

ENHANCING STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY THROUGH A MODEL OF STUDENT TEACHING ASSISTANT TO MEET REQUIREMENTS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION INNOVATION AFTER 2015

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ABSTRACT

Developing professional capacity for students is one of the primary duties at pedagogical universities in the current period in order to train the future teachers who are both virtuous and professional. Along with intensifying the traineeship for students at secondary schools, the model of student teaching assistant has been widely implemented in universities, which has been developed in many educational systems all over the world. In Vietnam, this model, however, has not been got adequate attention from the educators and leaders, and has not been widespread among universities. This article focuses on analyzing the advantages of the student teaching assistant model towards the development of professional capabilities for students. Furthermore, this paper proposes a model of student teaching assistant and the ways to implement this standard at foreign languages faculty, Thai Nguyen University of Education.

Key words: *professional capacity, professional development, student teaching assistant, pedagogical traineeship, teacher training*

INTRODUCTION

In order to meet the requirements of secondary education reform after 2015, the innovation of curricula, teaching methods, evaluation forms, etc, has got much attention from the society in current period. It can be said that the higher education in Vietnam is making a big move to improve the quality and adjust the global integration [8]. During this transitional period, the educators and education managers are constantly looking for ways to enhance the faculty and establish advanced models in teaching and learning. In developed countries, the model of student teaching assistant has been applied for many years and brought positive results in the whole three aspects: 1) *for the students as assistants*, they can gain the improvement in communication skills, a better understanding of their subjects, and practical pedagogical skills; 2) *for lecturers*, it is easier for them to apply active teaching methods and convey pedagogical skills to student teaching assistants; 3) *for students in class*, they will

get support both inside and outside the classroom [1]; [2]; [3] & [4]. It is undoubted that the relationship among students as assistants, lecturers and students are close and attached (see Figure 1).

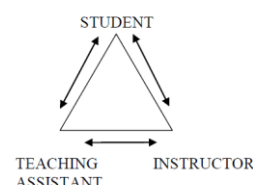


Figure 1. *The Teacher – Assistant – Student Relationship [6]*

In Vietnam, though the student teaching assistant model has been implemented in some universities, there have not been many articles looking deeply into the advantages of this model for students. Moreover, only a few studies have recommended this kind of model and ways to implement it in an appropriate way in the current context of Vietnamese education. In this article, the authors will, therefore, focus on analyzing the advantages of student teaching assistant model towards the professional development of students in the future. In addition, the authors also recommend one model and how to implement it at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TUE).

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MODEL OF STUDENT TEACHING ASSISTANT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Definition of students as teaching assistants

Teaching assistants (TA) have been known in the educational field by the following terminology: TAs, teacher aides, teacher assistants, teacher associates, rehabilitative aides, educational assistants, paraprofessionals, and most recently, para-educators [3]. In the range of this paper, the authors will use the term “*teaching assistants*” to describe third-year English students employed to assist in teaching first-year English majors and non-English students at universities/colleges.

It is clear that the work of the teacher assistant is to help students learn better [4]. In that way, teacher assistants work in small groups or singly with students who exhibit learning difficulties; this is a skilled work, in which teacher assistants must be flexible, consistent, cooperative, patient, and creative [5]. They play a vitally important role in undergraduate teaching, and the TA often provides a "friendly face" for many students, and also serves as a key link between the undergraduate and the professor [1]. Therefore, university leaders must rigorously define the roles and responsibilities of TAs and consider their contributions in relation to the drive for whole university improvement.

Roles & responsibilities of teaching assistants

Teaching assistants have a number of roles [1]. These roles include facilitator of learning, role model, and advisor for students, assistant to a professor, and representative of a department. Importantly, the TA acts as a bridge and a filter between the student and the course instructor [9]. Depending on the particular situation, these roles may be very rewarding or very trying. As a graduate student, TA should be concerned with responsibilities to themselves. As a teacher, their responsibilities are primarily to the students.

Advantages of TA models

For teachers: They will receive multi-dimensional feedbacks on teaching and learning; they have more time for designing the lectures, compiling textbooks, participating conferences and scientific research.

