

# Student's Perspectives on Their Professional Preparation and School-Based Pre-Service Training

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**Master's thesis / Diplomski rad**

**2019**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:431182>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-12-02**



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**STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION AND  
SCHOOL-BASED PRE-SERVICE TRAINING**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Art History at the University of Rijeka

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**March 2019**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to explore student teachers' attitudes towards the MA in TEFL programme and their experiences of the EFL pre-service training at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka. Pre-service training is a central aspect of every MA in TEFL programme as it prepares student teachers for their profession. The participants in the study comprise 31 MA in TEFL students who have completed their pre-service training. The data on the student teachers' perspectives and experiences were collected by means of a questionnaire distributed first via social media and afterwards sent via e-mail in July and September 2018. The findings suggest that the student teachers, in general, have positive attitudes towards the MA in TEFL programme, and for the most part, were immensely affected by the EFL pre-service training. Also, the study reveals some strengths and benefits of particular organizational aspects of the EFL pre-service training and of the MA in TEFL programme. However, the study also reveals some weaknesses of the MA in TEFL programme and the EFL pre-service training. More precisely, the findings show that student teachers are dissatisfied with the current duration of the EFL pre-service training, specific organizational elements of the EFL pre-service training, the role of mentor teachers, and the balance between theory and practice in the MA in TEFL programme. Finally, some suggestions for improvement of the MA in TEFL programme and the pre-service training are offered.

Key words: students' perspectives, MA in TEFL, EFL pre-service training, University of Rijeka, Croatia

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## List of Abbreviations

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
MA	Master of Arts
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
ESL	English as a Second Language
EPOSTL	The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
EPLTE	European Profile for Language Teacher Education

## 1. Introduction

The journey to becoming a teacher of English as a foreign language is a complex process during which necessary teaching knowledge and skills are gained and beliefs towards teaching are formed (Collins, Selinger, & Pratt, 2001; Freese, 2006; Yüksel, 2014). Many student teachers who enrolled in their teacher training programmes with already existing beliefs, values and attitudes, are “de-educated” and “enculturated” into the teaching profession. (Yüksel, 2014, p. 29)

Contrary to teacher education programmes that have been in existence for a long time, foreign language teacher education is a relatively new term. Prior to a current systemized foreign language teacher education, teachers of foreign language were usually native speakers of the target language or non-natives who had some recognized expertise in the language. Furthermore, sometimes the only criterion for a foreign language teacher was simply being a native speaker of the target language (Day, 1993). Nevertheless, in the last three decades of the 20th century there has been an increased confusion in the areas of teaching and learning of foreign languages, in other words, both in the actual teaching and in the education of foreign language teachers (Day, 1993). Present-day, interest in foreign language teaching is increasing continuously caused by economical, social, educational and scientific developments. In our daily world in which communication has gained great significance, knowing one or more than one language, meeting and comprehending different cultures have been unavoidable requirements for each society (Gökhan, 2015). That being said, much emphasis has been placed on the need to train highly qualified and competent language teachers, therefore underlining the importance of EFL teacher education programmes (Agudo, 2017).

One of the most important aspects of the teacher education is the development of the so-called practical knowledge (Mattsson, Eilertsen, Rorrison, 2011). Broadly speaking, the concept of practical knowledge or, professional practice knowledge, is an umbrella-term including “participatory action research, dialogic research, co-operative inquiry, research circles, collaborative research, action learning, learning studies, practitioner research” and similar (Mattsson et al., 2011, p. 3). Compared to other forms of knowledge, professional practice knowledge has specific characteristics of which an emphasis on performance and “doing” is the fundamental one. Due to the fact that teachers today are required to

demonstrate an increasingly high range of personal as well as professional qualities, skills and understandings, pre-service training is important in regards to initiating the development of practical skills of the student teachers (Mattsson et al., 2011). The culmination of the teacher training programme is the pre-service training which enables the student teachers to work on their practical skills and implement their knowledge into a real life situation (Bonavidi, 2013). The pre-service training is an educational programme designed to train future teachers to formally enter the profession ensuring that the novice teachers meet the qualities and standards needed for the teaching profession (“Pre-service training,” n.d.). That being said, various reports worldwide pointed out that qualified teachers are the key to raising a quality society and, therefore, sustaining growth. What is more, some studies (Rowan et al., 2002; Sanders et al., 1997) suggest that teacher quality has proven to be the most important factor in student achievement. That is why it is important to ensure a quality starting point of the teacher education which begins within the frame of the pre-service training (Yüksel, 2014).

Research on learning to teach has mainly focused on teachers’ beliefs and perceptions (Chiang, 2003; Fives, 2003; Johnson, 1994; Raths & McAninch, 2003), previous learning experiences (Vélez-Rendón, 2006), attitudes toward teaching and learning (Bae, 2003; Hudson et al., 2008; Reber, 2001; Street, 2003), understanding of the subject matter, needs and challenges (Nelson & Harper, 2006), perceptions of initial teaching practice, mentoring processes (Street, 2004), and motivation to teach (Kyriacou & Koberi, 1998).

As for student teachers overall evaluation of EFL teacher education programmes, so far, there has not been a lot of research except for a few published studies (Akcan, 2016; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karakas, 2012; Peacock, 2009; Seferoglu, 2006). What is more, these studies are context-specific and concerned with the implementation of such programmes in their own settings. According to Agudo (2017), due to the lack of research in this area so far, further studies are actually needed. Gaining insight into the perspectives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student teachers on their teacher education experience gives invaluable information to key figures responsible for shaping and reshaping policies and practices accordingly. If we expect to take accurate and relevant restructuring decisions that will result in desirable changes regarding the student teachers, and to help them acquire the knowledge, skills and values that will allow them to succeed, it is important to discover their beliefs and perspectives about the teaching and learning processes (Yüksel, 2014).



With this in mind, this thesis aims to explore student teachers' attitudes towards the MA in TEFL programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka and their experiences of the EFL pre-service training in schools. Furthermore, the thesis will give an insight into the strengths and weakness of the current EFL pre-service training as well as offer some suggestions for improvement of the MA in TEFL programme and the pre-service training.

In line with these aspects, this paper is organized as follows: the first section gives a theoretical foundation explaining the importance of the teacher education programmes and the EFL pre-service training with regards to elements and phenomena specific to the training itself. Afterwards, the second section gives an overview of the study and the third section is reserved for the discussion. Limitations of the study are presented in the fourth section, which is followed by the final section related to concluding remarks.

## **2. TEFL and pre-service training**

Ever since the mid-nineteenth century, people who aspired to teach have taken various paths into the education environment. In general, formal teaching preparation prior to the 1830s was minimal or non-existent. The contemporary teacher training model is a relatively recent phenomenon that is set within a university and encompasses theory, pedagogy and field-based practice, all leading to state licensure for teaching (Labaree, 2008). In contrast, during the nineteenth century, teachers of foreign language were usually native speakers of the target language or non-natives who had some recognized expertise in the language. Sometimes the only criterion for a foreign language teacher was simply being a native speaker of the target language (Day, 1993). By the twentieth century, teacher preparation shifted from schools and teacher colleges to university campuses (Herbst, 1989; Kaelin 2013). The main focus during this shifting process was to develop highly qualified teachers who possess theoretical and methodological knowledge (Kaelin, 2013).

Present-day, an integral part of the teacher preparation programme in this context-specific case is the two-year Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (MA in TEFL) programme. The MA in TEFL is a professional degree that aims to prepare teachers of English as a foreign language for schools and similar educational environments. The graduates who are involved in the programme usually work in schools under mentorship. Upon finishing the programme the graduates receive a government recognized teaching qualification. An integral part of the MA in TEFL is the EFL pre-service training (“AUA Teaching English as a Foreign Language,” n.d.). The pre-service training is an educational programme, generally in the form of a course, designed to train future teachers to formally enter the profession at a specified level of education. Pre-service teachers or student teachers are those who are enrolled in a teacher education programme in order to receive specific teaching credentials (“Pre-service training,” n.d.). The role of pre-service training programmes has a paramount importance in improving the quality of education in schools, since its main aim is to educate student teachers to be teachers who influence the success of their students’ education (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Bonavidi, 2013). The essence of the pre-service training programme is to:

prepare teachers to be committed to students’ learning; to have knowledge sufficient to be used for effectively preparing, implementing and evaluating the teaching of their subject;

teach and assess students' learning; systematically and critically reflect on their teaching experiences; and be ready to participate in communities of learning and schooling. (Tedick, 2005; Bonavidi, 2013, p. 1)

## **2.1. Language teacher education**

It is also important to point out here the differences between teacher education in general and language teacher education (Bonavidi, 2013; Richards 1990; Tarone & Allwright 2005). What differentiates language teaching programmes from other teacher education programmes is the fact that its fundamental knowledge base stems from (applied) linguistic and language learning theory, as well as the target culture (Pasternak & Bailey 2004), while its practical pedagogy stems from language teaching methodology and practice teaching (Cochran-Smith 2004). Taking into consideration both views, language teacher education should include a wider social, political (Roberts, 1998), economic and cultural perspective (Johnson, 2009), as well as emotional (Malm, 2009) conditions, and foster social and interpersonal relationships in a collaborative way during the education of a teacher. Language teacher education programmes should encompass various aspects, such as “new information, schemata, beliefs, practice, knowledge, direct and indirect experiences of teaching, reflection, development of skills and attitudes” (Bonavidi, 2013, p. 16; Roberts 1998).

Regarding foreign teacher education programmes in the European context, both pre- and in-service are mainly based on contemporary references developed by the Council of Europe such as Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) (Council of Europe, 2001), European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) (Council of Europe, 2007) and European Profile for Language Teacher Education (EPLTE) (Kelly et al., 2004). The main aim of these references is to contribute to teachers' professional development and foster their vocational growth by the means of self-reflection (Karakas, 2012). The CEFRL has become the main reference document for those who are involved in language teaching as it covers many aspects of learning, teaching and assessment of modern languages. The EPOSTL, on the other hand, is generally viewed as a competence-oriented reflection and self-assessment tool for language teacher education (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2012). The EPLTE offers a frame of reference for language teacher educators in both pre-service and in-service education of foreign language teachers in Europe, emphasizing the importance of student teachers' linguistic competence as well as teaching practice. In general,

these European references or tools seek to improve the quality of teacher education programmes (Agudo, 2017).

## **2.2. EFL teacher education**

Taking into consideration the fact that the English language is a global language, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has been of concern throughout the world. Furthermore, as various aspects of the language and peoples' needs around it are continuously developing and changing, the education of the same is trying to keep up with the ever-changing environment. In this context, EFL teachers' programmes are constantly developing in order to raise standards of teaching and learning (Hudson et al., 2008). An additional challenge EFL teachers have to face is that the English language is the medium and goal of instruction. That is why, among other things, student teachers have to be prepared to meet the challenges and standards for EFL teaching (Hudson et al., 2008).

