

Quality Assurance in EFL Teacher Training: The Algerian Context

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Recommended citation: Messaoudi, Y. (2019). Quality assurance in EFL teacher training: The Algerian context. *Turkish Online Journal of English Language Teaching (TOJELT)* 4(3), 121-136.

Received:

10 Nov. 2018

Accepted:

23 May 2019

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Abstract: Taking the University of Tlemcen as a case study, the present research was designed to investigate the adequacy of the current practices in the field of TEFL in comparison to Quality Assurance standards. This study is an endeavor to define the SWOT's of the Department of English in the light of international accredited standards such as NCATE, TESOL and TEKS. The data collection process was realized via a triangular approach including a questionnaire, addressed to 159 MA EFL students, and a group interview of specialists' meeting university professors and teacher-trainers. Implementing a statistical approach to data analysis, taking into account the mean, the standard deviation, frequencies and Chi-square tests, to deal with the questionnaire, alongside a qualitative method to analyze the EFL specialists' forum results, this study revealed a significant number of facets that are representing weaknesses and/or threats in the current beliefs and practices. For instance, it unveiled many shortcomings in the EFL institution goals determinations, curriculum design, policies of change and reform... Finally, limiting these lacks and needs enabled the researcher to propose a set of recommendations that are meant to bridge the gap leading to the horizon of Quality Assurance. These recommendations are

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addressed to all possible stakeholders not least teachers, policy makers and students.

Keywords: Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Quality Assurance (QA), Needs Analysis, SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)

Introduction

Teachers are supposed to play a vital role in providing effective learning for the nation generations. They are required to assure high quality education that will equip learners with better personal and social skills, and that will facilitate more chances for employment positions in the future. However, this noble, but hard task is always dependent on whether teachers are well informed and equipped to undergo their duties. In other words, students' achievement is strongly tied to their teachers' quality. If there is a real want to deliver our learners with effective and high quality education, the cornerstone that should be first guaranteed is the provision of adequately developed teachers. Teacher education has a major impact on the quality of learning and on the shape of future generations. It is to this end that teacher education should be given a great share in the national educational policies and reforms (Mair, 2006).

Regarding the position taken by English among world languages, English language teaching (ELT) is considered as one of the thorniest educational topics in the globe. Either through colonial history, economy, travel, information exchange or popular culture, English has become the global language, a fact that pushed all educational systems in the world to adopt ELT as a sine qua non subject-matter. This is why, more light is always shed on English teachers' role, especially in countries where English is a foreign language. EFL teachers' task is regarded as more complex since they are required to teach a language to learners who share with them the same mother-tongue (Harmer, 2001). Consequently, EFL teachers require a more specific development before taking these responsibilities.

In the same area of interest, the current study, which is part of a broader doctoral research, was designed in general to determine EFL student-teachers' needs to achieve professional

qualification. This investigation is an evaluation of the adequacy of the university-based PS training and school-based ITT programs in attaining the desired quality in the preparation of new EFL teachers in comparison with universal standards established by accredited parties such as the NCATE, TESOL and TEKS. This aim can be obviously deduced through the three research questions around which this research turns:

1. *What type of university-based pre-service training and school-based initial teaching training do EFL student-teachers receive?*
2. *What are the EFL student-teachers' needs in terms of professional quality, in both phases of training, and what is to be fostered to enhance this quality?*
3. *Is there any relationship or collaboration between these two phases of preparation to cover all the areas of novice EFL teacher education?*

Methodology

The process of gathering data about learners' needs and lacks in a specific area of knowledge and/or skill is known as 'needs analysis' or 'needs assessment'. Therefore, the current research can be categorized as a needs analysis that aims to define the EFL student-teachers' needs to attain professional competence. The findings of such a research can provide valuable data for course designers and teacher-trainers to precisely determine the needs and wants that ensure the efficiency of training. Needs analyses processes should be the starting point of any syllabus or curriculum design; and also, it should be made at different periods of training/teaching to re-evaluate the existing curriculum (Nunan, 1988; Li, 2014).

Though there were some few references to needs analysis in the 1920's (White, 1988; West, 1997), this process became a famous trend in the 1960's as a consequence of the advent of ESP (Richards, 2001), and later it was adopted in EGP (English for General Purposes) and applied linguistics. Till now, the most referred to scholars in the field of needs analysis in TEFL are Munby (1978), Richterich and Chancerel (1980) and Brown (1995). For instance, the latter defines needs assessment as a process of gathering information to be provided to course designers in order to develop a curriculum that meets the exact needs of a specific group of learners. On the other hand, it is said that any teaching or training program is designed aimlessly if it is not rooted in sound knowledge of students' entry profile and expected exit profile after the course completion. In this vein, Richards (2001: 51) claims that:

If providers of training programs wanted public or other sources of funding in order to provide different kinds of training programs, they were required to demonstrate that a proposed program was a response to a genuine need.