For students as teaching assistants: They will better understand the process of teaching and learning; mastering subjects they are studying; highly trained in pedagogical profession after school; promoting soft skills such as presentation skills, public speaking, teamwork, leadership and time management. All these things are helpful to their resume later or convenient to apply abroad scholarships.

For students in classes with teaching assistants: They will become more open to ask for help with their difficulties in studying; increase attention in class; encourage themselves to become teacher assistants; and have more time to discuss with friends outside classroom.

Challenges of TA models

First, time pressure is the most difficult one. Students as assistants, therefore, have to balance their learning in class with the teaching assistant activities.

Second, beside their professional knowledge, student assistants need to equip themselves with some other skills when teaching in class. It is not really easy to do such simple skills as board-writing and display, guiding and organizing learning activities in class.

Third, student assistants are often not experienced in assessing learners, which may lead to subjective evaluation among learners.

Finally, it is necessary to establish detailed criteria to manage the teaching activities of student assistants.

BUILDING A MODEL OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS AT FOREIGN LANGUAGES FACULTY, TUE

Why should we prepare the third-year English majors to teach?

1) *Building self-confidence*: Preparing graduate students for their role as TAs (and perhaps as future full-fledged teachers) helps alleviate the anxiety associated with teaching inexperience, and increases their self-confidence.

2) *Improving efficiency*: A little time spent learning the basics of teaching and how to manage it can make TAs much more efficient at the task, thus leaving them more time to work on their research.

3) *Teaching as a set of transferable skills*: Teaching skills can be applied to careers in a number of different sectors in the labor market.

4) *Gaining the edge in the job search*: Students who are able to show that they have had some trainings in teaching during their graduate years will be more competitive in their job searches (Adapted from Svinicki, M., 1995)

Teaching assistant competency development

To help teaching assistants to enhance their competency development, the following criteria should be focused (see Figure 2).

Proposed model of student teaching assistants

To effectively implement the model, it is necessary to conduct every stage in a scientific and logical way [7]. In this section, the authors will propose 5 stages of student teaching assistants model, that is, *Selecting, Training, TAs giving lectures with the help of the lecturers, Signing contracts with student assistants and Evaluating the effectiveness of TAs' activities per week/month/year*. Each part will be described with details. However, the implementation may be flexible depending on the context of each university or college (see Figure 3)

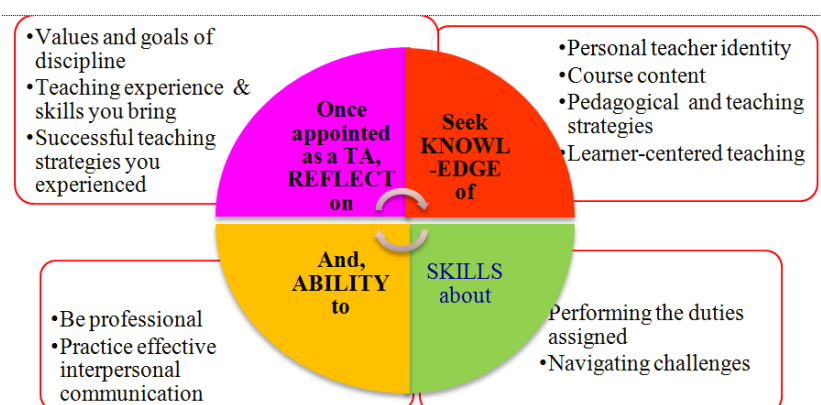


Figure 2: Framework for teaching assistant competency development
Adapted from Cynthia, K., Suzanne, L., & Roselynn, V. (2015)