## **2.3. TEFL**

“TEFL” is the acronym for Teaching English as a Foreign Language, or in other words, English language instruction for non-native speakers in countries where English is does not have a special status of a second language. Teaching English as a Foreign Language certification is an internationally recognized qualification to teach English abroad. The field of TEFL stands as one of the fastest growing educational fields in the world. There are also terms synonymous to “TEFL” such as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), English Language Teaching (ELT), and teaching ESL (English as a Second Language). When these terms are applied to the field of teaching English abroad, there is little or no difference between “TEFL” and “TESOL.” Both terms essentially denote the same thing which is teaching the English language to non-native speakers. Similarly, in the context of teaching English abroad, a “TEFL certification” and a “TESOL certification” are the same and the terms are interchangeable. On a more technical level, TESOL is the term applied to the teaching of English to non-native speakers in native English speaking countries, meaning those who will earn degrees and work domestically in the field in the UK, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa and the US will typically use the term “TESOL” (“What is TEFL and what is TEFL Certification?,” 2018). Upon completing a TEFL programme, the novice teacher should generally be equipped with a certain knowledge base which includes the ability to teach the four main English language skills that are reading,

writing, speaking and listening, the teacher should also know how to plan a lesson, manage a classroom, identify different learning styles, adapt lessons to suit students and their needs and, lastly, develop effective learning materials (“What is TEFL and what is TEFL Certification?,” 2018).

Present-day, there is even an option to earn a TEFL certification online. Since the pre-service training is an essential part of the TEFL programme in general, the Online TEFL Classes are not an exception here. The Online TEFL Classes require pre-service training in terms of 20 hours of practice teaching, observation and/or tutoring that the student must complete in an ESL or EFL classroom setting to earn the accredited TEFL certification (“How will I complete the practice teaching for my online TEFL course?,” n.d.).

#### **2.4. TEFL at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka**

All of the students who are enrolled into the graduate study programme in teaching at the Faculty are offered general teacher education courses which develop a knowledge base in the fields of pedagogy and psychology such as Didactics, Pedagogy, Developmental Psychology, Education Psychology, etc. These courses are intended for all majors and offer basic knowledge related to the preparation for the teaching profession. For instance, the course Didactics I is one of the most prominent courses of the programme which deals with teaching methodology. The course comprises 4 ECTS and focuses on the analysis of the basic didactic terms, lesson processes, lesson plans and methods of teaching (“Studijski program: Diplomski studiji nastavničkog smjera, Izvedbeni planovi zimski semester akademske godine 2018/2019.,” 2018). Likewise, the course Didactics II is also offered and it is a follow up of the previously mentioned course as it covers all the topics of the same thematic area. The course Didactics II comprises 4 ECTS points. These two courses are fundamentally theory based courses with embedded practical tasks such as the development of a lesson plan (“Izvedbeni planovi ljetnog semestra akademske godine 2017/2018.,” 2017, February).

The MA in TEFL programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka is structured as a double major programme, meaning the students can enroll in the MA in TEFL programme combined with another major that is offered at the Faculty. The graduate study programme consisting of two majors carries a total of 120 ECTS points of which the teaching courses carry 60 points and the two majors 30 points each. The aim of the MA in TEFL programme is to foster theoretical and practical knowledge in order

to successfully develop the knowledge, skills and competences needed for the teaching profession. The MA in TEFL programme covers scientific areas of linguistics and literature, as well as the Language practice. The teaching process is in its entirety carried out in the English language which contributes to the students' language competences. Upon completing the programme the students acquire the academic title Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language as well as competences which enable them to work in educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia. The acquired competences include knowledge within the field of the English language and culture, English language teaching methodology, applied linguistics and psycholinguistics ("Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti – dvopredmetni studij," 2014).

The MA in TEFL programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka is comprised of various courses that can generally be divided into two parts: the above mentioned general teacher education courses that are common to all majors enrolled in the graduate study programme in teaching (Didactics, Pedagogy, Developmental Psychology, Education Psychology, etc.), and courses orientated towards the language itself relating to linguistics of the English language (Introduction to Psycholinguistics) as well as English language teaching (Introduction to Learning and Teaching English, Practicum, ELT Methodology, Pre-service Training) ("Obrazac za izmjene i dopune studijskih programa," 2018).

Generally speaking, some TEFL programmes offer the opportunity of attending a practical training course which provides students with the opportunity to put theoretical ideas into practice at the university. In the English Department at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka, this is the Practicum in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. This course carries 3 ECTS points. The aim of the course is to equip the students with the knowledge about language learning and teaching which they can implement into a real life classroom environment. The importance of this course lies in the fact that it gives the students the opportunity to develop their practical teaching skills by obtaining microteachings. Each student has the chance to obtain two microteachings in a somewhat simulated classroom context which serves as a preparation for the course Pre-service training that the students have to attend in the following semester ("Obrazac za izmjene i dopune studijskih programa," 2018).

The only course in which students develop their practical teaching skills and competences in an authentic elementary and secondary school environment is the Pre-service training. This course has 3 ECTS points and it is offered in the last semester in the graduate study programme in teaching. For a student to be able to enroll into this course, he or she has to successfully pass the Methodology of Teaching English as a Foreign Language which is a course that covers all of the theoretical insight and knowledge one needs to know in preparation of a future teaching career, such as designing lesson plans, teaching the four language skills, etc. The requirements of the Pre-service training include: a total of 12 hours (6 in elementary and 6 in secondary school) of classroom observation, 12 hours of teaching assistant activities (6 per school), 8 microteachings (4 per school), 6 independent lessons (3 per school), 2 hours of peer observation (1 per school), a self-evaluation via EPOSTL and 6 post lesson self-evaluations for each lesson taught (3 per school). In addition, the student teachers are required to submit a portfolio which should represent their best work and consist of 4 lesson plans (2 per school), 6 observation sheets (3 per school), 2 peer feedback forms (1 per school), self-evaluations of 4 lessons, the EPOSTL as well as any additional material that the student teacher has used in his or her work and would like to incorporate in the portfolio. The mentioned material is submitted to the course instructor at the university who, on the basis of the portfolio and feedback from the school mentors, evaluates the student teacher's work and teaching skills ("Obrazac za izmjene i dopune studijskih programa," 2018).

### **2.5.The bridge between theory and practice**

In teacher training programmes theoretical knowledge is given a high priority in the university environment (Mattsson et al., 2011). The knowledge and skills that the student teachers need to develop during their education is a combination of "declarative knowledge (knowing that), procedural knowledge (knowing how) and conditional knowledge (knowing when and why to apply certain procedures)" which is defined as practice knowledge (Mattsson et al., 2011, p. 5). It should equip the student teacher with the right tools which he or she can implement in the actual practice, in other words, in the real life classroom setting (Mattsson et. al., 2011).

In general, university coursework and the pre-service training are not carried out simultaneously, meaning that the theoretical part done at university is completed prior to the practice. Some studies suggest that this division between theory and practice might hinder student teachers to implement the methods in the classroom situation (Kaelin, 2013). The

literature suggests that if theory is presented apart from actual practice, it may be perceived as having little practical value (Kaelin, 2013). Time spent by student teachers in pre-service training varies widely across programmes. In his study Kaelin (2013) mentions that in the United States, student teachers spend an average of 177 hours in supervised pre-service training prior to student teaching and an average of 514 hours during the pre-service training where they obtain teaching activities (Kaelin, 2013). It is also worth mentioning the Online TEFL Classes which require 20 hours of actual teaching, observation and/or tutoring that the students must complete in an ESL or EFL classroom setting to earn the accredited TEFL certification (“How will I complete the practice teaching for my online TEFL course?,” n.d.).

Taking into consideration all of the facts and previous findings, the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education, as in similar professions, is a somewhat controversial topic. While the university coursework is intended to offer a balanced programme in terms of theory and practice as well as to support the students during their transition to becoming teachers, the question remains of how well this intended balance is realized (Kaelin, 2013). As Capraro, Capraro and Helfeldt (2010) stated in their study, integration of theoretical models and ideas does not necessarily occur during the participation in the pre-service training among student teachers. On the other hand, it is important to state that, as one study (Kaelin, 2013) argued, the best theoretical work in the university context does not necessarily produce the best quality teachers for the actual classroom context. In other words, the theory that student teachers learn from their coursework needs to be recontextualized, appropriated and adapted. Furthermore, the study states that a complexity of various factors influences the quality of the practice some of which are personal histories, schooling experiences, student teachers’ professional identity and similar (Kaelin, 2013).

## **2.6. The importance of the EFL pre-service training**

The pre-service training has long been a crucial part of the EFL teacher training programmes in many countries (Anderson, 2004; Hudson et al., 2008; Stewart, 2004). The school context has an important role for the development of student teachers and their teaching practices, as well as in shaping their attitudes towards teaching (Hudson et al., 2008). The pre-service training is an essential experience for student teachers because it enables them a chance in not only shaping themselves as novice teachers but it gives them opportunities to establish a connection with the students and, therefore, shape and influence them as well (Bonavidi, 2013; Cochran-Smith 2004).



While the university courses have prepared the student teachers with theoretical knowledge, immersion and teaching in the actual classroom environment is required so that they gain practical experience in a complex school community (Bonavidi, 2013; Zeichner 2010). What is more, university teacher education will not be of much use for student teachers' teaching skills unless their real teaching experience at school is appropriately conducted (Bonavidi, 2013; Darling-Hammond 2000). Therefore, the management of the EFL pre-service training programme is an important element in ensuring that student teachers have a maximal experience in learning to teach. Furthermore, Heenan (2004) suggests that the organization surrounding the implementation and realization of teacher training programmes plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of further professional development.

### **2.7. Factors affecting EFL pre-service training**

The pre-service training is the culmination of the teacher training programme enabling the student teachers to implement their knowledge into a real life situation (Bonavidi, 2013). This specific element of the teacher preparation has continued to receive attention from policy makers, researchers, teacher educators and the public since the middle of the twentieth century (Cochran-Smith 2004). The focus of their concern is how to improve students' performance, which actually includes improving teachers' quality leading to the underlying issue of improving teacher education (Bates 2007). In order to improve this segment of teacher preparation, weak points need to be recognized and analysed. The experience of a pre-service training can be quite challenging for the student teacher and research (Hudson et al., 2008) on learning to teach has tried to uncover the problems student teachers face during this new experience. In their study, Wang and Odell (2002; Hudson et al., 2008, p. 3) identify three factors that student teachers confront during their pre-service training and they are: "(1) emotional and psychological stress, (2) lack of support, and (3) conceptual struggles about teaching and learning."

The first factor pointed out in the study (Wang and Odell, 2002; Hudson et al., 2008), emotional and psychological stress, is assumed to be the result of a relatively low professional and social status of teaching and "the uncertainty of classroom life" (Hudson et al., 2008, p. 3; Wang and Odell, 2002). What is more, student teachers can also experience stress because they have to face the two most important challenges of the pre-service training simultaneously: teaching and learning to teach. Also relating to the problem of emotional and psychological stress are high expectations that many student teachers have upon entering the pre-service experience with hopes

and expectations that are often “shattered by exposure to certain realities of schools, classroom, and teaching” (Hudson et al., 2008, p. 3; Knowles, Coles, & Presswood, 1994). Furthermore, student teachers can experience a culture shock in a way that they feel overwhelmed by the new situation of the pre-service training accompanied by other university obligations. This issue is particularly evident in cases where the pre-service training is conducted in a limited time frame such as the last semesters of the university programme (Hudson et al., 2008). In general, to facilitate student teachers to attain knowledge and skills stated in the standards, a teacher education programme should have motivating leadership and a supportive surrounding (Bonavidi, 2013).

