality. The study also indicates suggestions proposed by pre-service teachers regarding how to help the university improve the quality of education and training as well as the services it offers. Accordingly, this study brings significant insights for related stakeholders in achieving a better quality for education.

1. INTRODUCTION

To meet the increasing demand of the labor market, especially in the period of integration and internationalization, employers always want to have a workforce with sufficient professional qualifications and skills, such as ability to perform the assigned tasks, communicate well, and solve problems effectively (Harvey et al., 2002; Hodge & Lear, 2011; Jang, 2016). In fact, the quality of education and training has a great impact on the workforce's ability to handle the work. Many studies conclude that, among various determinants, the services offered by the university, the teaching curriculum is one of the key factors that determines the development of skills and professional knowledge for students. The university, therefore, must be a key unit responsible for this main task (Tran, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017).

In a context like Viet Nam where English is taught as a foreign language, difficulties in implementing English education and training activities are inevitable (Adam & Newton, 2009; Nguyen & Jaspaert, 2021). Needless to say, improving the quality of education and training activities with the hope to help students (hereinafter referred to as pre-service teachers) achieve the goal of both using the English language at work, and ability to understand and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes related to the field of English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) is clearly a huge challenge for university. There are many approaches to evaluating a course, one of which is collecting students' perceptions (Cohen, 1980; Phan & Lai, 2011).

Meanwhile, research on investigating pre-service teachers' perceptions of their satisfaction about the quality of a training course on ELTE which is a four-

year full-time program including its training program and services at Can Tho University has been scarce. Therefore, this study aims at investigating Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of their level of satisfaction with the quality of the ELTE course and its related services that the university offers. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

i. What are Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the quality of a training course on ELTE?

ii. To what extent do Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers vary in responding to the issue of quality of a training course on ELTE?

iii. What are Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers' suggestions for improving the quality of a training course on ELTE?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Quality in higher education and training

Quality is an important issue and highly debated subject in higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993). In literature to date, different ways of understanding the term quality have been proposed (Gibson, 1986; Harvey & Green,1993; Heizer & Render, 2011; Sallis & Hingley, 1991; Sahney et al., 2008). Quality, in fact, means different things to different people. In this respect, the question raised here is, 'whose quality?' Burrows and Harvey (1992) observed that multiple stakeholders are involved in higher education, including students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and the like who might adopt different conceptualizations of quality at different moments. According to Gibson (1986), quality is notoriously elusive of prescription, and it is not easier even to describe and discuss than to deliver in practical situations. Harvey and Green (1993), discusses five interrelated concepts of quality: exceptional, perfection (or consistency), fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative while Garvin (1984) discerns five approaches: the transcendental approach, the product-oriented approach, the customer-oriented approach, the manufacturing-oriented approach and the value-for-money approach. In addition, quality in higher education can be seen in three elements of the educational system, namely, quality of input, quality of process and quality of output (Cheng & Tam, 1997; Sahney et al., 2008). Input quality is described as man power, tangible and/intangible facilities and resources of finance which might go through

different processes of administration, educational activities, or the like. About the quality of output, it can be evaluated by a variety of agents ranging from satisfaction of the stakeholders, the employability rate, salary, or learning outcomes of the students (Becket & Brooke, 2008).

It is worth stating that there is an argument that, in a service industry like education, quality should go beyond merely meeting customer requirements and should be about 'delighting' customers. It is, of course, difficult to measure 'delight' (Sallis & Hingley, 1991, p. 3). Therefore, it is not possible to talk about quality as a particular concept or a thing that can be clearly defined; quality instead must be addressed in terms of a range of qualities. From these perspectives, quality in general can be understood as the capacity of a product or service that can meet the expected needs of the customers or it can fully or partly satisfy their desire (Bornman, 2004; Heizer & Render, 2011).

2.2. Assessing student satisfaction in higher education and training

It is currently believed that concentrating on participant viewpoints and the meaning individuals attach to educational issues is valid and this trend is particularly favorable in specific cases (Creswell, 2009). By investigating students' satisfaction and needs on their learning outcomes or evaluating satisfaction levels of the given services provided by the educational institutions, it is possible for educators or policy makers to think of necessary changes or pedagogical innovations contributing to enhancing quality in education (Herdlein & Zurner, 2015).

Kotler (2012) states that satisfaction is the degree of a person's sensory state based on comparing results obtained from products or services with his/her prior expectations. Satisfaction, according to him, can be divided into three levels. First, if the performance is worse than expected, the person will not be satisfied. Second, if the performance is commensurate with the expectations, the person will be satisfied. Finally, if the actual results exceed expectations, the person will be very satisfied. In addition, Bearden and Oliver (1985) argue that satisfaction is the degree of agreement that the customers respond to the quality of the services that they wish to have and this includes both the level of response above the desired level and below the desired level.