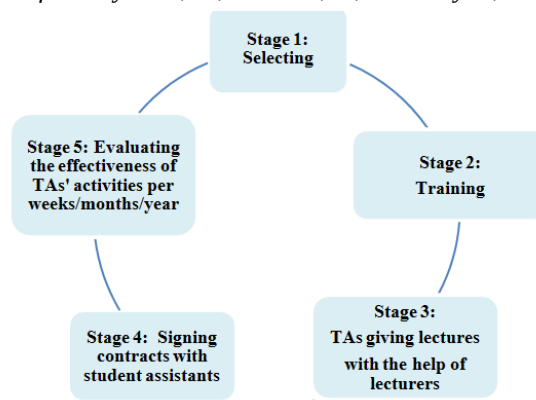


Figure 3: The circle of student teaching assistant model

Stage 1: The process of selecting student assistants

The recruitment plans are made about a month before the start of semester 1 of year 3. Candidates are required to fill in the registration form including information about extracurricular activities that they are involved, the subjects registered in the semester to ensure that candidates have sufficient time for the tutoring. Recruitment notice and registration form are attached in the appendix.

Based on a number of criteria, the faculty conduct preliminary selection on records and live interviews with candidates. The criteria and their meanings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Criteria for selecting student assistants

Criteria	Meaning
Have social knowledge	Be good at communication skills and working with other people
Have high learning competences (achieve the cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher, and grade A with the subject going to be taught as an assistant)	Have enough knowledge to help other students revise what they have learned so far, and resolve given problems
Have enough experience related to teaching (prioritize candidates who have been tutoring or deans of academic clubs).	The capacity of solving pedagogical situations and understanding the procedure of teaching and learning
Have excellent quality and passion in teaching (based on moral qualities, the willingness and the enthusiasm to impart knowledge)	Assistant teaching is a good example for students to follow both in morality and profession
Good skills in organizing activities and time management	Have capacity of working under high pressure, arranging activities effectively

(Adapted from Tran Thi My Dung, Nguyen Minh Luan & Doan Thi Truc Linh, 2014)

Besides, in the department of foreign languages, there is a class of 15 talented students in each course. Those students are selected based on their semester GPA and the scores of three skills (Listening, Reading & Writing) at the end of each semester. The talented students are prioritized to become student teaching assistants.

Stage 2: Training students as teacher assistants

When recruited, the students are like fish out of water and do not even know what their future job is and how to do it. Therefore, the organization of training classes for students before entering the semester is really necessary and important.

Depending on the size and the specific conditions of each department, the well-prepared training course will help students feel confident, enthusiastic in teaching and fulfill their roles.

According to Young S. L. et al (2008), the training of student teaching assistants basically must ensure the two main contents

of awareness and skills. First, the traineeship helps them understand their role in supporting other students, their department and school; recognizing their rights and responsibilities. Second, it ensures that those students will be equipped with the necessary skills in teaching: (1) develop skills to communicate lectures effectively, create favorable conditions for students to focus on class discussions and management of group activities, (2) develop problem-solving skills to encounter possible issues in the interaction between faculty and students.

Stage 3: Students giving lessons with their teachers' help

Initially, they may feel perplexed by the board. Teachers then utilize hands-on methods to guide their students. In this stage, students as teacher assistants will play the roles of a teacher, lecturers will attend their classes and use observation checklists to give feedbacks to the teacher assistants. After attending at least 4 periods, lecturers give their students chance to take control of the class.

Table 2: Duties & responsibilities of the teacher assistant

Duties and responsibilities of the teacher assistant	Marking students' homework, exercises, and tests.
	Recording the marks, store and supply related information to lecturer.
	Attending classes.
	Assist lecturers with their teaching in class
	Be present in the office during working hours, make an appointment to meet students and help them through phone call or email.
	Give feedbacks to students on their homework, in class exercises, tests.
	Compile/photocopy the documents outside the lessons
	Attend the exam observation with other officers.

Stage 4: Signing contract with teacher assistants

In order to improve the effectiveness of the teaching assistant activities, before signing the contract or any kind of engagement, students should have a detailed discuss with their teachers to clearly understand their responsibilities as a teacher assistant [7]. The duties and responsibilities of teacher assistants are described in Table 2 below.

Empowering students as teacher assistants to grade assignments or exams has attracted much controversy because those students are inexperienced and easy to fall into their own bias. Therefore, all the work of teacher assistants will be supervised by lecturers in charge of studying and the score recording will be checked.