This notion, or precisely the lack of it, leads to the second factor which is the lack of support. It can include a “lack of instruction routines, procedures, skills, and techniques that are related to the contexts of teaching” (Hudson et al., 2008, p. 3; Wang & Odell, 2002). However, the lack of support can also indicate lack of emotional support from mentors and the university supervisor as Goh et al. (2009; Bonavidi, 2013) indicated in the study on student teachers’ confidence during the pre-service training. In general, besides the student teachers, the pre-service training involves university supervisors and teacher mentors. Each party has their role and responsibilities they are obligated to maintain to ensure a pre-service training of satisfying quality. University supervisors monitor the student teachers during the university practicum preparation, match the student teachers with mentor teachers from particular schools and support the novice teachers to learn by teaching in the community with ethics and social integrity (Bonavidi, 2013). Some researchers (Chow, Tang, & So, 2004; Forbes, 2004; Garnes 2004; Hudson et al., 2008; Hawkey, 1997; Street, 2004; Woullard & Coats, 2004) have shown that mentoring relationships in school contexts can shape student teachers’ professional practice. It is no surprise that student teachers require assistance from experienced colleagues especially in their initial stages of teaching in schools. Effective mentoring programmes should ensure structure and support to the novice teacher (Arnold, 2006; Chow, Tang, & So, 2004; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Hudson et al., 2008; Woullard & Coats, 2004). The mentor teachers are perceived as having the most important role in working with the student teachers. Their role of mentoring is to share effective practice of teaching and to support student teachers during their first experiences in working with students which include planning, teaching and assessing, as well as developing tools for reflection. A professional relationship between the mentor and the student teacher is of critical relevance for the effectiveness and formation of positive attitudes towards the pre-service training,

therefore, teaching (Bonavidi, 2013). In order to achieve this positive professional relationship, effective matching between a novice and an expert is needed (Cuenca 2011; Kaelin, 2013). What is more, the study also pointed out several other important characteristics of a well-designed pre-service training experience such as ensuring the university supervisors and mentors work according to clearly articulated expectations, good communication and ongoing opportunities for reflective discussion (Cuenca, 2011; Johnson & Naper-Owen, 2011; Kaelin, 2013). As it is stated in the previous paragraph, the role of a mentor teacher is a crucial one for ensuring a supportive, effective and motivating first teaching experience setting a foundation of attitudes towards the future teaching profession (Hudson et al., 2008).

To further highlight the importance of mentorship it is necessary to mention what kind of consequences negative mentoring practices leave behind. There have been a number of studies that suggest the pre-service experiences in teacher education programmes do not necessarily deliver positive results (Bullough et al., 2004; Hascher et al., 1999; Kaelin, 2013; Lortie, 1975). Some of the weaknesses of the pre-service training that were identified include poor communication between mentors and university supervisors (Hascher et al., 2004; Kaelin, 2013), unclear expectations between mentors, student teachers and university supervisors as well as inadequate training for mentors and supervisors (Johnson & Napper-Owen, 2011; Kaelin, 2013). Regarding the mentor teacher – student teacher relation, tensions can be caused by conflicting teaching philosophies (Graham, 1997; Hudson et al., 2008). Another negative aspect of a pre-service training that McLaughlin (1993), Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) and Long (1999) found are environments that restrain innovation and reinforce traditional practice. Any negative experiences can greatly influence the process of learning how to teach EFL successfully, and that is why clarity is required on “the definition of mentoring, the role of mentors, and the selection of mentors” (Giebelhaus & Bendixon-Noe, 1997; Hudson et al., 2008, p. 4). Negative mentoring can indeed hinder the development of a novice teacher (Sudzina & Coolican, 1994; Hudson et al., 2008). Still, problems that student teachers experience vary on an individual level (Jonson, 2002; Hudson et al., 2008). In general, some specific concerns of the student teachers include: classroom management/discipline, student motivation, teaching techniques and catering for individual differences (Ellis, 2001; Hudson et al., 2008).

## **2.8. Positive influences of the pre-service training**

According to Agudo (2017), studies that deal with the evaluation of the teacher education programmes and the investigation of the attitudes and perspectives of students who are enrolled in such programmes are in great deficiency, so further studies are actually needed. Despite the fact that such studies are scarce in number and done in their own specific contexts, a study worth mentioning here is the one carried out by Kaelin (2013). He investigates the student teachers' perspectives on the professional practice, the pre-service experiences and the development of the teacher identity (Kaelin, 2013). In his study he concludes that the professional preparation has been shown to contribute to the development of professional competencies. He argues that the pre-service training can indeed yield positive results if done under proper conditions. Although there are numerous variables at play, Kaelin (2013) argues that the efficacy of the professional preparation experience relies heavily on the student teachers' values and disposition, which are both powerfully influenced by personal experience. Also, an important element that impacted the student teachers' attitudes towards the professional preparation in Kaelin's study (2013) was the mentor teacher at school. Overall, all of the participants identified the pre-service experience as the most significant part of their professional preparation. Even those who reported difficulties and challenges felt strongly that the experience provided them with essential skills and insight (Kaelin, 2013).

### **3. Present study**

#### **3.1. Aim**

The overall aim of the present study was to gain insight into the attitudes of the student teachers' perspectives on the quality of the EFL pre-service training and the MA in TEFL programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka.

The purpose of the study was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the student teacher perspectives on the effectiveness of the pre-service training at elementary and secondary schools?

RQ2: How do student teachers feel about the extent to which they are successful in teaching EFL?

RQ3: To what extent have the general teacher education courses prepared the student teacher to teach?

RQ4: To what extent have the ELT courses prepared the student teacher to teach?

RQ5: How have the mentors influenced the student teachers perceptions of and attitudes towards the teaching profession?

RQ6: What are the student teachers' recommendations for improving the MA in TEFL programme and EFL pre-service training?

#### **3.2. Participants and context**

The study consists of 31 participants in the MA in TEFL programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. Accordingly, the context of the present study is the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. The majority of the participants had attended the course Practicum in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Regarding the participants other major, 10 (25.8%) of them studied Croatian Language and Literature, 6 (19.3%) of them studied Pedagogy, 4 (12.9%) of them studied Philosophy, 4 (12.9%) of them studied German Language, 4 (12.9%) of them studied Art History, 3 (9.6%) of them studied Italian Language and 1 (3.2%) studied History. Their age range is between 23 and 36 years.

#### **3.3. Research methods**

The responses were collected by means of an online questionnaire which was distributed first via social media and afterwards it was sent via e-mail in July and September 2018. The

questionnaire was anonymous. The estimated duration of time to complete the questionnaire for the participants was approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

The questionnaire comprised 4 parts: initial demographic questions, questions about the pre-service training, questions relating to the balance between the theoretical and practical coursework at the university; self-reflection questions and suggestions for the improvement of the EFL pre-service training programme.

The first part, consisting of demographic questions, enquired about the participants' age, second major and questions relating to some details about their second major (e.g. how many hours of teaching the participants had in schools), whether they had had prior experience of teaching in school and the last question enquired into their motivation for teaching, in other words, willingness to actually teach EFL.

As to the second general thematic part consisting of 34 Likert type questions relating to the pre-service training, the sub-thematic parts were as follows: questions about the overall organization of the pre-service training; questions concerning mentorship in both elementary and secondary school; questions that inquired into the overall pre-service training in terms of self-reflection on teaching skills, competences, confidence and readiness to teach. The participants had to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed with the statements.

In the third part, the participants had to rate how well the University courses contributed towards their preparedness to teach EFL. This part consisted of 12 Likert type questions.

The final part comprising 7 open-ended questions elicited participants' opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the EFL pre-service training in elementary and secondary school. Furthermore, the open ended questions in this part prompted the participants' to reflect on what skills and competencies they gained and developed during the EFL pre-service training. The final question elicited suggestions on how the EFL pre-service training programme could be improved.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Perceptions about the teaching profession

As for the participants previous experience with teaching EFL outside the university programme, 25 of them (80.6%), had no experience teaching EFL, while 6 respondents (19.3%) had taught EFL outside the university context. When asked to further elaborate on their experience, the answers generally related to teaching EFL to young learners in kindergarten and/or giving private lessons, i.e. tutoring children, while half taught senior learners.

*I've taught English to early learners in kindergarten and I've taught English to senior citizens.*

*I held a three-month course in English for beginners (for the retired).*

*Gave private lessons, learning assistance to children.*

*I was teaching English in kindergarten.*

Apart from teaching the two opposites of the age spectrum, young and senior learners, one respondent mentioned teaching EFL in a non-profit organization.

When asked how many hours of teaching EFL outside the university programme they had had, the answers varied greatly. The answers were as following: 2 hours, 15 hours, 20 hours, 40 hours, 100 hours and 160 hours.

As for the participants' motivation and willingness to become an EFL teacher, there is almost an equal balance between "yes" and "maybe". More precisely, 16 respondents (51.6%) answered "yes", 13 of them (41.9%) answered "maybe", while the 2 respondents (6.4%) answered "no".

Those who would like to become EFL teachers offered answers related to their genuine love for teaching and working with people.

*I always wanted to be a teacher.*

*This is my calling and I feel like I could really be a great EL teacher.*

*I genuinely enjoy working with children!*

*I love teaching and working with people.*

Moreover, some report they enjoyed the challenge of the job itself because it is dynamic, creative, requires constant adaptation to new situations, and develops teaching skills as well as other skills that are needed for this profession.

*I always strive to learn something more so this motivates me to transfer some of the knowledge to others, and it makes me happy to see that someone has memorised and understood something that I have said/taught. And you get to work with different people which is always a challenge so you need to adapt your work in order to be successful.*

*I would like to be an EFL teacher because I would like to master the skill of teaching and other skills that go along with it.*

*I feel that teaching English can be very interesting and creative, and there are a lot of materials at our disposal (online) to use in the classroom.*

One participant expresses their belief that the English language can be a tool for influencing and motivating the students to develop an appreciation for culture, especially art and literature.

*By being a teacher, I believe I could influence and motivate students into liking English, make them aware of culture and art, primarily literature, related to English-speaking countries...*

One respondent thinks that by becoming an EFL teacher he or she has a better chance of employment after receiving his or her degree.

*...it is the most favourable option in terms of employment with regards to alternative options I have upon finishing my degree.*

Moving on to the respondents that are uncertain whether they would want to become an EFL teacher. The vast majority of the statements reflect the participants' personal doubts relating to the profession, meaning that they are not quite certain that being an EFL teacher is the right career path for them. A few stated that the pre-service training changed their opinions of the profession for the better but still show uncertainty as to picturing themselves in that field of work.



