Crossing the borders: Experiences of teachers in teaching special needs

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Abstract
Teaching beyond the limits of teacher specialization is not only challenging but also disorienting. It measures not only the teacher's ability to adjust but also his/her patience. This qualitative – descriptive phenomenological study explored the experiences of non-special needs lecturers who were assigned to teach tertiary deaf and mute students. Using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) among two groups of teachers, the researcher found in the data analysis four essential themes such as capitalization of teaching, disorientation, acquisition of new knowledge and patience. In capitalization of teaching, non-special needs teachers taught deaf and mute because they had no choice; in disorientation, teachers at first didn't know what to do because they were not familiar with sign languages and had never taught deaf and mute students; in acquisition of new knowledge, non-special needs teachers were happy when they observed their students to be active, cooperative and showed knowledge and understanding; lastly, in patience, non-special needs felt that their patience were tested. Each theme was discussed and conclusions were provided.

Keywords: crossing the borders, experiences, teachers, special needs, Gulf College

Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks among teachers is handling a special need student, especially when they do not have the background on special education. This is true with those lecturers who are given a task to teach special needs. How will you adjust with them? Special needs lecturers' skills with classroom behavior organization and management affect the emergence and persistence of behavior problems as well as the success of inclusive practice to special need students. Adequate special needs lecturers' preparation and strong classroom organization and behavior management skills are very critical because special needs students cannot hear and cannot express themselves like in a normal student. Their mode of communication is through seeing and sign language (Oliver and Reschly, 2010).

Hence, what makes a lecturer becomes motivating and becomes different from teaching a normal student? The approach in teaching is the same, the only difference is through the use of sign language as compared to the normal students. Special need students' way of communication is through seeing and sign language. They can be reached through sign language because that is the most functional mode of their communication. Unfortunately, many special needs lecturer working in inclusive settings believe that they are unprepared to meet the challenges to bring to the learning environment because the greatest barriers are their communication process. There is a necessity to increase knowledge of proven practices among the special needs lecturer. A wealth of information exists about instructional practices that are evidence-based and effective for students with special needs who are learning in inclusive setting. Selecting those practices that have proved to be most effective and that will be most helpful in teaching situations you will encounter in the real classroom setting (Bryant, Bryant, and Smith, 2016). This can also adapt on how to help determine how, when, and with when to use the proven academic and behavioral interventions to obtain the best outcome.

On the other hand, there are also difficulties encountered by the special need lecturers. Whatever the difficulties are, there is always room for improvement. Special need lecturers take into account that the need for better understanding of teacher attitude towards special need students must

be given emphasis due to their situations as individuals. Difficulties in teaching them can be improved and can be adapted to a better learning process among them (Ross-Hill, 2009). In addition, special need students must have special care and attention. How a teacher addresses these problems? They must be examined and maintained. There is a need to analyze the development of their disability. Consider how the attitudes of special need lecturers handle them. This measures the patience of the lecturers on how to help the special needs learning to their full capacity. This outlines the roles and responsibilities of the special need lecturers in their teaching career that involves their delivery to special need students (Hodkinson, 2015).

Moreover, lecturers must be dynamic and enthusiastic enough to teach special need students. A thorough tender loving care (TLC) must be practiced. Teaching is a passion and a great responsibility to deal with special needs. Attitudes in teaching special needs are extremely complex and vary from teacher to teacher and school to school. It explores the attitudes of teachers about special need students. Lecturers among special needs have more positive attitude towards the special need students. They are professionals and qualified lecturers that tend to have a more favorable attitude towards the special need students (Fakolade, Adeniyi and Tella, 2009).

The accomplishment and success in teaching special needs will result to their success. Molding and shaping them like a normal one influence them with love and care. This is followed by understanding and patience. The result is happiness and learning (Danielewics, 2014). Special need students are compared to environmental education that is a part of the core curriculum in the basic education. They should not be set aside but they should be prioritized, they are also human like normal ones (Terzi, 2005). Special needs are committed to sustainable lifestyle and motivated to act in the society and human well-being. The sustainable lifestyle of special need students are added in teaching influence students' attitudes toward sustainable development and lifestyle (Kankainen, Määttä, and Uusiautti, 2016).