In the same vein of thoughts, Brindley (1984, qtd. in Richards, 2001) claims that the term 'need' does not always denote what it literally means: EFL student-teachers' needs in the area of teacher training could be also categorized as wants, desires, demands, expectations, motivations, lacks and requirements... This is due to the fact that there are many users of needs analysis who have different views and approaches such as teachers, learners themselves, and ministries officials. This multiple sources of information in needs analysis processes always yield varied useful data about the target needs. This is why it is always recommended to assess needs both from an objective standpoint which represents the stakeholders' interpretation, and a subjective point of view as seen by the learners themselves (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Richards (2001: 53) comments on this point as follows: "Needs analysis...includes the study of perceived and present needs as well as potential and unrecognized needs".

As it was pointed to through many literature contributions, for better curriculum design, needs analyses processes are often coupled with situation analyses. Likewise, in the present work, we try to define any factor that may positively or negatively affect the training process in addition to the existing shortcomings. This is what is labelled also as SWOT analysis because it involves the determination of "a language program's internal strengths and weaknesses in addition to external opportunities and threats to the existence or successful operation of the language program" (Klinghammer, 1997: 65). Therefore, strictly speaking, this research can be categorized as a needs and SWOT analysis.

As far as the research instruments used in developing a needs analysis process are concerned, careful decisions should be made first on the tools to be used to approach the variables in question, since many options are available for the sake of analyzing needs such as questionnaires, self-ratings, interviews, meetings, observations and learners' language samples (Bryman, 2004). Bearing in mind that no tool among all these options is perfect, the researcher opted for a multi-method approach. This approach, which is broadly recognized as triangulation, is based on the use

of more than one research instrument in exploring the same issue: a fact that increases the level of accuracy of the obtained results, and also validates them by cross-checking and confirming the overlapping ones. In this research, we have highly considered the issue of triangulation in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the study. The researcher tries to assure the five types of triangulation as introduced by Denzin (1989): method, population, space, time and design. Following all these considerations, three research instruments were implemented in the current study:

- a. A university-based questionnaire to address EFL teacher-students,
- b. A School-based questionnaire to address newly-recruited EFL teacher, and
- c. A group-interview gathering a number of EFL experts such as EFL practitioners and teacher-trainers.

Findings

The triangular research methodology devised by the researcher resulted in a variety of findings that facilitate drawing a clear picture of novice teachers' needs and wants. These results also enabled the researcher to answer the questions aroused in the beginning of this work.

Concerning the university-based PS program, the results revealed that this curriculum is purely theoretical. Taken together, the findings attained through approaching the student-teachers and the group of EFL experts highlighted the fact that Master's holders could acquire a moderate linguistic competence. Though it was proved that they were able to accumulate a satisfactory knowledge about language registers and L1 and FL learning processes, the student-teachers showed that they were still encountering many obstacles when producing the language both verbally or non-verbally. In addition, the findings ascertained the student-teachers' weakness in dealing with all subjects related to pedagogy. Despite the existence of a number of modules devoted to subjects such as Didactics, EFL Methodology and Educational Psychology, we have discovered that the student-teachers could gain only a very basic knowledge in these areas. This shortcoming lies in the way such topics are approached: these topics which are purely practical and related to real teaching environments were dealt with in an isolated and fragmented manner far from real classrooms and EFL pupils. Add to all these deficiencies in the theoretical courses offerings, the current PS training program includes no teaching practice course. The latter fact entails that the student-teachers were unequipped with skills related to classroom management, classroom

communication and course design; and of course, they had no accurate idea about the EFL learners' individual factors and how they can inhibit learning. However, the most striking result was the one that unveiled the difference between the Language Studies (LS) and Literature and Civilization specialties (LC). Our investigations into this point showed that the LC specialty has nothing to do with pedagogical purposes. It was revealed that the smallest hints of Didactics, EFL Methodology or Educational Psychology were absent in the curriculum of this option. This specialty is rather designed for academic purposes in which the students are concerned with studying Anglo-Saxon literature and civilization with no link to teaching the language. These facts should push us to reflect on the aim behind designing such Master's specialties while the students are going to work as teachers in most cases. All these findings can be translated in the dissatisfaction noticed among the Master's holders who overtly expressed their feelings of disappointment about the way teaching competence was approached; According to them, it was an archaic, non-innovative and merely theoretical approach.