*I found the experience of teaching EFL surprisingly interesting, but I'm still not sure if that's what I'd want to do for the rest of my life.*

*I definitely didn't want to be one before, but actually doing it in practice changed my opinion a little bit. I now think it would be an acceptable career, but it's still not the one and only thing I want to do.*

Several participants acknowledge the positive sides of the profession but express their dissatisfaction with the present status of teachers as unappreciated and underpaid.

*The job itself is very fulfilling and dynamic, but the current state of school system in Croatia (as well as in the world) is not the best. The teachers are not valued enough and are mostly underpaid.*

Two respondents report they feel like they are not able to decide with certainty about their possible future teaching job because they simply do not have enough hours of practice to actually self-reflect and thus express self-doubt.

*I'm really interested in teaching both English and German but I'm not sure whether I'm ready for that job since we didn't have many hours of practice.*

*...I think that I need more training and more practice if I want to be really good at teaching.*

Some believe that their job choice depends solely on the situation of the job market.

*It really depends on the jobs available on the job market.*

Lastly, moving on to the minority (6.4%) that claim they do not want to become EFL teachers. Their explanations are rather simple and straightforward claiming they think the teaching job is too challenging or they have other aspirations in life regarding their career.

*I feel that teaching is a job that is too dynamic and complex.*

*I would really wish to become to a professional historian and research medieval weaponry and fighting styles.*

## **4.2. Opinions and attitudes towards the pre-service training**

Moving on to the participants' opinions of the overall organization of the EFL pre-service training, mentorship in both elementary and secondary school, the pre-service training in terms of self-reflection on their teaching skills, competences, confidence and readiness to teach. The participants were examined by the means of 34 Likert type questions.

Half of the participants (51.6%) report that the duration of the programme was not sufficient enough to prepare them, student teachers, for a real-life working context, while only two participants (6.5 %) strongly hold the opinion that the duration of the programme was not long enough. The minority of the participants (22,6%) are neutral, while 19.4% think that the duration was sufficient enough for preparing them for a real-life working context. Questioning further into the duration of the pre-service training, a vast majority (74.2 %) strongly agrees with the statement that the training should be extended to a period longer than eleven weeks, which was the official duration of the training the participants took part in. Furthermore, 12.9 % agrees with the statement, 6.5% is neutral, while 3.2% disagrees and another 3.2% strongly disagrees.

The data shows that the student teachers are satisfied with the general organization of the pre-service training, 29% strongly agrees and just over a half of the respondents (51.6%) agree, 9.7 % are neutral, while 5.6% are not satisfied with the organization and 3.2% express strong dissatisfaction.

Moving on to smaller segments of the pre-service training programme, 32.3% express strong satisfaction with the organization of the microteachings, 61.3% are satisfied with the organization, while only 6.5% are neutral. Continuing with positive attitudes, when asked to decide upon the adequateness of the organization of independent lessons the student teachers held, 45.2% hold a strong opinion that the lessons were organized in a satisfactory way, 48.4% are averagely satisfied while only 6.5% are neutral. Next, as regards the post pre-service self-evaluations done via EPOSTL and the self-evaluations student teachers had to write themselves, 29% strongly believes they were effective, just over a half (51.6%) agrees they were effective but to some extent, 12.9% are neutral, 6.5% does not think these self-assessment and self-reflection tools were effective. The majority of the participants (35.5%) strongly believe that the peer observations were adequately organized, 38.7% are moderately satisfied with the organization, while the minority (6.5%) does not share this satisfaction and 3.2% express strong dissatisfaction.

### **4.3. Student teachers and school mentors**

As for the participants' experiences relating to their mentors in both primary and secondary schools, the vast majority (74.2%) are very satisfied with their elementary school mentor teacher; 16.1% are averagely satisfied, 3.2% are neutral, while 3.2% report they are not satisfied and 3.2% report strong dissatisfaction. When presented with the claim that the mentor provided them with adequate student teacher activities, again the majority (64.5%) strongly agree, 19.4% agree, 12.9% are neutral, while 3.2% strongly disagree. Similar data can be found regarding the feedback participants got from their elementary school mentor as the majority (65.5%) strongly believe they received constructive feedback, 22.6% hold a moderate belief, 6.5% are neutral, while 3.2% think they did not receive quality feedback and 3.2% strongly believe they did not receive quality feedback from their mentor. When asked to decide whether they gained valuable knowledge from their elementary school mentor, 61.3% strongly agree with the claim that they learned a lot, 19.4% agree, 12.9% are neutral, while 3.2% disagree and also 3.2% strongly disagree with the claim. As for the support of the participants in elementary school, 64.5% strongly believe that the elementary school mentor provided them with guidance and support, 25.8% hold a moderate belief, 3.2% are neutral, 3.2% believe they were not provided with support and 3.2% strongly think they were not provided with adequate support and guidance. Finally, as regards to the established relationship with the elementary school mentor, the majority of 64.5% strongly hold the opinion they are satisfied with the relationship they established, only 19.4% agrees, 9.7% are neutral while 3.2% both disagree and strongly disagree.

Looking at the student teacher satisfaction with the school mentors, the majority of the participants (58.1%) report they are very satisfied with their secondary school mentor, 32.3% report moderate satisfaction, 6.5% are neutral and only 3.2% say they are not satisfied with their secondary teacher mentor. As for the adequateness of student teacher activities provided by the mentor, 51.6% strongly think the secondary school mentor provided them with adequate student teacher activities, 35.5% are moderately satisfied with the provided material, 9.7% are neutral and 3.2% are not satisfied. The following question investigated the participants' satisfaction with the given feedback and the results were less optimistic in relation to prior questions. Namely, 45.2% strongly hold the opinion that the secondary school mentor provided them with constructive feedback, 22.6% say they were provided with constructive feedback, 16.1% are neutral, 12.9% think they were not provided with quality feedback, and only 3.2% strongly believe they did not receive quality feedback. In relation to

the data received from the questions about elementary school mentors, the respondents are generally less satisfied with the feedback given by the secondary school mentors. Next, regarding the knowledge gained from their secondary school mentors, 35.5% strongly believe they learned a lot from their secondary school mentor, 38.7% say they learned a lot, 19.4% are neutral and 6.5% think they did not gain much knowledge from their mentor. As regards to this question, the participants generally hold a more neutral position when compared to elementary school mentors. When asked about the guidance and support offered by the mentor, 45.2% strongly agree with the claim that their secondary school teacher offered them guidance and support, 38.7% agree, 12.9% are neutral, 3.2% disagree and no one strongly disagrees. Lastly, just over a half of the participants (51.6%) strongly support the claim that they are satisfied with the relationship they established with their secondary school mentors, nearly a third of the participants (25.8%) agree, and 22.6% are neutral.

#### **4.4. Classroom management and lesson planning**

This part will examine the participants' attitudes towards some specific segments of classroom management in regards to pedagogical skills and the participants' ability to organize a lesson. According to the respondents, only 12.9% strongly believe that the pre-service training at school comprises a good balance between the teaching of English-related content and the implementation of pedagogical skills and the majority of the participants (54.8%) say that there exists a good balance. Nearly a third of the participants (29%) are neutral and only 3.2% claim there is no balance between the stated elements. Furthermore, only 6.5% strongly agree that the EFL pre-service training at school equipped them with pedagogical knowledge and skills related to classroom management and interaction with learners, the majority of the participants (51.6%) agree, nearly a third of the respondents (22.6%) are neutral, while 19.4% disagree with the statement.

When it comes to planning and organizing a lesson, 29% say that the training at school equipped them with knowledge and skills related to planning and organizing a lesson, 48.4% shares the same belief on a more moderate level, 19.4% are neutral and only 3.2% report they did not receive such knowledge.

#### **4.5. The four skills and task-based learning**

Examining the perceived ability to teach the four language skills, 19.4% strongly believe the training at school gave them adequate training to teach the four language skills, 41.9% moderately agree, 29% are neutral and 9.7% say that the pre-service did not train them well

enough to teach the four language skills. As to the question regarding task based learning, the results are almost equally distributed with 16.1% strongly claiming that the pre-service training at school adequately equipped them with abilities to utilize task based learning, 25.8% agree, the majority of 32.3% are neutral and nearly a third of the participants 25.8% think that they do not feel prepared to implement task-based learning in an actual classroom.

#### **4.6. Classroom materials and student evaluation**

Nearly a third of the participants (22.6%) strongly claim that the EFL pre-service training programme taught them how to develop foreign language teaching materials, the majority (51.6%) claim they were taught how to develop such material to some extent, 19.4% are neutral and 6.5% report the training did not taught them how to develop foreign language teaching materials. On the other hand, when it comes to developing language tests, only 6.5% hold a strong opinion that the training programme taught them how to develop language tests and 19.4% share the same opinion but a moderate level. There are 16.1% neutral participants while nearly half of the participants (48.4%) say the programme did not equip them with the knowledge of developing language test and 9.7% strongly think they were not taught how to develop such tests. Similar situation can be seen when it comes to the evaluation of students' language skills. Namely, only 6.5% strongly claim they were taught to asses and evaluate student language skills, 19.4% say they gained such knowledge to some extent, 29% are neutral and 45.2% think they were not taught to asses and evaluate student language skills.

#### **4.7. Self-reflection of the student-teacher**

Just over a third of the participants (35.5%) strongly claim the EFL pre-service training taught them to reflect on their teaching, 51.6% also agree but to some extent, 9.7% are neutral and only 3.2% say they were not taught how to self-reflect. The next statement, which investigates the participants' opinions on the development of skills and competencies an EFL teacher should possess, shows that, a very low percentage (9.7%) of participants strongly agree that the EFL pre-service training helped them develop the necessary skills and competencies, the majority (51.6%) agree, 32.3% are neutral, while 3.2% disagree and 3.2% strongly disagree that the training equipped them to teach. Furthermore, only 19.4% strongly claim the EFL pre-service training gave them adequate training for an ELT career, just over a third (35.5%) claim it gave them adequate training to some measure, 35.5% are neutral, and 9.7% think the training did not prepare them for an ELT career. Similarly, 16.1% strongly think the EFL pre-service training prepared them to teach the English language, 35.5% share this opinion to some extent, nearly half of the participants (41.9%) are neutral and 6.5% claim the programme did not prepare them to teach the English language.

The next two statements aim to examine how satisfied the participants are with the overall EFL pre-service training. Just over a half of the respondents (54.8%) strongly claim that their overall EFL pre-service training experience was positive, 32.3% claim the same but to some extent, 9.7% are neutral and only one respondent (3.2%) strongly claims that the overall experience was not positive. Furthermore, 41.9% hold a strong opinion that the overall quality of the EFL pre-service training was satisfactory, 45.2% also think the quality was satisfactory, 9.7% are neutral and, as in the previous case, one respondent (3.2%) reports the quality was not at all satisfactory.

#### **4.8. Effectiveness of the university courses**

The main aim of the following part is to examine how well have the university courses contributed towards the student teachers' preparedness to teach EFL. Therefore, data related to theoretical coursework will be presented firstly, followed by an examination of the practical coursework.