Stage 5: Evaluating the effectiveness of teacher assistant activities by weeks/months/ quarters/ year

Establishing the assessment criteria should be clear and associated with the duties and responsibilities of students as teacher assistants. Students attending the modules will receive survey forms about the attitude, spirit, strength, professional qualifications, strengths as well as weaknesses of the teacher assistant that should be improved. Thereby, the faculty will have appropriate adjustments so that the teaching assistant activities meet the maximum demand for students. Besides, teachers can adjust expectations on teacher assistants to suit their inherent abilities.

CONCLUSION

The student teaching assistant model is expected to bring distinct advantages to

lecturers, students as teacher assistants and students attending classes with teacher assistants.

Besides, the process of applying this model may encounter certain difficulties. However, these obstacles will soon be resolved if there is more attention and help from faculty and school.

To improve the efficiency in applying this kind of model for better teaching and learning process, we really need the support from various sides such as the school, faculty and staff. Therefore, in this article the authors offer some suggestions based on the consensus between teachers in charge of the module and the teacher assistants.

For the Department: Have preferential policy for students as teaching assistants; have responsibilities for guiding and managing the use of teaching assistants.

For the teaching staff: Under the policy and regulation of the department, most of the responsibilities belong to lecturers utilizing students as teaching assistants. They, therefore, should pay attention to such aspects as selecting the teaching assistants from the talented student group (as mentioned above); discuss the possible conflict with the candidates between them and their friends in class; make sure that teaching assistants are fully equipped with necessary knowledge and skills to do their teaching assistant activities well; establish a quick and reliable channel of communication (email or e-learning system); regularly supervise the work of teaching assistants; ask the teaching assistants to sign the binding contract of responsibilities.

The student teaching assistant model brings many benefits to students, teachers and schools. In the current conditions, the recruitment, training and management of student teaching assistants may be difficult to fully implement, but we have done our best to create all favorable conditions for students to become a good tutor. At the moment, we are implementing this model to some third year students at Thai Nguyen University of Education. Although we have not gone through the whole 5 stages above to get clear statistics, through informal interviews with some teachers and students, we have learnt that all the three related groups are excited about the new model. In the later article, we will add some follow-up activities in the model and collect practical data to analyze the effectiveness of this model. The authors hope this article would give readers a fresh perspective on an advanced teaching model – developing professional capacity for English students through the student teaching assistant model.

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TÓM TẮT
PHÁT TRIỂN NĂNG LỰC NGHỀ NGHIỆP SINH VIÊN TIẾNG ANH
ĐÁP ỨNG YÊU CẦU ĐỔI MỚI GIÁO DỤC PHỔ THÔNG SAU 2015
THÔNG QUA MÔ HÌNH SINH VIÊN TRỢ GIẢNG

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Phát triển năng lực nghề nghiệp sinh viên là một trong những nhiệm vụ then chốt của các trường sư phạm trong giai đoạn hiện nay nhằm đào tạo những nhà giáo tương lai vừa hồng, vừa chuyên. Bên cạnh việc tăng cường cho sinh viên tham gia thực tập sư phạm tại trường phổ thông, hiện nay, ở các trường đại học có nền giáo dục phát triển trên thế giới, mô hình sinh viên trợ giảng (MHSVTG) đã được áp dụng rộng rãi. Tuy nhiên, mô hình này tại các trường đại học tại Việt Nam còn chưa phổ biến và chưa được quan tâm đúng mức bởi các nhà sư phạm và các nhà quản lý giáo dục. Bài viết này sẽ tập trung phân tích những thuận lợi của MHSVTG đối với sự phát triển nghề nghiệp trong tương lai của sinh viên. Thêm vào đó, bài báo cũng đề xuất mô hình và cách thức triển khai mô hình sinh viên trợ giảng tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên.

Từ khóa: *năng lực nghề nghiệp, phát triển nghề nghiệp, sinh viên trợ giảng, thực tập nghề nghiệp, đào tạo giáo viên.*

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