Gulf College is catering special need students (deaf and mute). However, the college has no special education teacher who would teach these learners; hence, loads in reading and writing were given to the English teachers who had no background nor expertise in dealing with the deaf and mute. Our first encounter with these students was tough and disorienting. Although there was an assigned interpreter for each class of special needs, still it was a struggle dealing with them because it needed a total turnaround. At first, we felt disgraced but on the other side, challenged. It was on this ground that this study was conducted. This study highlighted and explored the difficulties as well as successes we encountered in dealing with the special needs students and also the essential experiences which were worth sharing to non-special needs teachers who will be assigned to deaf and mute students.

Research Questions

This research was conducted to explore the experiences non-special needs lecturers who were assigned to teach deaf and mute students. Their experiences were seen relevant to commission on higher education, curriculum developer, school administrations, teachers and students in proposing policies which were relevant to Gulf College. Particularly, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What makes the non-special needs lecturers teach special need students?

2. What are the successes of the non-special needs lecturers in teaching special needs students?

3. What are the challenges of the non-special needs lecturers in teaching special needs students?

4. What significant experiences of the non-special needs lecturers could be shared with other teachers?

Theoretical Lens

This study generally anchored on *Social Identity Theory* (Ashforth and Mael (1989). This theory contended three specific concepts: (a) it unifies a group of persons; (b) it categorizes individuals based on their distinctiveness, traditions, formation or belief systems; and (c) leads to

endeavors congruent with the identity, stereotypical perceptions, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and reinforces the antecedents of identification. In this research, non-special needs teachers were given the task to teach deaf and mute students; hence, these English teachers became outcast of their specialization. Although these teachers were to teach reading and writing to deaf and mute, their teaching conditions were not normal, which they were used to.

Specifically, this research was based on *Professional Identity Construction* (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). This concept argued that there was a contradiction between what and who an individual is based on profession; hence, this is a mismatch between what is he/she is and what he/she does.

These contentions gave clear grounds to this study. In this study, English teachers who specialized in the different aspects of language were tasked to teach deaf and mute, who were considered special needs students. Thus, there was incongruence between what these teachers' abilities are and the students' capabilities. These teachers were not trained in sign language or on the psychology of the deaf and mute students.

Definition of Terms

The following words were operationally defined for common understanding of concepts:

Crossing the borders. This an idiom which implies the going beyond the limits of specialization. In this case, the English teachers, who were hired to teach English subjects, were tasked to teach deaf and mute learners. Thus, making them cross the borders.

Experiences. This refers to the good and not so good encounters of the English teachers in teaching the deaf and mute learners.

Teachers. They were the participants of the research. They were English teachers and interpreters who taught the deaf and mute students for at least two semesters.

Special needs. This word refers to the deaf and mute students.

Method

Presented in this chapter were the methods and procedures used in this study. The presentation included the research design, research participants, research instrument used, and procedures in gathering information.

Research Design

This research used the qualitative – descriptive phenomenological method. In qualitative research, individual's feelings are revealed (Patton, 1987); individual stories (Miller and Glassner, 1997); and personal experiences and insights are the primary concerns (Jackson, Drummond and Camara, 2007). On the other hand, phenomenology looks into 'how a person experiences what he experienced' (Patton, 1990); focuses on the essential and significant consciousness of an experience (Creswell, 1998); examines the 'lived experiences' (Rossman and Rallies, 1998; Sadala and Adorno, 2002 and Munhall, 2007) and investigates "how a day-to-day, intimate and personal world is constituted by an individual" (Schwandt, 2000). Finally, descriptive phenomenology is focused in the significance of individual's while he is conscious (Lopez and Willis, 2004). Thus, in this research, the real and conscious experiences of the non-special needs teachers, their essential reactions to their tailored conditions, their impressions and encounters to their leaners and significant learning were the focused of the investigation.

Research Participants

The research participants of this study were divided into two groups: This first group was composed of four English teachers. These teachers were all holders of either PhD or EdD. Moreover, all of them handled the deaf and mute students for at least two semesters. The second group included two shadow teachers. They were the ones who did the interpretation in sign language during the special needs class. They were bachelor's degree holders and essential sign language trainings. Also, they were hired because they were able to communicate in Arabic language.

Research Instruments

To obtain the important information, we formulated interview guide questions based on the research problems. The interview guide questions were composed of four main questions with probe questions. All questions sought to examine the participants' real knowledge experiences of their in teaching the special needs and to obtain their significant views which were worth sharing to others. It was made sure that interviews with the participants would not last for more than an 60 minutes. This was considered so that participants will not be burdened with their time and comfort and as compliance to the ethic of research.