With respect to the courses relating to general teacher education courses in the field of pedagogy, only one participant (3.2%) strongly thinks that they provided theoretical knowledge which could be implemented in the practical work during the pre-service training, 25.8% agree to some measure, 29% are neutral and the highest percentage (35.5%) think the

courses did not provide such knowledge, while 6.5% strongly claim they did not provide valuable knowledge. As for general teacher education courses in the field of psychology, 6.5% strongly believe that they provided theoretical knowledge that could be implemented in the practical work during the EFL pre-service, 19.4% agrees to some extent, 41.9% are neutral, 29% do not think the courses provided such knowledge and 3.2% strongly claim the courses did not have the mentioned impact. When comparing pedagogy and psychology in this context, participants showed they feel more negatively towards the pedagogy related courses.

As for the other theoretical courses, the respondents feel significantly more positive about ELT (English Language Teaching) methodology. The results show that 41.9% strongly believe the ELT methodology provides theoretical knowledge which can be implemented in the practical work during the pre-service training, 48.4% also believes this but to some extent, 6.5% are neutral, 3.2% do not think the course has such effect. Lastly, the participants were asked to rate how satisfied they are with the overall theoretical knowledge gained during the graduate programme of the teaching module. The highest percentage in this case (38.7%) is recorded with the participants who hold the neutral opinion. Next, only 9.7% are very satisfied with the overall theoretical knowledge, 32.2% are satisfied to an extent, 16.1% claim they are not satisfied with the overall knowledge and 3.2% strongly express their dissatisfaction.

The following part deals with the evaluation of the practical knowledge provided within the ELT Practicum course. The results show the respondents have positive attitudes towards the ELT Practicum course as 48.4% strongly claim the course provided practical knowledge which can be implemented in the practical work during the pre-service training, 48.8% also agree with the statement, while only one respondent (3.2%) is neutral. As for the participants' satisfaction with the practical knowledge during the graduate programme of English Language and Literature, 22.6% say they are very satisfied with it, 45.2% are satisfied to an extent, and 32.3% are neutral.

When asked to decide upon the impact of the ELT Methodology course on micro-teachings conducted in the school context, 32.2% strongly claim they could confidently conduct micro-teachings because of the knowledge obtained in the ELT Methodology courses, just over a half (58.1%) shares this opinion but not to an extreme measure and 9.7% are neutral. When asked the same question but related to conducting lessons in schools, 22.6%

strongly agree they could confidently teach because of the knowledge obtained in the ELT Methodology courses, 54.8% agree, 19.4% are neutral, while 3.2% disagree with the statement. Furthermore, the participants expressed positive attitudes towards the ELT Practicum course. Namely, 51.6% strongly believe that they could confidently conduct micro-teachings because of the practical knowledge gained in the ELT Practicum course, 45.2% also share this opinion, while 3.2% are neutral. Similarly, 29% strongly believe they could confidently conduct lessons because of the practical knowledge obtained in the ELT Practicum course, the majority (61.3%) also believes this to some extent, 6.5% are neutral and 3.2% do not think so.

The following data deals with the relation between micro-teachings and graduate courses related to pedagogy and psychology. As it can be noted from the results, only 6.5% strongly believe they could confidently conduct micro-teachings because of the knowledge obtained in the graduate teaching module from courses related to pedagogy and psychology, 22.6% also agree with this statement, 29% are neutral, 22.6% do not think there was a relation between the two elements and 19.4% strongly claim the relation is nonexistent. Similarly, 12.9% hold the strong opinion they could confidently conduct lessons because of the knowledge obtained in the graduate teaching module from courses related to pedagogy and psychology, 16.1% shares this opinion but not fully, nearly a third (29%) are neutral, 25.8% claim that the courses did not have an impact on their teaching and 16.1% strongly claim the courses did not contribute to their teaching performance.

In the matter of the participants' views on the balance of theoretical work and practical training, no one strongly believes that there is an adequate balance of theory and practice in the graduate teaching programme. Furthermore, 12.9% believe there is an adequate balance of theory and practice to some extent, 19.4% are neutral, almost a half of the participants (41.9%) do not think such balance exists and 25.8% is of strong opinion that there is no balance established. What is more, 12.9% strongly claim that in the graduate teaching programme, there is an adequate balance between the theoretical university workload and the practical workload of the EFL pre-service training, 22.6% also believe there is a balance to some measure, 19.4% hold a neutral opinion, 29% do not think there is balance between the theoretical and practical workload, while 16.1% strongly believe there is no balance.



## **4.9. Strengths and weaknesses of the pre-service training in schools**

### **4.9.1. Elementary school**

When asked to identify the strengths of the pre-service training in elementary school in an open ended question, the respondents most frequently mention:

Gaining insight into teaching younger learners.

*Trainee learns how to approach younger learners...*

*A good insight in how to approach different age groups from age 7-15...*

*We get the full scope of what it's like to teach to children of all ages.*

*...we learned which topics interest which age groups...*

*Working with different age groups in terms of cognitive development, interests, level of prior English knowledge, etc.*

*You learn how to work with young learners who are, in some segments, more challenging than high school students.*

*The strengths of the pre-service training at elementary school were the opportunity to learn about the specific characteristics of the learners, for example the difference between 5th grade students and 8th grade students relating to speed of writing, psychological characteristics (developmental psychology), type of activities which are more suitable for each group and to see what is learners' language level and which materials are suitable for particular group.*

They also mention helpful mentorship.

*...good communication with the mentor...*

*The mentor was very helpful and offered practical and good advice. She always helped with the things we were not yet fully acquainted with.*

*Good organization, good and helping mentors, lesson materials provided.*

*The mentor in the elementary school was really helpful and supportive which contributed to the overall positive and pleasant atmosphere during the pre-service teaching in the elementary school.*

*I had a good mentor in elementary school who was really supportive and she was always trying to show us everything we needed to know.*

*My mentor was really a great teacher and she was always offering me guidance during the whole practical experience in school and the best thing was that she always gave a constructive and detailed feedback.*

Another point they brought up are the students:

*... overall atmosphere, the students.*

*Working with students.*

*The chance to work with young learners...*

*Interested students, ...*

*You get experience of working with children which is rewarding in itself...*

*Pretty much everything, especially kids' enthusiasm.*

*...the students were generally engaged, active and well behaved.*

*Children are usually more prone to learning and the lessons themselves can be very fun, especially with young learners.*

*Working with students who are always willing to participate in any activity you give them.*

The respondents also identify the opportunity to be creative as a strength of the EFL pre-service training in the elementary schools.

*...the chance to be creative...*

*...the ability to utilize your creativity to the maximum.;*

The student teachers also highlight flexibility and adapting to new situations.

*In order to teach English on a level of elementary school, one has to adapt themselves to both language and social skill of the students, something I had not previously*

*thought about nor practiced. With the pre-service training in elementary school, I was able to train and practice this skill of adaptation.;*

Another important benefit is the opportunity to learn about specific teaching methods.

*...we learned how to approach teaching grammar without using metalanguage; we learned how to approach very young children without using a word of Croatian (visual aids, games).*

Regarding the weaknesses of the pre-service training in the elementary school, the respondents identify the small number of hours of the pre-service training as the key problem.

*It should have lasted longer.*

*Not enough time spent in school.*

*...more time spent there would be beneficial for us...*

*Not enough hours spent there, as well as doing micro-teachings. We need more practice.*

*I believe that we should have more hours of conducting micro-teachings and whole lessons.*

*I don't believe there are any weaknesses of the pre-service training in elementary school other than my strong belief that we should have many more hours of it.*

*Not enough time spent in the classroom. Because of that children could not connect with us on a higher level and lower their anxiety levels.*

*Needs more time; teaching 1st grade is not the same as teaching 4th grade or 8th grade, so it should last a bit longer so we can experience all these different contexts.*

*Not enough hours spent observing and teaching. For example, I had no experience of teaching students in grades from 1 to 4, as well as those in grades 7 and 8. More experience is needed to become more aware of possible issues that could rise in the classroom.*

Another challenge for the student teachers as well was the difficulty they had adapting to the learners' level of English.

*Having to use simplified English language.*

*Knowing how to appropriate the level of the language to the students.*

*We are not used to using English at their level (we are C1 or C2, and they are B1/B2).*

*Difficulty to implement appropriate ELF materials to elementary grade students, i.e. how to explain English in pretty simple, basic terms.*

*You have to dumb down your knowledge of language to their level which is not that easy since when you're speaking words are just popping out in your mind and you have to seek for synonyms and negotiate meaning. Also, it's repetitive.*

What they also noticed is a reliance on the coursebooks.

*Some classes needed to be taught strictly by the course book, there were not many opportunities for our own activities outside the syllabus.*

*Teacher mentor was usually relying on textbook during the lessons and very few lessons were based on some other material other than the material in textbooks which I find really dull and I believe she could have used a lot more task-based learning activities.*

A lack of constructive feedback is also identified as a weakness.

*Would have been good to get more concrete and informative feedback.*

*...didn't give us constructive feedback.*

Classroom discipline is highlighted as a weak point.

*Problems with maintaining the classroom discipline.*

*...the trainee doesn't know the students and may have difficulties in classroom management.*

Bad mentorship is pointed out as well.

*Bad atmosphere in the classroom stimulated by the awful mentor...*

*The teacher was not very supportive and she didn't provide us with the necessary information and tools to conduct the lesson and also didn't give us constructive feedback.*

Few respondents even state that they do not think the elementary school pre-service training had any weaknesses.

*Thanks to my mentor, I had no problems and it was an overall positive experience, so I cannot think of any weaknesses.*

*I cannot think of any major weaknesses.*

#### **4.9.2. Secondary school**

When asked to identify the strengths of the EFL pre-service training in secondary school, the respondents most frequently mention:

Teaching teenage learners.

*Gaining experience with older learners.*

*We learned how to approach teenagers ...*

*The age level is generally easier to work with.*

*Working with generations that are closer to your own age as a young teacher, ...*

*The students are at the language level at which they understand what you're saying.*

*More advanced learners, high-schoolers are better audience for practicing your teaching skills in terms of communicative skills and skills of critical thinking and writing.*

Another benefit is the variety of the content that was being taught to the particular age group.

*...working with students that can take a wider variety of ELF teaching materials, dealing with more sensitive topics, doing tasks which require the students' personal opinions, etc.*

*...we learned how to complement the textbook texts with the interesting real-life stories, videos, TBL tasks; we learned how to start and obtain a fruitful discussion.*

*... I also think the textbook used here was better and provided more variety in exercises.*

*Working on more interesting lesson topics, as opposed to elementary school.*

*More creativity in using the language, wider range of topics considering grammar and vocabulary, bigger cognitive complexity, more interesting and dynamic in my opinion.*

*The lessons and the topics are more interesting and challenging than that of elementary school.*

Another strength that is highlighted was good mentorship.