As far as the school-based ITT is concerned, the researcher approached this phase of training hoping to find it complementing what was done at university and covering its lacks. However, we did not expect that this program had no room for teaching practice too. When the EFL experts were asked about this critical situation, they hanged this problem on the circumstance that there is no feasibility to train novice teachers with real EFL pupils. This builds on the fact that trainers who are in charge of the ITT program are most of the time ordinary EFL practitioners who have loaded teaching duties: a fact that allows them to train novice teachers only when they are off during holidays. However, organizing training sessions only in holidays regarding the shortage in staff and space implies that there would be no possibility to work with pupils since they would be off too! All these limitations in the realization of the ITT program systematically led to very few, or almost no improvement in the student-teachers' knowledge and skills in comparison with the level achieved after the end of the university-based PS program. Save for the linguistic competence which seemed to be slightly improved as claimed by the trainees, all the other areas remained ill-treated in the same way that was highlighted in the tertiary phase. Furthermore, evaluation and assessment in EFL teaching was proved to be totally neglected in the two programs of training. Except for few definitions and theoretical concepts dealt with at university, the trainees had no idea

or skill about how tests and exams are designed and interpreted.

Looking at the findings of the first research question dictates that the main facet which is lacking in the two phases of training is teaching practice. Teaching cannot happen in a vacuum; teaching is a set of skills that cannot be learned by heart. EFL teaching is dependent on a number of human actors who are required to get in touch to see the real nature of the profession. Therefore, the primary need that should be satisfied is the adoption of a practical realistic approach in dealing with pedagogical topics such as Didactics, Educational Psychology and EFL Methodology; and certainly, the implementation of a teaching practice program bridging university with schools in a holistic approach rather than a fragmented one.

In addition, during the treatment of the various research tools, many needs among students emerged. These needs were categorized as felt needs rather than needs expected by training designers. Each time an area was tackled, the student-teachers expressed some needs and wants that were not expected by the trainers/teachers. Therefore, it can be said also that what is also lacking to design an adequate PS/ITT program is to always let a margin to address the individual needs of each candidate.

Besides, this study showed also that in order to enhance the quality of training, many situation requirements were to be assured. The results obtained, mainly from the EFL experts' forum, showed how the absence of some factors could harm the training and teaching processes. Consequently, assuring all the required situation factors (societal, institutional, teacher, learner etc.) is considered as another set of needs that are necessary for the success of training, be it university- or school-based.

As to the third question, it was formulated to check whether the two phases of training in question complement each other or not. It cannot be said that there is an inadequacy in one of the programs if the other provides the necessary supply. This is why the researcher insisted on cross-checking both phases of training and their interrelatedness. However, we have arrived at the conclusion that there is not a strong collaboration between schools and the university. Neither university is designing teacher training that conforms to school syllabi and requirements, nor are schools accepting or inviting trainees from university in internships. It is true that university is not supposed to create Masters' programs only for ELT purposes, but its comprehensive role is to provide programs for all society needs, be it academic or professional. However, it was unveiled

in this research that students holding academic Master's degrees are accepted in positions that require a purely professional training as the case of EFL teachers. All these facts were ascertained by the experts approached in this study; no one of them denied the total split between the two ministries of education (National Education and Higher Education).

Recommendations

In the light of the above-listed results and conclusions which revealed a number of gaps and shortcomings in the current PS and ITT programs, the researcher offers a number of recommendations to meet these needs. The recommendations below are meant to enhance the quality of EFL novice teacher training at the University of Tlemcen and at the Education Directorate of Tlemcen with equal focus on both policies and practices.

Before setting them forth, it is worth highlighting that these recommendations are not ordered chronologically in a way that one should come after another, nor are they classified in an order of importance. However, recommendations for change in the policies governing novice teacher education in Algeria are made first because all the other recommendations are dependent to; this research unveiled that no change can be feasible if it does not root top-down. These recommendations are rather called for to be realized all together in one ideal program that will engage all stakeholders in the tertiary and educational levels (ministerial officials, local administrators, teachers and students). It is true that an adequate EFL teacher training program with such requirements will seem to cost more additional human efforts and resources in terms of time, budget and equipment. However, it should be borne in mind that inadequately trained teachers will cost more expensive for the society.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish a strong partnership between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education in holding EFL teacher education.