Procedures in Gathering Information

The pertinent information for this study were primarily acquired through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) from the two (2) groups of special needs teachers. To elaborate further, the following steps were observed.

Mapping. It was observed that several teachers, who are not special needs (deaf and mute) specialists, were given teaching loads to teach deaf and mute learners. Initial interviews were conducted among these teachers and they revealed their struggles in communication gap, culture shock, and lesson preparation. Although they had interpreter, collaborative-teaching remained challenging.

Formulation of Paper. After the mapping, the construction of research paper was formulated. The researcher looked into professional crossing, which means that teachers were put into a reality where they had no choice but to teach outside of their professional field, an alienated rough sea.

Validation. After the method was determined, research questions were formulated and validated by expert qualitative researchers.

Conduct of FGD. Before the conduct of the interview, permissions were obtained from the selected participants. Two groups of FGD were conducted. First group consisted of 5 PhDs and EdDs who were teaching special needs for at least two semesters while the second group was composed of 2 interpreters who had been teaching deaf and mute for more than 2 semesters.

Analysis of Information. After the FGD were conducted, the researcher gave the transcribed information to the data analyst for data analysis and interpretation.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Truthfulness and credibility are issues which qualitative researcher needs to address. In handling the trustworthiness of this study, I followed important procedures reiterated by Shenton (2004) and Creswell (2007). These procedures included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility as mentioned by Lincoln and Guba (1985) can be obtained when there is a long-term encounter and consistent observation of the participants under investigation. In this research, I had a very close encounter with the participants because they were my colleagues in the college. Every time we had a chance, we shared our experiences about our classes and our students. Thus, during the FGD, they were honest and frank with their answers to the questions.

Elo and Kyngas (2008) said that transferability is obtained if the 'researchers are able to give clear description of the context.' Presented in this study was the clear ground in the mapping. Moreover, the purpose of the study, the nature of the participants, the research designs, the theory, the procedures clearly pointed out what this study was able. All these, described the entirety of the study. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985), Cobbo and Forbes (2002) and Creswell (2007) said that transferability can also be obtained when a researcher 'feed sufficient description as to whether the findings may be applicable or transferable to another study of similar nature. I believed that the findings of this research could be essential to other teachers were also thrown non-special needs and thrown into teaching special needs learners.

Dependability means replicability or repeatability of the study (Trochim (2016). This study was an offshoot of the previous studies with special needs students (deaf and mute) of Gulf College

conducted by San Jose, Bahket and Al Alsalhi (2017); San Jose and Galal (2016); and San Jose (2016). Thus, dependability of results of this study was obtained through the series of researches conducted on related topics regarding the deaf and mute students of Gulf College.

Confirmability, according to Cope (2014) is the ability researcher to demonstrate the information showed the participants' responses and not the manufactured. In this research, it was stated in the procedures of the study how the information were obtained from the participants; moreover, in the presentation of results, verbatim transcriptions were provided.

Scope and Limitations

This study was only limited to those teachers who taught the special needs students (deaf and mute) for two semesters. Moreover, this study only looked into the experiences of the teachers and explored their conscious understanding of their encounter with the special needs students. Likewise, this study only had two groups of participants and used the qualitative- descriptive phenomenological methods. With the limitations on the number of participants, the results of this study could not make general conclusions on the experiences of the participants. The results could only offer implications and insights which may be beneficial for non-special needs teachers who taught deaf and mute students.

Results

Presented in this section were the results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted among the two groups of participants. Further, thematic analysis and identification of core ideas from the interviews were included. Moreover, the information gathered from the interviews were categorized by taking into account the recurrence of reactions of the participants. The responses in the Focus Group Discussion were classified into *General* if similarities in responses were 50 percent or more; *Typical* if similarities in replies were 25-49 percent; and *Variant* if the similarities of the responses were 25 percent or below. Lastly, verbatim texts were included in the presentation to further elaborate answers.