*Professional and relevant mentor, I learned a lot just from observing her classes, I liked how she arranged learning activities and I was also impressed with the way she implemented advanced level skills in her lessons. She also had nice and professional communication with her students.*

*Teacher mentor was always using some new approaches to learning and besides textbooks she was always trying to include something else into the lessons which made her lessons more fun and engaging for the students.*

*The teacher was really nice and she was always trying to make our first experience with teaching pleasant and she also always provided us with everything we needed for a lesson or micro-teaching.*

*In secondary school I also had a good mentor...*

*The teacher was always really cheerful and she was always trying to motivate her class with a lot of fun activities which I can also implement in my teaching.*

*Good communication with the mentor, constructive feedback after the lessons.*

One respondent identifies some specific teaching methodologies as strength of the secondary school pre-service training:

*...we learned how to teach culture in a fun and educational way; we had the freedom to be creative and use a lot of TBL; we learned that motivation (the pre-activity part) and visual aids are of great importance for the students; we learned how to teach grammar using metalanguage at a high school level; we learned how to prepare students for Matura exam (essay writing) ...*

What is more, another respondent thinks that every aspect of the EFL pre-service training in secondary school was completely satisfying:

*Pretty much everything, especially not having to pay attention to the level of language complexity.*

As regards the weaknesses of the EFL pre-service training in the elementary school, the respondents identify the lack of practice hours.

*Not enough lessons.*

*It should have lasted longer.*

*Though we have learned a lot, the time we spent there was not enough.*

*We should've had more hours of pre-service training at secondary school.*

*Again, not enough time spent actually teaching.*

*I also believe that we should have more hours of practice in the real environment (the school).*

Lack of feedback is highlighted as a weakness as well.

*The mentor could have offered more substantial feedback.*

*The feedback after the micro-teachings and lessons was not very constructive.*

*Teacher mentor did not give any constructive feedback after my lessons and I believe she should have so I could learn something from the possible mistakes I've made when teaching.*

*The teacher gave us a feedback but she was speaking only about the good things and didn't mention the things we need to work on in the future.*

*The feedback was not as constructive as it was in elementary school because the teacher was always emphasizing the good things and she was avoiding to talk about areas for improvement which I find the most important part so the feedback would truly be constructive.*

Another challenge of the EFL pre-service training in the elementary school is the classroom management.

*...there was no obvious need for any pedagogical intervention and there was no opportunity to observe how to solve interpersonal problems (which proves both mentor's and students' personal and pedagogical qualities).*

*Basically, classroom management and dealing with students who go through the pinnacle of puberty.*

*Not all students are interested in the topics or the subject and the level of the willingness to communicate is lower.*

Several respondents state they do not think that the secondary school EFL pre-service training had any weaknesses.

*There weren't really any weaknesses.*

*None that I can think of.*

*Haven't spotted any.*

*None.*

One respondent states that there was not enough time to get proper insight into the administrative side of the teaching job.

*Not enough time to see how the birocratical part of the work looks like (working with e-dnevnik, for example).*

Some respondents express their discontent with the content and materials used in the secondary schools.

*The course books are sometimes boring. You have to try to make the content interesting and suitable for their generation.*

#### **4.10. Self-evaluation of the student teachers**

In the next part the participants explain what skills and/or competencies they gained during the EFL pre-service training programme. The most frequent answer is lesson planning, followed by presentation skills which is the second most frequent answer, time management, effective interaction with the students and teaching of the four skills. The other answers in order of frequency of occurrence are: finding and creating teaching material, organizational skills, adaptability, classroom management, ability to adapt to learners of different age, use of creative methods, giving constructive feedback, self-reflection and critical thinking.



As to the student teachers' self-reflection, the participants were asked to describe what aspects of teaching they have developed the most during the EFL pre-service training programme. The responses show that their results can be divided into two groups related to lesson planning as well as teaching methodology and, secondly, to teaching confidence.

The following statements describe aspects of teaching that the student teachers have developed the most during the EFL pre-service training programme which are related to planning and teaching methodology.

*Adapting to different age groups, reacting in unexpected situations, combining the educational content with interesting activities, error correction, leading the students to the conclusions.*

*I've realized how important it is to plan the lesson before teaching but also that it is important to stay as flexible as possible because we as teachers should always adapt to our students and organize our lessons accordingly, etc.*

*I especially improved in how to thoroughly develop a lesson plan and then apply it in a classroom, how to communicate with students, how to observe them collectively and individually using pedagogical paradigms.*

*I've developed aspects of motivating students for the lesson, coming up with rather creative ideas of teaching, both, grammar and vocabulary, etc.*

*I learned about different methods, materials and tools I can use when teaching different content.*

*I learned about different teaching methods, giving constructive feedback to the class, about self-evaluation, about constructing effective tests and other ways of knowledge assessment, etc.*

Another aspect of teaching the student teachers identify as improved is teaching confidence.

*I started to have fun teaching and I was starting to win the battle with anxiety which came from improving my communication and social skills. I started to relax. I have a lot to learn still but it kind of broke the ice and gave me confidence to pursue teaching further as a viable profession for me.*

*Gaining confidence because at first I was anxious about teaching in front of a class. Along with that, I also developed my presentation skills such as body language, speech and similar.*

*The ability to interact with students more confidently.*

*Speaking skills.*

*Confidence and classroom management.*

*Tone and speech intensity.*

#### **4.11. The influence of the EFL pre-service training**

As to the influence of the EFL pre-service training on student teachers' perspectives of teaching EFL, the received data can be roughly divided into three categories: those who were influenced positively, the undecided ones and those who were influenced negatively.

Student teachers who claim that the EFL pre-service training left a positive impression are in the overwhelming majority.

*Pre-service training was an enlightening experience for me. I've also realized in practice the difference between teaching English and teaching other subjects in school - English is a skill and I love teaching and mastering skills while other subjects are mostly transference of content. That means that you can do a lot more with English, you can be creative and think of fun ways for students to practice it.*

*Pre-service training also gave me confidence to think of myself as capable of pursuing a teaching job. At first I was afraid that I would not be able to do it, but the way it is constructed - observations, micro-teaching, lessons, instead of throwing you in at the deep end it gently pushes you towards it.*

*Great experience.*

*I like it even more now. At one point during the graduate program, I had lost motivation related to teaching EFL. With the pre-service training, I have regained that motivation.*

*After seeing how much you can do regardless of the syllabus; I became motivated to strive to achieve something like that.*

*Actually teaching real students, rather than just hearing about the theory behind it, made me much more appreciative of teachers and their work and more willing to pursue a career in this.*

*The EFL pre-service training helped me to see that this is a job to do in the future and that there are still a lot of students who are willing to learn English.*

*It has positively influenced my perspective on teaching because now I have more confidence in my own career choice of actually becoming a teacher.*

*I am now more confident that this is my future calling and cannot wait to work with children.*

*Improved my opinion on it. More likely to be working as a teacher.*

*It affected my opinion in the way that I do not consider teaching EFL (and teaching in a more general sense) as a nightmarish scenario. It can actually be quite pleasant.*

*It's less scary and more interesting than I thought it'd be.*

There are some indecisive respondents.

*The pre-service influenced my perspective on teaching in a way that now I have more respect towards the teaching job because being a teacher means you have to be the student's assistant, psychologist, role model, etc. However, I am still not sure if teaching is something I would like to do in the future.*

*Although the overall experience was positive, I don't feel that I could be a teacher.*

*I am still not sure whether I see myself as a teacher or not.*

Lastly, results of negative impact are in great minority.

*Although the EFL pre-service was much better than the pre-service training for my second major, I have to say that, sadly, after experiencing school life, I've lost the initial enthusiasm and desire to work in school.*

#### **4.11.1. Influence of mentor teachers**

The following part examines the influence the mentor teachers had on the student teacher's experience during the pre-service training. The majority expressed positive impressions with only a few statements which were neutral or slightly negative. Accordingly, the answers indicated two categories of mentors: those who provided constructive and/or positive influence and those who did not have any valuable influence.

The mentors who had a positive impact are praised for the following:

*They have showed us that teaching and learning can be fun and encouraging, as well as motivating, for both the students and teachers.*

*I had mentors who are great teachers but also great mentors. They instilled the perception of teaching as a noble profession, as something you can have fun with and that builds your professional skills as well as your character and worldview.*

*Mentors are kind and forgiving instead of judgmental with regards to your mistakes and they build an atmosphere of learning and apprenticeship. They are aware that there is a wide discrepancy between practical and theoretical element of teaching.*

*They gave me valuable advice as how to react in certain situations with students.*

*My elementary school teacher helped me accept that teaching in elementary school is equally interesting and challenging as it is in secondary school.*

*They were honest about their experiences, gave good practical advice and provided good support. They contributed to making the whole process easy (easier) and enjoyable.*

*Teacher mentor in secondary school made me realize that you can implement anything you find important in EFL classroom and that you can make lessons really interesting and fun and the learners will really appreciate it and their results will be much better.*

*They were really experienced and confident about themselves. I want to achieve that, too.*

*Both were very kind and helped a lot with the materials and lessons.*

*They were positive and kind and they love their job and they have shown us everything they could in the context we were in. They were supportive and helpful.*

*They seemed very dedicated to their work and they showed me that, with proper preparation and using creative and clever materials, you can motivate the students to actually listen and follow what you are saying/writing/doing.*

*I have learned so much from my elementary school mentor and she made me like teaching.*

*They motivated me and showed me how entertaining and useful this job can be, despite its possible disadvantages.*

*The mentor in secondary school was really good and I could see how she was always prepared and everything was so natural to her and that made me realize that I would have to work really hard on myself and my skills if I ever want to become a good teacher.*

*It was great experience overall being able to learn from my mentors who showed me that the teaching job can be done with a lot of creativity, enthusiasm and sincere love for the profession.*

In contrast, the mentors who have not met the student teachers' expectations are criticised for the following:

*They didn't really talk about their perspectives on teaching, they focused on the tasks at hand which we had to do in order to fulfil course obligations.*

*I was especially disappointed after seeing what it looks like to work in a secondary school. I expected the teacher mentors to have a really good English pronunciation (probably because of my high school teacher), but it wasn't the case. I also expected them to be stricter.*

#### **4. 12. Areas for improvement**

The final question of the survey in this study is related to suggestions on how the EFL pre-service training programme could be improved. The most frequent response is, undoubtedly, related to extending the duration of the EFL pre-service training.

*“The last semester should be entirely dedicated to our pre-service training.”*

Moreover, the respondents provided elaborate arguments as to why it would be necessary to extend the duration of the programme, as well as listed negative consequences of the short-term training, such as increased stress and difficulties in balancing university obligations. Furthermore, more than a third of the respondents suggest that the graduate teaching programme would benefit from fewer theoretical courses as they were described to be “of little practical value”. Furthermore, several respondents stated that the graduate teaching programme needed courses on leadership and presentational skills. A couple of the responses indicated that more focus should be put on receiving feedback so that the student teachers get a comprehensive insight into their teaching performance. Lastly, a few respondents stated that there should be some kind of monitoring of the mentor teachers to ensure they meet the required standards of mentorship.