The two ministries of National Education and Higher Education, respectively represented in schools and universities, should work in a collaborative and complementary approach when dealing with the subject of EFL teacher education. Each sector should consider the other

counterpart as a main stakeholder and a full partner who have an equal share in designing, developing and evaluating novice teacher training process. For university to excel in producing EFL future teachers, it should receive from schools well educated and skilled students; and for schools to succeed in their mission, they should be provided by qualified and competent teachers (Consider fig.1). Collaboration between the two sectors will generate a better organization of PS and ITT programs investing all human and materialistic resources in many ways:

- It strengthens local institutions networks to share ideas, experience and material.
- It will open the doors for mutual exchange of staff for training purposes. For instance, experienced EFL teachers may be invited to university to organize training days, and experts from university can participate in PS and IS training sessions for school teachers.
- It will make the teaching personnel of each sector aware of the counterpart programs and their goals, which will systematically lead to shaping practices in a way that will make the ends of each program meet.
- Ministerial revisions of curricula and reforms in policies will be made in correspondence with the other sector actual components of education.
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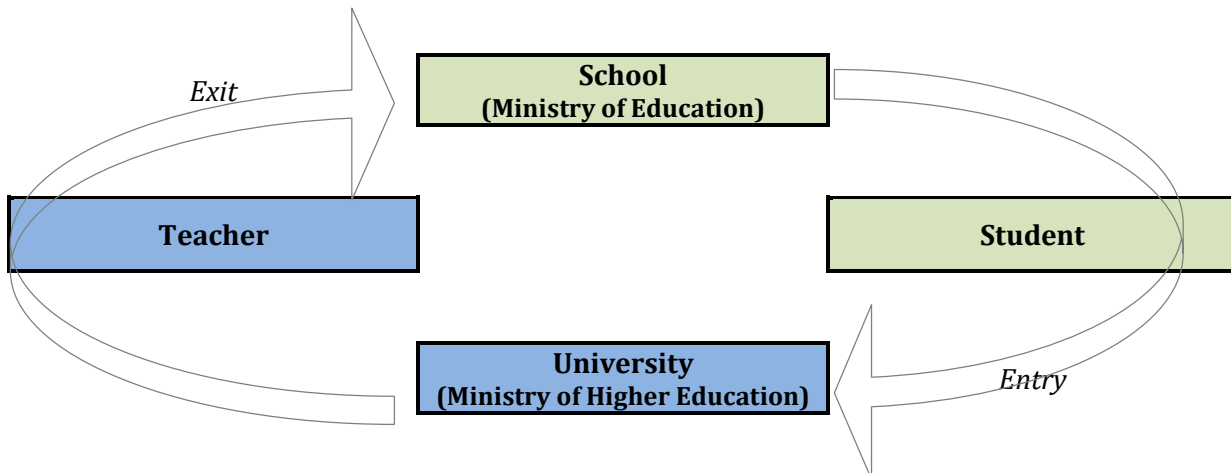


Figure 1: Interrelated Ministerial Involvement in Teacher Education

Recommendation 2: Design Master's projects that are purely meant for teacher training purposes.

One of the procedures that are anticipated to lead to a better selection of future EFL teachers is the design of Master's specialties that are meant for the preparation of EFL teachers in primary and secondary levels. The programs of such Master's projects should be related to the Algerian context with relevance to the syllabuses and EFL textbooks currently in use in the Algerian school. In addition, the content of such projects should be scientifically proved and approved in the two ministries of Education and Higher Education which will open the door for more opportunities for student-teachers to experience internships inside schools. However, it seems of paramount importance to recommend that the holders of Master's degrees that were designed for teacher training purposes should have the exclusivity in teaching job positions.

Recommendation 3: Establish a reliable strong needs and SWOT analyses system meant for the evaluation of the training processes in both schools and universities.

For the sake of quality assurance in training, evaluation systems should be established to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that may facilitate or hinder the training process, be it university- or school-based. Collaboration and partnership, which were summoned in the first recommendation, may yield common projects such as the creation of needs analysis and SWOT analysis systems to follow in each sector. Evaluation systems, when approved, can be made in use internally by each institution, or may be adopted as an external evaluation tool by which experts from both sectors mutually approach the other partner to check the processing of the training goal in each step. Such evaluation practices will encourage administrators and practitioners in schools and universities to always create new resources and standards to improve training practices, and therefore to assure quality in training. Data obtained from such evaluation measures should be introduced to the teaching staff as a whole to provide them with the necessary feedback that will help in assessing progress and shaping future practice.