2.3. Relationship between the quality of education and student satisfaction

Student perceptions can be defined as the way the students perceive and look at a situation from their personal points of view and accumulated experience (Lee & Shute, 2010). For instance, when students share positive thinking about a course, they are more likely to feel satisfied with it. Therefore, it is important to understand how students think about a course, with a view to determine its implications on their academic achievement. It is worth mentioning that student satisfaction is a key indicator of students' overall academic performance (Virtanen et al., 2017). It also measures the quality of the services as well as education and training activity that the institutions offer. Mihanović et al. (2016) report that students' ability to apply knowledge, and to achieve the intended learning outcomes, also impact on their satisfaction of quality of the education and training.

To date, there are numerous models that researchers can apply to measure students' levels of satisfaction toward the quality of university education and training activities and support services. For example, Pham (2016) evaluated students' satisfaction of the quality of education and training services based on four factors: (1) facilities such as classroom equipment, learning materials, (2) curriculum like course objectives, learning outcomes, syllabus, (3) teaching staff, and (4) services. Moreover, Pham and Nim (2017) conducted a study investigating students' attitudes towards the quality of the curriculum and training at a university. This paper presents the students' evaluation on the quality of three factors of curriculum, teaching methods, and services of the university.

2.4. Research on students' satisfaction of training program in a Vietnamese context

It should be mentioned that the number of studies which focus on students' satisfaction with training program in Viet Nam is still limited.

Lai and Pham (2011) conducted a study on 331 regular students in the third and the fourth academic years examining an assessment of the training programs at the Faculty of Finance and Accounting - College of Economics, Hue University. This study revealed that the students highly valued the quality of the training programs. However, there was an urgent need for improving both the program contents and the teaching methods so as to satisfy the needs of labor market, ensuring that the graduate students have adequate knowledge and professional skills capable of working in the globalized working environment.

Similarly, Vo et al. (2015) investigated students' perceptions of the education quality of both public and private universities located in Ho Chi Minh City. The results indicated that students showed a high level of satisfaction on seven components: (1) training programs; (2) teaching skills of faculty; (3) the interaction between faculty and students; (4) physical facilities; (5) the interaction between university and businesses; (6) extracurricular activities; and (7) student support service quality. The study also suggested pedagogical implications for related stakeholders in the field of education and training in designing and making policies.

Nguyen (2020) conducted a quantitative study investigating students' perceptions of the quality of a training program in distance learning at Ho Chi Minh City Open University. 642 graduates participated in the study. Results showed that students had a high level of satisfaction on the three factors of services, teaching staff and the training curriculum. Based on the research results, a number of recommendations are given for improving the quality in the training program of the same university and other similar contexts.

In order to extend the research base on the potential of investigating students' perceptions of the quality of a training course on ELTE in a Vietnamese context, this study was conducted.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Participants

A total of 39 EFL pre-service teachers who had just completed a course on ELTE (academic year of 2019-2020) at Can Tho University in the Mekong Delta, Viet Nam participated in the study. Six (15.4%) of these were male and 33 (84.6%) were female. The age range was 22-24 years.

3.2. Instrument

A semi-structured questionnaire was employed to collect data for the study. Using questionnaires brings many benefits to researchers. For one, it allows researchers to get data from a large number of participants at their own convenience (Gillham, 2008). In addition, using questionnaires which consist of a series of questions and statements helps participants respond and write down their thoughts in a deep manner (Brown & Hedges, 2009).

The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first section was designed to collect participants' demographic data including their names, age, gender, and email addresses while the second part consisted of 13 Likert-type items, and 1 open question item for qualitative data. The Likert-type items were given a numerical score (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) and categorized into three clusters. Cluster 1 included 5 items (1-5) which related to pre-service teachers' perceptions of the given syllabus. Cluster 2 included 1 item (6) for capturing pre-service teachers' views of the teaching methods commonly used by the teaching staff. Cluster 3 included 7 items (7-13) which focused on pre-service teachers' perceptions of the services provided by the university. It is worth mentioning that items 1-13 were partially adopted from the questionnaire developed by the Center of Quality Management of the same university for investigating students' perceptions of the quality of education and training activity as well as related services offered by the university. Finally, item 14 was an open ended question developed by the researcher based on the aims of the study.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected in two phases. First, the questionnaire was piloted on 32 students who had just completed a training course of English Studies at the same university for its reliability check. Prior to the pilot activity, the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by two experts in the field, each holding a PhD in Education. The aims of the study and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire were also provided to the participants. The Cronbach alpha analysis indicated that the level of reliability was high ($\alpha = 0.85$). This result implied that the questionnaire could be used for official data collection afterward.