*As the EFL pre-service training teaching lasts for one semester simultaneously with many other subjects at the faculty, the trainee cannot devote herself / himself fully to the tasks in*

*the training - everything is done quickly and you have to organize and manage many obligations, which is really stressful. The best way to improve the practice of EFL pre-service training is to free students of all other obligations at the faculty, so that they can devote themselves to the tasks and do it in a slower and less stressful way. The last semester should be free - only teaching practice and other practice at the other departments, as well as writing the diploma work should be set as the workload for the students.*

*My biggest suggestion would be to expand the programme to a longer period of time. This would provide a more comprehensive view of teaching in general as well as give more varied opportunities to actually do things in the classroom and get a proper "feel" of particular students and classes.*

*It should definitely last longer than 11 weeks! I think one semester is not enough to prepare us for something we are expected to do our entire lives.*

*It could be improved by adding more practical courses or prolonging the pre-service programme on the level of one full semester (or maybe a whole year being completely dedicated to pre-service teaching).*

*I believe that the program should be focused on more hours of practice so the students can become more confident when teaching. This could be done if the theoretical EFL courses start from the first semester so the entire 5th year could be reserved for practice only.*

*Definitely more hours of real practice in schools and I would also recommend that the students have one last session with Methodology professor where they could talk about their experiences and give their opinions about it as a way of recapitulating the whole experience.*

*Having the practicum in the last semester with all of the other university obligations was extremely stressful.*

Reorganization of the theoretical courses of the MA in TEFL programme is highlighted as a suggestion for the improvement.

*I honestly think that we should have less theoretical subjects (such as Edukacijska psihologija, Didaktika etc.), and more Practicum.*

*I think we would benefit from cutting down the pedagogy and didactic classes that are being taught as obligatory courses at the teacher training module. Neither the content nor the form is helpful. I benefited mostly from the Methodology classes at the English department. If I had to go to school solely on the classes I've attended that are held by Pedagogy professors, I would be in big trouble.*

*I believe that EFL pre-service training lacks at least one subject which should deal with competencies and skills that future teachers should acquire during the training like leadership and/or classroom management because those are the skills that I believe we really lack after the programme and none of the classes teaches us how to deal with problematic situations in the class and we should be able to deal with them in real-life when we start teaching.*

*The overall teacher training programme could be better if the students had some kind of a course teaching them about presentation skills and leadership in general.*

The student teachers also point out that real and honest feedback is needed in order to improve the programme.

*Also, it would be useful for the student to receive the mentors' final comments and grades so he/she can see which areas need improvement, because sometimes mentors sugar-coat the comments, although there are always some aspects to improve.*

*Mentors should give written feedback to students.*

Another suggestion for improvement is to organize some sort of monitoring of the mentor teachers.

*I believe that the mentors should be somehow monitored because not all of them are good mentors and not all of them are willing to help the students to learn, some of them are doing it just because they have to and they are not really trying.”*



## 5. Discussion

Having reviewed the results, let us now move on to the discussion of the observations retrieved from the data presented above. The first major topic that needs to be elaborated upon is the issue of the duration of the EFL pre-service training programme. It is evident that the vast majority of the research participants (87.1%) believe that the duration of pre-service training should be extended to a period of time longer than eleven weeks, which is the present situation. We should also take into consideration the fact that the most frequent answer regarding the suggestions for improving ELF pre-service training was, undoubtedly, to extend the duration of the same. Similar key points were identified as the weakness of the EFL pre-service training in schools, meaning that the most frequent weakness highlighted in, both, elementary and secondary school was the lack of practice hours. According to the participants, having the teaching practice take place only in the final semester caused stress, difficulties in time management as well as problems balancing the pre-service training in their second major. Studies have shown (Hudson, et. al., 2008) that student teachers can experience a culture shock, meaning they feel overwhelmed by the new situation of the pre-service, which is exacerbated by course requirements at the university. The phenomenon is, of course, intensified where the pre-service training is conducted in a limited time frame (Hudson, et. al., 2008) as is the case in the context of this particular study where the EFL pre-service training is conducted only in the last semester of the university programme.

Moreover, not only is the lack of practice hours an issue in itself, but it also paves the way for a whole new set of other problematic areas. For instance, some participants pointed out that because of the limited time frame they did not get the chance to gain a comprehensive view of the teaching profession. According to the student teachers, there was no time to observe the administrative side of the teaching profession. Moreover, test development and student evaluation were also neglected due to the restricted duration of the programme. Furthermore, the results show that 58.1% of the respondents hold the opinion that the EFL pre-service training did not teach them how to develop language tests and 42.5% believe that the training did not teach them how to evaluate students' language skills. Needless to say that these results come as no surprise when taking into consideration the current duration of the training programme. Finally, in order to increase the quality of the pre-service training programme, as well as the quality of the TEFL programme, some participants have stated that the final semester should be allocated only for field practice, and some even suggested that it should be prolonged to an entire academic year.

Another point worth mentioning is that the balance of the theoretical and practical workload of the MA in TEFL programme proved to be unsatisfactory. Interestingly, the participants expressed more negative attitudes towards pedagogy courses than psychology courses in terms of how much of the theoretical knowledge the student teachers could implement in the field practice. When asked to suggest improvements for the existing pre-service training programme, the second most frequent answer was to decrease the number of general teacher education (theoretical) courses in the graduate teaching programme. What is more, a minority of respondents also criticised the pedagogy-oriented courses, when asked to elaborate on suggestions for improvement. Namely, the participants suggested reducing the number of pedagogy-oriented courses and increasing the course hours of the ELT Methodology and the Practicum as those were the courses that the participants referenced as being relevant to the actual real-life classroom situation.

These findings which underline the imbalance of the theoretical and practical workload as an important weakness of the MA in TEFL programme coincide with the study conducted by Agudo (2017) where he concluded that teacher education programmes seem to be particularly weak as regards to the so-called divide or lack of connection between theory and praxis. Interestingly, Bartels (2005) and Richards (2008) argue that student teachers often fail to put the theoretical knowledge into the real-life classroom situation during the pre-service training. This problem which has long been discussed by researchers still remains unresolved and is, therefore, one of the biggest challenges in the education of language teachers so it is no surprise that the MA in TELF programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka is no exception here.

Despite the fact that the majority of student teachers do not find pedagogy or psychology related courses of much practical value, they praised the quality of the ELT Methodology courses and were satisfied with the interconnection between the theoretical knowledge provided by the course and practice done in the classrooms. The findings also indicate the participants' positive attitudes towards the Practicum. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority (96.8%) of student teachers deem that the Practicum provided knowledge which could be directly implemented into the real-life classroom situation. The participants stated that the ELT Practicum course prepared them to teach, and therefore, they could confidently conduct microteachings and independent lessons.

The results regarding the current state of mentorship in schools are, in some aspects, controversial. According to the results, the student teachers were generally satisfied with their mentor teachers. It would appear that the data related to elementary and secondary school mentors is generally similar, although there are some slight differences. The data relating to the elementary school mentorship is more polarized than the secondary school mentorship. In other words, although the majority of the respondents express positive influence and outcomes with regards to their mentor teachers, several respondents did not share these positive opinions. The results show that the vast majority of the student teachers who were positively influenced by their school mentors had a significantly more positive overall pre-service experience than the minority who had not had such a positive experience. The positively influenced participants were, enthusiastic and, willing to pursue a teaching career and some stated their mentors managed to change the negative attitudes they had towards the teaching profession to a more respectful and appreciative view. This position is corroborated in the literature which shows that positive and supporting relationship between the student teacher and the mentor teacher should be developed for the student teacher to gain confidence during the field practice (Bonavidi, 2013). Bearing this in mind, a special focus should be put on how to improve this aspect of the EFL pre-service training and possibly prevent any further negative experiences because some of the student teachers in this study, unfortunately, expressed negative cases of mentoring. Generally speaking, what could be pinpointed as a common denominator of the school mentorship is that the mentor teachers themselves highly influence the student teacher's experience and perspectives towards the teaching profession. That being said, some of the participants suggested there should be some sort of evaluation process of the mentor teachers as to ensure that every student teacher experiences constructive and positive mentoring during the EFL pre-service training. The student teachers who participated in a study done by Kaelin (2013) also share a similar opinion. Namely, the student teachers in Kealein's study (2013) stated that the university should make more of an effort to screen prospective mentor teachers and ensure that these individuals understand the expectations for serving as a mentor teacher. On top of that, some participants suggested that the university needs to seriously consider annual mentor evaluations from student teachers when determining placements for the approaching year (Kaelin 2013).

A study (Kaelin, 2013) that has dealt with this issue proposed a process of selection of mentor teachers. The process should be conducted in two parts. In the first part, the mentors should be evaluated on specific key areas relating to their teaching identity, philosophy,

overall approach to teaching, willingness to mentor student teachers in order to see whether they are an adequate mentoring figure. The second part consists of gathering data on the mentors and mentoring process, such as feedback from their students and colleagues at school and pre-service teachers. Finally, the data would have to be analysed and reviewed by the people who are in charge of coordinating the field service in order to identify quality mentors. The process would ensure that the pre-service teachers are assigned to only the most qualified mentors. On top of that, at the end of the semester, summative feedback could be collected and reviewed to validate mentor performance.

The organization of the EFL pre-service training proved to be at a satisfactory level. The participants were generally satisfied with all of the components of the EFL pre-service training. For the most part, participants were very satisfied with the organization of the microteachings at schools and the independent lessons they had to hold. Interestingly, the results relating to the microteachings held at school and the teaching of the four skills at school differ to a significant extent. The participants show very positive opinions of the microteachings in schools, however, the results show that this is not the case with the teaching of the four language skills. This is surprising because the four language skills were practiced by the means of the microteachings within the framework of the Practicum at University. The discrepancy is probably due to the fact that some skills are perceived to be more difficult to teach than others, leaving a more negative impact on the student teachers. Furthermore, the length of duration of the lesson, when compared to the fifteen minute microteaching, make it more challenging. Another point is that microteachings at schools often included teaching activities that the student teachers believe are more enjoyable to teach than, for instance, grammar.

Interesting results were noted regarding the task-based learning at school. The results were almost equally distributed on the rate from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These results are probably based on the fact that the majority of participants did not even get the opportunity to actually carry out task-based learning in the classroom due to the limited duration of the pre-service training.

The participants expressed moderate satisfaction with elements such as peer observation and self-reflection via EPOSTL. It is important to mention that some negative results were noted related to the organization of the teaching assistance segment. In other words, nearly a third of the participants (29.1%) are of the opinion that the role and responsibility of the

student as teaching assistant in school should be clarified to, both, the student teacher and the mentor teacher.

The participants were neutral when expressing their attitudes towards the knowledge and abilities they gained related to the development of foreign language materials. On the contrary, when it comes to developing language tests the participants expressed significantly stronger negative opinions with nearly a majority of the student teachers saying they were not taught how to develop language tests. It does not come as a surprise that similar results were as well noted with regards to the evaluation of student's language skills. In other words, nearly half of the participants claimed they were not taught how to properly assess and evaluate student language skills. These results are, again as is the case with task based learning, closely related to the insufficient number of hours that are intended for the pre-service training.