Table 1. *Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Non-Specialist EFL Teachers*

Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Capitalization of teaching abilities	General	• accepting the assigned load
Disorientation	General	• lacking training in teaching Special needs students • struggling in understanding sign language
Acquisition of new knowledge	General	• responding and participating in the classroom tasks • learning from the lessons
Patience	General	• measuring patience
	Variant	• understanding SN situations • helping SN students to learn • considering SN students as normal

Capitalization of teaching capabilities

Generally, the English had no choice but to accept the reading and writing loads for the special needs. Before their signing of contract for the teaching job, there was no mentioned that they

needed to teacher special needs classes rather they will teach English to tertiary students. Somehow it was a sort of deceit. Hence, they couldn't make any complaint.

> *"I accept the load because there were no other teachers to teach"*
> (P2L2-3)
> *"I accepted it because nobody is available and it was given to me"*
> (P3L3-4)

Disorientation

Generally, English teachers who were given special needs load experienced disorientation. During their first few days in conducting classes, they were in a limbo as to what were the appropriate teaching strategies they may use in reading and writing. First, they didn't any background or orientation of sign language. Second, they don't have training in teaching special needs and third, they wouldn't know whether their parallel teacher was interpreting correctly what they say.

> *"There was no orientation given to us. We lack the skills in handling*
> *special needs."* (P2L10-11)
> *"I don't know how to communicate with them in sign language."*
> (P3L9-10)
> *"It's hard to comprehend what they were saying through sign*
> *language. We had communication barrier."* (P4L11-12)
> *"I was confused, really confused. I didn't know if my parallel SN*
> *teacher teaches the lesson correctly.* (P1L8-9)

The college was one of the few academic institutions which stream-line the deaf and mute students. However, the college was not ready because it had no equipment which could cater the deaf and mute students' needs.

> *"It would have been better if the college had provided special*
> *laboratory for the special needs students like speech laboratory*
> *where they could see on video how an English vowel or consonant*
> *is pronounce.* (P5L12-15)

Moreover, other problem in teaching the special needs was the lack of exclusive reading and writing modules. The modules used for them in reading and writing were similar to those normal students. Hence, non-special needs teachers were in trouble complying because the SN students' pacing was very slow.

> *"It was very difficult because we follow the normal students'*
> *modules. There was no module for SN. That's what makes teaching*
> *SN more frustrating and difficult."* (P5L16-18)

Acquisition of new knowledge

Despite the challenges, the non-special needs teachers, in their own little ways, were able to share to their learners' knowledge in reading and writing. Generally, they believed that the deaf and mute students acquired comprehension and writing skills. They observed that their students were cooperative in their visual - reading and guided writing activities.

> *"I am happy when they elicited their desire to learn. They participate."*
> (P2L8)
> *"I felt happy when my students are able to do task given to them."* (P3L10)
> *"I teach them to the best that I could. Yeah, it is difficult because they*
> *need to learn many things."* (P7L12-13)

However, the success they encountered dealing with the deaf and mute learners were results of their extra preparations. Unlike with the normal students' preparation, they needed to spend more hours in searching or making exercise materials like video-clips for reading, constructing picture-writing activities and picture-word vocabulary drills.

> *"Most of the time I am in the computer searching for short video clip. My*
> *students like a short story with pictures or video."*(P5L10-11)

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> *"In writing activities, I composed a story with fill-in the blanks with pictures beside so they will determine the intended word for the space. It is tedious, though."* (P3L12-13)

Patience

All the participants generally admitted that their patience was put to test. Despite their struggles, they learned the essence of self-control and tolerance in teaching. Hence, they realized that teaching SN after all was wonderful.

> *"I learned how to extend patience. Teaching SN was rewarding."* (P1L24-25)

> *"I was able to practice patience, a genuine one. I learned to discover my limits."* (P2L20-21)

> *"I was able to understand the situation of my SN students. I needed to give them special attention."* (P3L22-23)

For other participants, they were thankful that they were not deaf and mute. They learned from their experienced that deaf and mute leaners needed special care; that they should be treated as normal and be given respect.

> *"I am happy that I am normal. I now realized that become deaf and mute is a struggle."* (P5L18-19)

> *"Special needs should not be discriminated. They too have rights to education."* (P4L20-21)

> *"I considered special needs students as my children. I need to be considerate to them. Yeah, they are like normal students but with disability"* (P6L25-27)

Discussion

Presented in this section is a short summary of the results and integration of the previous researchers related to the themes.