In the second phase, the questionnaire was distributed to 42 pre-service teachers during the end of the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year with the response rate of 92.8% (n = 39). The reliability of the questionnaire was checked. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was found to be 0.84. Therefore, it can be concluded that data collected from the questionnaire was reliable.

The data were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS, version 20. To answer the second question, to what extent the pre-service teachers varied in responding to the quality of education and training activity as well as related services of a course of ELTE given

by the university, a multidimensional ALSCAL analysis was run. Since the stress and squared correlation (RSQ) value of the one-dimensional solution was high (RSQ = 0.71), a one-dimensional solution was employed for data analysis.

4. RESULTS

Regarding pre-service teachers' perceptions of the curriculum, they generally shared a high level of satisfaction (M = 3.37). The pre-service teachers strongly agreed that the curriculum has a well-balanced proportion between the knowledge of general education, basic education and specialized education (item 1, M = 3.36); helps develop students' learning and researching ability (item 2, M = 3.44); has clear expected learning outcomes (item 3, M = 3.33); includes clearly defined syllabus (item 4, M = 3.41), and has a good coherence within subjects (item 5, M = 3.31).

The results also showed that the pre-service teachers perceived a relatively high level of satisfaction with the teaching methods used by the teacher educators in helping them (student teachers) develop knowledge, skills and attitudes (item 6, M = 3.36).

Regarding pre-service teachers' level of satisfaction with the services that the university offered during the time they were trained, the results generally indicated that the university offered them great services (M = 3.33). To be specific, the pre-service teachers agreed that the university offers them good facilities to study in both theory-based and practice-based subjects (item 7, M = 3.41; item 8, M = 3.44, respectively). In addition, materials for learning activities were also reported to be highly satisfied (item 9, M = 3.28). Moreover, the pre-service teachers strongly agreed that the university provides them with good student profile including their updated personal data and learning results (item 10, M = 3.18); provides them with great consulting activities (item 11, M = 3.38); has effective ways of getting and dealing with their feedback on annual teaching and learning activities (item 12, M = 3.13); and provides them with useful information about job seeking activity (item 13, M = 3.46).

The results also indicated variance in pre-service teachers' perceptions of the quality of the ELTE training and education activities as well as its related services offered by the university.

The results from the multidimensional ALSCAL test (see Figure 1) showed the participants' distributions of their different responses regarding

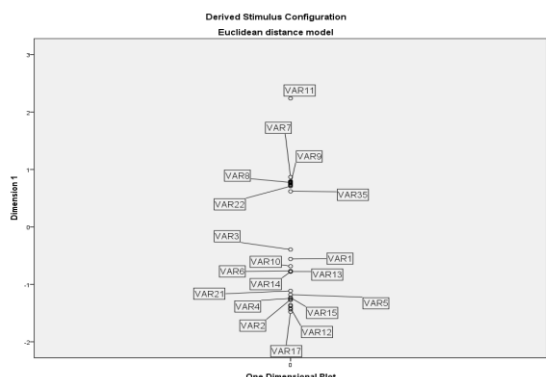their satisfaction about the quality of the training course on ELTE.

Figure 1. Distribution of subjects into one-dimension solution

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between the values of dimension 1 and the 13 items in the questionnaire (see Table 1) were also computed to analyze the corresponding relation between the items and the dimension.

Table 1. Pearson coefficients between values of dimension 1 and items 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11

		Dimension 1
IT2	Pearson Correlation	-.867[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	39
IT3	Pearson Correlation	-.924[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	39
IT4	Pearson Correlation	-.478[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
	N	39
IT7	Pearson Correlation	-.974[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	39
IT8	Pearson Correlation	-.605[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	39
IT9	Pearson Correlation	-.615[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	39
IT11	Pearson Correlation	-.916[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	39

The results showed that there were negative correlations between dimension 1 and items 2, 3, 4,

7, 8, 9 and 11, indicating that the subjects (pre-service teachers hereafter) who are situated towards the lower half of the table on the figure (see Figure 1) had more positive values of satisfaction towards the stated items while the other group of subjects who are situated towards the upper side were more negative towards these items. We will use subjects 17 and 11 to illustrate these differences. Quantitative analyses showed that subject 17 responded to items 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 11 with an extremely high level of agreement (M = 4), while subject 11 had much lower scores (M = 2.71). In the same vein, quantitative data collected from subject 12 showed that (s)he had a high level of satisfaction (M = 3.86) when responding to these items while subject 7 shared a lower level of satisfaction (M = 3.29).