A study conducted by Hammerness (2003, 2009; Yüksel 2014) argues that teacher training programmes designed with a clearly articulated shared vision, reinforce images of good teaching, which in turn help student teachers to develop self-images relating to teacher identity. As for the teacher identity, the findings of this study show that the respondents have a relatively positive outlook on the profession, however, almost half of them are still not definitely sure they want to pursue this career while two respondents offered a definite "no" as to their willingness to become an EFL teacher. Despite the fact that they are still indecisive about the ELT career, when asked whether the pre-service training influenced their attitudes towards teaching EFL, the vast majority (87.1%) said the overall experience had indeed made an impact on their view of teaching EFL. These results coincide with the results Kaelin (2013) presented in his study where he says that participants in the study reported that pre-service experiences powerfully contributed to perceptions of professional identity. Also, the participants in Kealin's study (2013) reported changes in how they perceived themselves between the beginning and end of the study. Similar observations can be noted in this particular study as some of the participants reported that upon finishing the pre-service training, they felt more confident as EFL teachers.

Those student teachers who experienced an overall positive impact commented on the quality of their mentors, the valuable practical knowledge they obtained, the self-growth they experienced and some went so far as to describe the EFL pre-service training as an "enlightening experience". The skills and competencies that the student teachers developed the most were lesson planning, time management, interaction with the students and teaching

of the four skills. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers also identified other acquired skills and competencies such as finding and creating teaching material, organizational skills, adaptability, classroom management, the ability to adapt to learners of different age, the use of creative methods, giving constructive feedback, self-reflection and critical thinking.

On the other hand, a minority of the participants stated that the pre-service training did not significantly influence their attitudes towards teaching and explained that because of the pre-service training they had actually lost the initial enthusiasm to work in a school context. In line with this, it is important to mention that some weaknesses in the organization or inadequate administrative procedures may have a negative impact on student teachers' success in learning to teach, and can thus result in failure to develop appropriate personal and professional values and beliefs (Bonavidi, 2013).

To sum up, since the majority of the participants had significantly positive attitudes towards the EFL pre-service training, further effort needs to put into the improvement of the programme by addressing the weaknesses that were identified by the present study in order to ensure a high quality education for teachers to come.

## **6. Limitations**

It is important to state the limitations of the study, the crucial one being that the study is based on a small sample of 31 participants, most of whom are students of the same generation studying in the context of the a MA in TEFL programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka. That being said, further research should be done on a greater number of participants across Croatian Universities in order to investigate the current state of particular universities and their policies about the graduate teaching programme and the students' perspectives towards it. Such a large-scale study would offer a more detailed insight into the Croatian system of EFL teacher education.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

This study has attempted to investigate the perspectives of student teachers on EFL pre-service training within the context of the MA in TEFL programme. It focuses heavily on the beliefs student teachers have regarding the effectiveness of the pre-service training and the general teacher education courses, and thus sheds light on various strengths and weaknesses of the EFL pre-service training with a minor focus on certain segments of the MA in TEFL programme.

The results suggest that the student teachers, in general, have positive attitudes and experiences, however, the study revealed some negative findings within the context of the EFL pre-service training. More precisely, key findings of the study reveal a number of challenges that need to be addressed in order to serve as a starting point of possible improvements that would contribute to an overall safer and more constructive educational experience for aspiring teachers of generations to come. The key findings indicate that the student teachers have to deal with various difficulties, the majority of which are related to the duration of the EFL pre-service training that is conducted within a one-semester time frame. Not only do they face organisational challenges, but they also have to balance between an extensive workload at the University and a large number of contact hours in the double major programme. On top of that, some respondents have also highlighted the time needed to work on the M.A. thesis, which should be dealt with during the final semester. The consequences of the stated issues manifest themselves in increased stress levels and negative attitudes towards the heavy workload distribution, and its negative impact on learning and the student's free time throughout the whole duration of the MA in TEFL programme. These issues take its toll on the effectiveness of the EFL pre-service training that can be noted in the student teachers' statements about the lack of time to focus on some activities of the teaching profession such as classroom management, test development, student evaluation and task-based learning.

Another key finding of the present study reveals that the respondents are generally unsatisfied with the quality of the teaching module general teacher education courses offered in the graduate study programme and state that the workload is excessive and redundant. Furthermore, they complain that these courses are heavily theoretical, and are not directly relevant or applicable to practice. Therefore, they suggest that general teacher education courses should be substituted by courses related to specific teaching methodology courses.

Another point the study sheds light on is the importance of school mentorship with regards to mentor teachers being the key figures that can greatly influence the attitudes of student teachers towards the teaching profession. This suggests that the Faculty should organise mentor training programmes to standardise mentorship. It should also be pointed out the majority of the respondents highlighted the need for (more) practical training, and described their EFL pre-service as a positive and useful experience, possibly the most useful one. This study has attempted to highlight the numerous strengths and benefits of practical training, which should not be taken for granted and overlooked in favour of the challenges, but rather should serve as a motivational factor for further improving the EFL pre-service training programme and introducing more practical training into the MA in TEFL programme in Rijeka.



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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

Questionnaire on the student teachers' attitudes towards the MA in TEFL programme and their experiences of the EFL pre-service training at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka

Dear colleagues!

This questionnaire has been developed to examine your perspectives on the EFL pre-service training you have enrolled in and its relevance for preparing you to teach English as a foreign language at school, as a part of my research for my Master Thesis at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka.

I would appreciate you taking the time to complete this questionnaire which should take about 10 minutes of your time. Your responses are completely anonymous, and will only be used for research purposes.

If you have any questions or would like to receive the results, please contact Lucija Peremin (lucijaperemin@gmail.com).

1. Age
2. What is your second major?
3. How many hours of teaching have you had in your second major preservice training?
4. Have you taught EFL outside the university program  
Yes No  
Please explain your answer.  
If yes, how many hours of teaching experience do you have outside the pre-service training?
5. Do you want to be an EFL teacher?  
Yes No  
Please explain your answer.

**Please rate on the scale from 1-5 to what extent you agree with the following statements related to your English as a foreign language pre-service training in elementary and secondary schools:**

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree or disagree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly agree

The duration of the EFL pre-service training of approximately eleven weeks was sufficient to prepare me, as student teacher, for a real-life working context.	1	2	3	4	5
The duration of the EFL pre-service training should be extended to a period of time longer than eleven weeks.	1	2	3	4	5
The general organization of the EFL pre-service training was adequate.	1	2	3	4	5
The organization of the microteachings was adequate.	1	2	3	4	5
The organization of the teachings (whole lessons) was adequate.	1	2	3	4	5
The organization of the post lesson self-evaluations was adequate.	1	2	3	4	5
The organization of the peer observations was adequate.	1	2	3	4	5
The organization of the TA's was adequate.	1	2	3	4	5

I was generally satisfied with my ELEMENTARY SCHOOL mentor teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
My mentor teacher in ELEMENTARY SCHOOL provided me with adequate student teacher activities.	1	2	3	4	5
My mentor teacher in ELEMENTARY SCHOOL provided me with adequate constructive feedback.	1	2	3	4	5
I have learned a lot from my ELEMENTARY SCHOOL mentor teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
My ELEMENTARY SCHOOL mentor teacher offered me guidance and support during the pre-service training.	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with the relationship I established with my ELEMENTARY SCHOOL mentor teacher during the EFL pre-service training.					

I was generally satisfied with my SECONDARY SCHOOL mentor teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
My mentor teacher in SECONDARY SCHOOL provided me with adequate student teacher activities.	1	2	3	4	5
My mentor teacher in SECONDARY SCHOOL provided me with adequate constructive feedback.					
I have learned a lot from my SECONDARY SCHOOL mentor teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
My SECONDARY SCHOOL mentor teacher offered me guidance and support during the pre-service training.	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with the relationship I established with my SECONDARY SCHOOL mentor teacher during the EFL pre-service training.					



The EFL pre-service training at school comprised a good balance between the teaching of the English-related content and the implementation of pedagogical skills.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training at school equipped me with pedagogical knowledge and skills related to classroom management and interaction with learners.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training at school equipped me with knowledge and skills related to planning and organizing a lesson.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training at school gave me adequate training to teach the four language skills.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training at school gave me adequate training to utilize task-based learning.	1	2	3	4	5

The EFL pre-service training programme taught me how to develop foreign language teaching materials.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training programme taught me how to develop language test.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training taught me how to evaluate student language skills (speaking, reading and writing).	1	2	3	4	5

The EFL pre-service training taught me how to reflect on my teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training helped me develop the necessary skills and competences that an EFL teacher should possess.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training gave me adequate training for a future English language teaching career.	1	2	3	4	5
The EFL pre-service training prepared me to teach English in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
My overall experience during the EFL pre-service training was positive.	1	2	3	4	5
The overall quality of the EFL pre-service training was satisfying.	1	2	3	4	5

**Please rate how well the University courses contributed towards your preparedness to teach English as a foreign language.**

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree or disagree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly agree

The university courses during the graduate programme related to PEDAGOGY provided theoretical knowledge which I could implement in	1	2	3	4	5
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the practical work during the EFL pre-service training.					
The university courses during the graduate programme related to PSYCHOLOGY provided theoretical knowledge which I could implement in the practical work during the EFL pre-service training.	1	2	3	4	5
The university courses during the graduate programme related to ELT METHODOLOGY provided theoretical knowledge which I could implement in the practical work during the EFL pre-service training.	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with the theoretical background I was provided with during the graduate programme of the teaching module.	1	2	3	4	5

The ELT Practicum course provided practical knowledge which I could implement in the practical work during the pre-service training.	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with the practical knowledge I was provided with during the Graduate Programme in English Language and Literature.	1	2	3	4	5

I could confidently conduct MICRO-TEACHINGS in schools because of the knowledge I obtained in the ELT Methodology courses.	1	2	3	4	5
I could confidently conduct LESSONS because of the knowledge I obtained in the ELT Methodology courses.					

I could confidently conduct MICRO-TEACHINGS in schools because of the practical knowledge I obtained in ELT Practicum course.	1	2	3	4	5
I could confidently conduct LESSONS because of the practical knowledge I obtained in ELT Practicum course.	1	2	3	4	5

I could confidently conduct MICRO-TEACHINGS in schools because of the knowledge I obtained in the graduate teaching module from courses related to pedagogy and psychology.	1	2	3	4	5
I could confidently conduct LESSONS because of the knowledge I obtained in the graduate teaching module from courses related to pedagogy and psychology.	1	2	3	4	5

**Please rate on the scale from 1-5 to what extent do you agree with the following sentences:**

In the Graduate Programme in English Language and Literature, there was an adequate balance between the workload of the theoretical courses of the teaching module and its practical implementation at university and in schools.	1	2	3	4	5
In the Graduate Programme in English Language and Literature, there was a fair number of courses in the teaching module based solely on the theoretical knowledge in comparison to the practicum (pre-service) hours.	1	2	3	4	5

**What are the strengths of the pre-service training at elementary school?**

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**What are the weaknesses of the pre-service training at elementary school?**

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**What are the strengths of the pre-service training at secondary school?**

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**What are the weaknesses of the pre-service training at secondary school?**

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**Please explain what skills and/or competencies you gained during the EFL pre-service training programme.**

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**Please describe what aspects of teaching you have developed the most during the EFL pre-service training programme.**

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**Has the EFL pre-service influenced your perspective on teaching EFL?**

**Yes/No**

**Please explain.**

**Have the mentor teachers at school influenced your perspective on teaching EFL?**

**Yes/No**

**Please explain.**

**Please suggest how the EFL pre-service training programme could be improved.**

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