Recommendations for Change in the Current Programs Principles

This research revealed in many occasions that every student-teacher approached could define his own area of weakness that was not tackled by the offered courses. This fact entails that an effectively designed training program is the one which is not totally based on prescribed courses and activities. Still, one of the criteria of an adequate training program is letting a margin to deal with any emerging individual needs. Likewise, it is claimed that the focus of the PS/ITT EFL training program is to be made on the student-teacher rather than the curriculum. In a trainee-centered program, the trainers are not required to track a PS EFL training program slavishly, but they have to consider each trainee's felt needs (Messaoudi, 2012).

All the findings related to the design of an effective PS/ITT training program that the researcher accumulated were classified through the canons of the principles summarized by Korthagen *et al.* (2006). These interrelated principles, that we have found very analogous with our findings, were constructed to recommend change in EFL teacher education in a way that makes it responsive to nowadays' needs.

Principle 1: Learning about teaching involves continuously conflicting and competing demands

As aforementioned, this study unveiled that the student-teachers were dissatisfied with the kind of course offerings they were subject to. They claimed that the training goals were designed 'for' them, while neglecting the fact that trainees themselves have their own wants and needs which were totally different from what was officially prescribed. The solution to overcome this inadequacy is to adopt PS/ITT programs that are not dependent only on prescribed activities and also to give room to trainees' felt needs and newly emerging demands. In a nutshell, for more effective EFL training to happen, there should be the adoption of an eclectic approach that creates a balance between official received needs and student-teachers' felt needs.

Principle 2: Learning about teaching requires a view of knowledge as a subject to be created rather than as a created subject

All the findings of this research let the impression that student-teachers were considered as passive subjects in the training process. Student-teachers were supposed to accumulate what was dictated by the training program either at university or in the place of work. In other words, teaching

was seen as an already created subject, and trainees were required just to follow and imitate with no room for innovation. However, for better training, teaching should be seen as a subject to be created by the trainee through individual experience. Such an approach will guide trainees from the beginning of their career to learn how to reflect on their actions, and generate their own theories which will shape their professional identity.

Principle 3: Learning about teaching requires a shift in focus from the curriculum to the learner

The two first principles summoned for a shift of focus on prescribed theories and skills to the emphasis on felt needs and their experience. In an indirect manner, it is a suggestion that this experience-based approach required to be trainee-centered rather than curriculum-centered. Trainee-centeredness is very important for the student-teachers in a way that gives them a central role in the training process. Also, this learner-centered approach, which is also adopted in the Algerian school through the CBA, will familiarize the student-teachers with the method they will be required to follow in their professional future.

Principle 4: Learning about teaching is enhanced through (student) teacher research

All the previous recommendations for innovative approaches to teacher training also dictate on the community of student-teachers to be more responsible about their development. They are supposed to tackle their own needs and struggles in teaching through reading and research rather than depending on the trainer to solve all their varieties of problems. The trainers and teachers in charge of the PS/ITT programs remain a source of guidance and modelling; this is another feature of trainee-centered approach that should be understood by the trainees. Making research about their own needs will be a very valuable source of data for both student-teachers and trainers. Such kind of research will help to reshape the content of the training programs in a way that assures that all the actual needs will be detected.

Principle 5: Learning about teaching requires an emphasis on those learning to teach working closely with their peers

This fifth principle insists on the importance of peer-supported approach to PS/ITT training. This approach will enable the trainees to supervise and evaluate each other, and then to write reports about the needs emerging from their experiences to the trainer. Adopting such a method will diminish any threat towards the student-teachers' confidence and will guide them towards teaching autonomy with less risk taking, as they are evaluated by their own mates rather than real EFL students. Peer-supported approach will also allow the trainer to design the curriculum of PS/ITT training with less time consumed and especially with assertion that the trainees' real requirements will be addressed. Furthermore, supervision skills acquired from such an approach will also furnish these future teachers by many skills to supervise and manage their future learners in the classroom.