Capitalization of teaching capabilities

Lecturers who were assigned to teacher deaf and mute students (Special Needs) are caught with no defense. They come to the college expecting that they will teach normal learners but it turns that they also need to handle deaf and mute learners. Presumably, the college administration thinks that these lecturers, with the interpreter, can do the teaching of the deaf and mute because they are PhDs and EdDs. Also, the college administration expects that co-teaching, between the lecturer and interpreter, would be work. However, what the administration can't see is the inability of the lecturer to handle deaf and mute and their lack of training in sign language. Mayer and Wells (1996) mentions that if sign language is well established, this means deaf and mute students and teachers have full cognition of sign language, then literary in the target language can be attained. Moreover, San Jose (2016) finds that deaf and mute learners prefer teachers of their kinds because they can learn and connect easily and feel more confident. Additionally, Almotori (2017) avers that deaf and mute learners see deaf and mute teachers as influential role models to their persons. Thus, it implies that investing in the non-specialized teachers to teach deaf and mute students makes an ineffective learning result.

Disorientation

Teachers who are given deaf and mute learners are shocked especially during the first few weeks of classes. They can't reconcile on what to do because they don't have any knowledge of sign language and they haven't taught deaf and mute learners. They are put into a hostile teaching environment. William and Berry (2015) find that disorientation in teaching happens when a teacher is confronted with new and different pedagogical situations and cultural and institutional practices. On the other hand, Watt (2017) mentions that any changes made to teachers' professional identity cause

potential strife and disorientation. Thus, college administration needs to be aware of the capabilities of their hired teachers. Teachers working abroad suffer not only culture shock but also professional shock; thus, adding more to these problems may lead more struggles and difficulties.

Acquisition of new knowledge

The non-special needs teachers' believed that with their efforts in teaching the deaf and mute students in reading and writing, they are able gain essential knowledge. The extra mile they give in preparing the picture-word vocabulary lessons and visual-slip reading activities for them pave the way. Kadar, Kadar, Rowe and Kadar (2016) say short animated movies may be used as an educational resource in teaching a language – of a word, a string of words or a phrase. While San Jose, Bahket, and Ali Alhalsi (2017) find that deaf and mute learners consider using video-clip in reading lessons as the best approach for them to learn. They also find picture word pair as essential in learning new vocabulary words. Similarly, Yang (2017) mentions that comprehending a text by watching video clips is the same thing as reading books. Thus, despite the struggles they experienced in teaching the deaf and mute learners, they are able to let the learners learn reading and writing. It implies that creativity and resourcefulness in teaching strategies are important so that students learn.

Patience

The non-special needs teachers' learn much from their experiences. They feel that their patience is tested; and their compassion to learners is stretched to its limit. Benn, Akiva, Arel and Roeser (2012) observe that learners with special needs are socially and emotionally challenge; hence, extra-attention, mindfulness and care are important. For Becker, Gallagher and Whitaker (2017) mindfulness of students' learning improves the quality of teacher-learning relationship. Teachers of special needs, according to McGee, Menousek, and Menolascino (1998) should assure students of a compassionate and gentle learning environment. If special needs learners see the warmth of their teacher, they fell assured and confident (Williams, 2001). Thus, teaching special needs require not only professionalism but also personal strength. Patience may not be for everyone to have in teaching but patience is a must in teaching the special needs.

Conclusions

Due to limited teachers for special needs (deaf and mute), college administrators may sort to other options and that is to give teaching loads to those non-special needs. However, college administration needs to understand that if the college's aim is to give learners utmost potential, then hiring competent teachers is a must.

Disorientation may be normal at first especially when a teacher is given loads which are beyond his/her expertise. In this case, the college administration may have done intervention so that teachers may be guided on what to do. Moreover, the college administration may have designed curriculum, provided essential equipment, context-based materials for the teachers to ease their feeling of doubts. Teachers don't have super human powers who can teach everyone at any time. They too have their limitations.

Special needs learners may have acquired knowledge in reading and writing from their non-special needs teachers; however, the impact of their learned knowledge is limited if compared to deaf and mute teachers. Thus, if college administration aims to improve the learning of the special needs students, they may consider qualify special needs teachers to handle special needs (deaf and mute) classes.

Lastly, teaching deaf and mute has tested patience of the non-special needs teachers. Their experience may be considered beneficial because they are able to define their patience; however, if these teachers are continuously given special needs loads, without given them the opportunity to have orientation, seminar-workshop, and study grants to further understand the deaf and mute students, then, soon they will burnout. Thus, college administration may not be blind to this reality.

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