With regard to pre-service teachers' suggestions for enhancing the quality of the course on ELTE, three categories of recommendations were identified from qualitative data of the study. The first category relates to content of the curriculum, in which pre-service teachers recommended the need for more time and opportunities for students to practice the language and teaching skills; and this task must be a necessary focus. As for a clarification, subject 10, for instance, suggested that the curriculum "should give students more time to practice the language skills and limit unnecessary amount of theory-based subjects". Similarly, subject 15 said that it is better if "the curriculum includes more opportunities for students to participate in practicum activities. By doing this, students can develop both of their skills of teaching and language".

The second category of recommendation was about the teacher educators' teaching method. Pre-service teachers suggested that the teacher educators should be more professional and expert in conducting their teaching. Participant 35, for instance, shared that:

I think the teacher should not depend much on using group presentation as a means to conduct teaching activity. In fact, it is not always a smart idea to apply this in some subjects. (Participant 35)

In addition, it is suggested that the teacher educator should help students know how to apply learned theories into practical situations in learning. Participant 3, for instance, recalled that:

From my experience, I realize that the teachers teach a lot about theories but fail to show how they can be applied in real-life situations. Therefore, I

think teachers should do this job to help enhance the quality of teaching. (Participant 3)

Third, in terms of services, the results showed that the pre-service teachers wished to have more opportunities to meet their potential or future employers during the training course since they wanted to update information about their future career. Participant 17, for instance, said that:

I think the university should organize more activities to give students the opportunity to approach employers. By doing this, students can know more about the job requirements and also employers' expectations about their future jobs. (Participant 17)

Sharing the same point of view, participant 25 expected "*the school organizes regular meetings or workshops where I can meet and talk to the employers with the hope to get useful information*" regarding job requirements.

Moreover, it is reported that the university needs to re-consider the method of getting and treating students' annual evaluation of the quality of their learning course. In particular, many students said that they were not satisfied with the way the university analyzed and reported the data. In other words, they wished they could know the results in a more detailed manner and see how the university deals with their raised voices. For instance, participant 33 suggested that:

Once the results are available, the university should make it clear and widely available to all students. Also, specific information about how the university has dealt with the data, or what explanations or adjustments have been made should be clearly stated. (Participant 33)

5. DISCUSSIONS

The first research question focused on investigating pre-service teachers' perceptions of the quality of a training course on ELTE and mainly addressed three categories: (1) the curriculum, (2) the teacher educators' teaching methods and (3) services.

Firstly, the results showed that pre-service teachers generally were highly satisfied with the quality of the training curriculum. This finding seems to be in relatively accordance with previous studies (Lai & Phan, 2011; Pham & Nim, 2017). The reason for this could be seen in the effort of the university in taking important factors related to the curriculum into consideration. For example, the university encourages the faculty to renew their teaching

syllabuses annually, in which new learning aims, learning outcomes and content alignment are made (Albers, 2003; Zeichner, 2006). By doing this, it can be said that the curriculum not only serves the needs of individual students but also aims at targeting the development of the society. The results seem to imply that the university should be careful in considering the distribution of modules in each semester since this task is very important mainly in helping students to master the required knowledge and skills. In addition, by extensively listening to students' feedback, the university can timely make necessary changes in the curriculum aiming to satisfy both individual student's and society's needs.

Secondly, the study findings showed that pre-service teachers strongly believed that members of the teaching staff were well trained with regard to teaching methods (Pham & Nim, 2017). However, this result is not consistent with a Lai and Phan's (2011) study which found that the students showed a fairly low level of agreement on the quality of the teacher educators' teaching methods. We find the results of the current study promising due to the fact that teaching methods are considered a very important factor in determining the quality of education and training. In fact, good methods definitely contribute to the efficiency and students' motivation to learn (Divjak & Tomić, 2011, Haerazi & Irawan, 2020). When students are motivated, they are likely to achieve better learning outcomes (Goodman et al., 2011; Erhel & Jamet, 2013). As a result, the quality of education and training activity will reach the expected level of quality of the university. It is, thus, suggested that educational leaders and policy makers need to seriously consider policies regarding Personal Development or Continuing Professional Development which might give necessary support to teachers to ensure they can take their teaching roles more properly. The university, for instance, can organize training courses on teaching methods according to the output orientation of the learning process.