Principle 6: Learning about teaching requires meaningful relationships between schools, universities and student teachers

As pointed to in policy recommendations, no change can be expected in the quality of EFL teacher training if the university-based PS training and school-based ITT programs remain fragmented and independent. Teacher training includes three main perspectives which are: a) the EFL student-teacher, b) the university teacher-educator and c) the school teacher/mentor. In an adequate training program, no one of these variables is to be dismissed in any step of training, or to act in a separate manner. The interrelatedness of these perspectives is illustrated in the following figure:

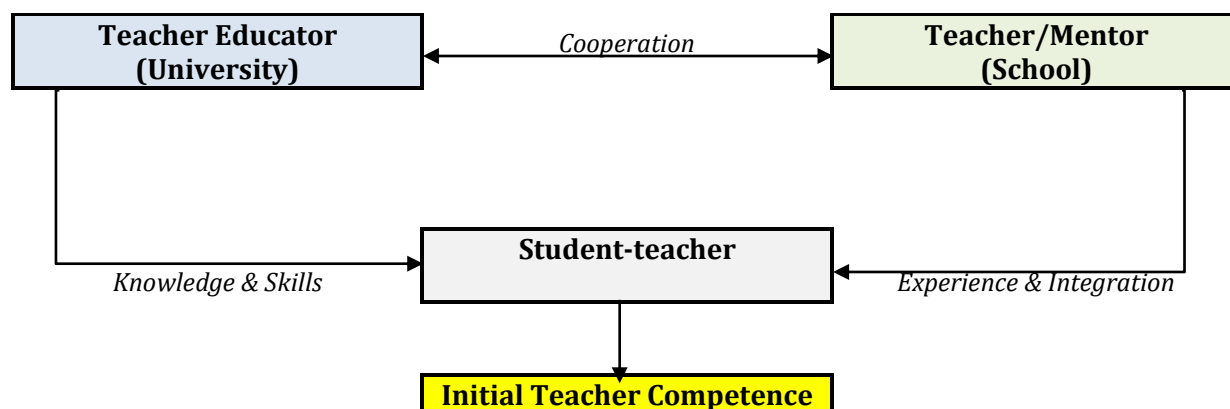


Figure.2: Relationships between University, School and Student-teachers

Principle 7: Learning about teaching is enhanced when the teaching and learning approaches advocated in the program are modelled by the teacher educators in their own practice

Even in a trainee-centered EFL training program, the role of the teacher at university and the teacher/mentor at school remains vital and indispensable. Teacher educators are considered as a source of modelling without which student-teachers will be short of evidence of application and usefulness of the knowledge and skills acquired. Being provided by an ideal model, the student-teachers will understand how to transfer theory into practice and how to behave in front of different circumstances in real EFL classroom. For the success of any adopted PS/ITT training, we recommend that all educators involved in the program should be first aware of these responsibilities, and also competent to behave as an ideal model for future teachers.

The Implementation of Quality Assurance Evaluation System

In the fourth policy recommendation, we have called for a quality assurance evaluation system in order to regularly generate an up-to-date report about the existing needs and SWOT's. As far as QA in education is concerned, it serves for two vital purposes: accountability and improvement (Woodhouse, 1999). As to accountability aims, QA procedures follow a summative approach to determine how the institution under evaluation performs and then render account to the concerned stakeholders and the public to have a clear idea about the current practices of the institution. Most of the time, summative evaluation is made by external bodies than the institution. Concerning improvement purposes which are mainly addressed by the institution itself (what is known as auto-evaluation), they are based on a QA system which focuses on enhancing future performance rather than making judgments on past actions. The aim behind this formative approach to QA is to foster conditions, motivations and level of achievement among learners by supplying the emerging needs and requirements (Billing, 2004; Thune, 1996).

Conclusion

The current research, which provides an in-depth view of the EFL novice teacher training situation in Algeria, considering the University of Tlemcen as a case study, insists on the establishment of a strong and balanced partnership between the Ministry of National Education

and its counterpart of Higher Education. This study proves that little improvement can be made to enhance the quality of EFL teacher education, and therefore to assure quality, by practitioners if there is no official political will for reform and change. Also, it recommends the adoption of professional Master's projects that are specifically meant for EFL teacher training, and that are supposed to include all the requirements to help the student-teachers attain professionalism. Collaboration between the ministries and the existence of EFL teacher training Master's programs are supposed to help providing better theoretical course offerings and adequately organized teaching practice program. As far as practicum is concerned, a comprehensive schedule of teaching practice including both university and school is introduced as a suggestion to correct the absence of any practical dimension in the current PS and ITT programs. Continuous needs and situation analysis mechanisms are assumed to lead to better practices and reform in education, be it in the tertiary level or in schools, and therefore to attain the horizon of quality assurance in EFL teacher training in a country like Algeria where English is still struggling to gain a place like its French counterpart.

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