Thirdly, most pre-service teachers shared a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the services offered by the university (Pham, 2016). This could be explained by the university's recent careful and huge investment in the system of facilities, learning materials and information technologies (Can Tho University, 2019). In addition, services related to supporting students' learning activities are highly valued. However, the pre-service teachers reported some concerns about how the university handles

students' feedback. Pre-service teachers claimed that the university failed to carefully investigate and seriously report the data about students' feedback on the quality of the education and training and services offered by the university. Therefore, it is implied that policy makers need to improve the quality of services to promote students' learning and satisfaction. The study findings also underscore the importance of taking immediate actions towards changing the way students' feedback data is collected and managed, so that the student feedback serves the purpose of reference for improvement.

The second research question focused on the extent to which pre-service teachers vary in responding to the quality of the training program and services of the course on ELTE. The results showed that most of the pre-service teachers varied in terms of evaluating the proportion of theory-practice balance within modules included in the curriculum, evaluating the quality of the facilities and materials provided by the university, and debating the effectiveness of the consultancy services.

The reason for variance in pre-service teachers' evaluation on the proportion of theory-practice balance could be that while some pre-service teachers learned carefully and paid much attention to the syllabus before and during each module, others tended to wait until the teacher explain to them or they seemed to ignore whether the content was useful or not. As a result, they shared different views on the detailed balance of the content weight of the syllabuses. About the facilities and materials provided by the university, it is undeniable to note that pre-service teachers were still confused in addressing this kind of support due to the fact that some of them might lack information or not pay much attention to news or notice made by both teachers and the university. Further variance was found in pre-service teachers' points of view of the service of consultancy given by the university. Although most pre-service teachers agreed that the university provided a very clear-cut and effective kind of service of consultancy, some of them seemed to be uncertain and confused. This could result from those who did not read information carefully before consulting the responsible staff for help. Therefore, they might still feel confused after the explanation or thought that the staff were not enthusiastic enough resulting in a low level of satisfaction. Moreover, it could be possible that there is a lack of smooth connection between the students and their teacher supervisor for dealing with problematic issues. This might have caused

troubles for the consulting staff in responding to students' problems in person. No need to say, this also leads to students' dissatisfaction with the services.

With regard to the third research question which sought suggestions for improving the quality of education and training activity and services of a training course on ELTE, the results indicated three major issues: consideration in the teaching content, the teacher educators' teaching methods, and services. To clarify, the results suggested that the university needs to allocate more time and opportunities for students to practice the skills of language and teaching since they believed that this might be necessary for achieving their learning goals (Bygate et al., 2013; Cotterall, 1999; Norton, 2003). In addition, instead of preferring one teaching method and only teaching theories, the teacher educator should be more careful and reasonable in selecting appropriate ways of teaching. As for the services, the pre-service teachers suggested that the university should offer them (the students) chances to meet potential employers. In fact, by getting to know more about job requirements directly from the employers or at least necessary information of the company, pre-service teachers can prepare and deal with job-related things in advance better. Furthermore, the university should seriously evaluate the effectiveness of the students' feedback activity towards the quality of the training course. According to them, the results of the collected data were not fully analysed and reported. These claims imply that the university needs to take immediate actions in order to consider and then adjust in case of agreement. Needless to say, listening to suggestions by pre-service teachers, who are supposed to be one of the key and direct agents of the education process, is worth considering (Van den Branden, 2006).

6. CONCLUSIONS

By addressing pre-service teachers' perceptions of the quality of a training course on ELTE in terms of its education and training activity and services, this study shows a promising pool of data which can be used to re-evaluate the quality of the current course offered by the university and suggest improvements for a better similar course. The results of this study showed that most pre-service teachers had a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the course. We find this encouraging since it shows that the university has achieved great success in offering a

high quality course to students. However, it should be noted that the results showed some variances in students' responses to the issue of quality. Among them, some were still not fully satisfied with the quality of the curriculum, or services offered by the university. Therefore, careful consideration of the students' suggestions for the course improvement must be a foremost priority. In addition, to enhance the quality of the training course, timely actions toward a gradual change in conducting and reporting students' feedback activity should be encouraged because this allows the university to deal with issues of quality in a deeper manner. Also, on-going support and appropriate policies regarding quality of the training course need to be offered in good time (considered by the authority) to maintain and promote the success of the university in its path of quality assurance.

Although the results of this study seem promising, limitations cannot be avoided. For one, the number of participants in this study was too small to draw any general conclusions. Moreover, all participants in this study were pre-service teachers of English who had just completed their training course. In this respect, it can be confirmed that they surely share a better understanding of the quality of the course since they have spent longer time to experience compared to other peer students. However, it is suggested that a replication of this study should be conducted with other groups of pre-service teachers of different years at university. By doing this, more insightful data related to the issue of quality can be addressed.

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