

Revisiting the Efficiency of Teaching Practicum: Voices from ELT Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

Practicum is one of the most important components of teacher education programs due to providing pre-service teachers with valuable experience and insights into teaching in a real-life context. However, it is necessary to examine the effectiveness of practicum at certain intervals from different aspects to maintain the high-quality teacher education. Considering the new curriculum implemented in practicum from 2021 on, this study scrutinized 32 pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' views and experiences in four different types of practicum schools, including middle school, vocational training high school, Anatolian high school, and religious vocational high school. The study is qualitative in nature, utilizing reflection forms and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed a common agreement among participants on the benefits of practicum in terms of observation of mentor teachers, gaining teaching experience through individualized feedback, and realizing a theory and practice balance. However, findings showed some problems regarding several issues such as mentor teachers' lack of guidance and support as well as being a bad role model, insufficient feedback, insufficient technological infrastructure in the classrooms, and frequent occurrence of idle classes. Several recommendations are provided to improve practicum and hence teacher education.

Keywords: Pre-Service Teachers, Teacher Practicum, ELT Teacher Education

Introduction

Teacher education is a key point to accomplish the improvement of a group of people, institution, and even a nation as a whole, which might imply that improving the quality of teacher education will directly influence the development of a society in all aspects. In a similar vein, governments usually justify the regulations on the teacher preparation programs by arguing that doing so will improve student achievement in classroom (Imig & Imig, 2007). As one of the most important components of teacher education, teaching practicum enables future teachers to combine theory and practice in a real classroom context (Wilson & Scalise, 2006). As Funk et al. (1982) emphasized about four decades ago, teaching practicum is currently broadly accepted as one of the most vital aspects of a teacher education program for prospective teachers. Programs for the preparation of English language teachers include practicum courses that give preservice teachers the opportunity to teach in partner schools. However, in order for pre-service teachers to take maximum benefit from practicum, there needs to be sufficient coordination and interaction between schools and pre-service teacher education programs, pre-service teachers and in-service teachers functioning as mentor teachers, and teacher educators and in-service teachers (Genç, 2016). The collaborating teachers, mostly referred as

mentor teachers, have the most influence over pre-service teachers because they are the most accessible for guide during teaching practicum (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Studies also show that during teaching practice, prospective teachers' teaching methods are significantly influenced by their interactions with these cooperating teachers (Randall, 1992). Moreover, according to Richards and Crookes (1988), practicum can give candidate teachers the chance to strengthen their skills in both real classroom instruction and choosing, changing, and creating original course materials. Considering all these factors affecting the development of pre-service language teachers, teaching practicum is of crucial importance and must be thoroughly investigated to increase the quality of teacher education.

The role of practicum in teacher education has been extensively investigated in both theoretical and empirical level in the related literature. Regarding the theoretical aspect, Schank et al. (1999) emphasized the gap between theory given during teacher education and practice in practicum schools and argued that "life requires us to do more than it requires us to know [*italic in original*]" (p. 164). In this regard, practicum establishes an important ground for teacher candidates to realize and customize theoretical aspects according to practical considerations (Tercanlioglu, 2004; Yıldız et al., 2016). In terms of empirical level, there are several studies conducted in various contexts such as Hong Kong (Gan, 2013), Norway (Ulvik & Smith, 2011), the USA (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010), Malaysia (Goh & Matthews, 2011), Rwanda (Otara, 2014), Indonesia (Tan, 2008), and Turkey (Çakmak, 2008; Genç, 2016; İşcan, 2017; Sarıçoban, 2008; Şimşek&Müftüoğlu 2017). The common problematic issues revealed in these studies are mentor teachers' lack of enthusiasm and support to trainee teachers, classroom management problems, discrepancy between university training and practice in real classes, trainee teachers' dissatisfaction with the organization of practicum, difficulty in adjusting new environment, and so on. Based on these studies, Uysal and Savaş (2021) recently reviewed 20 related papers and used coding methods to broadly examine and classify the difficulties discussed in

the literature. There have been five major groups discovered as well as a further thirty-six sub-groups. Receiving feedback from supervisors and classroom instructors, student teachers' classroom management, lack of coordination between schools and faculty of Education, the theory-practice contradiction, and target language concerns were identified as recurrent issues.

Several positive aspects were also found out such as development of self-awareness, gaining experience, honing teaching skills, and constructive feedback from mentor teachers. Considering such benefits, practicum is regarded at the core of teacher education program (Başkan et al., 2006; Şişman, 2017). Although the above mentioned studies provided useful insights into the implementation of practicum in various disciplines including ELT, they were all conducted and published before the current revisions applied to the teacher practicum by the Council of Higher Education (CHE). For instance, the School Experience Courses mentioned by Sarıçoban (2008) is abolished, and the length of Practicum Course has been extended to two semesters with the latest changes in teaching practicum starting from 2021-2022 academic year. Therefore, the current research can be assumed as a newsworthy attempt to evaluate the current situation in teaching practicum practices and could provide an opportunity to compare the past and current practicum issues as well as providing up-to-date recommendations in terms of effectively implementing practicum for ELT candidate teachers.

With the revisions in teaching practicum in Turkey initiated during 2021-2022 academic year, pre-service teachers are now required to attend six hours of practice to the courses per week in the final year of bachelor's degree for two semesters. During this time, student teachers are required to conduct classroom observation, gain familiarity with the real school context, and improve their teaching practices. Teaching practicum was previously implemented as four hours of observation in the first semester and six hours of practice in the second semester. The current revisions apparently extended the practicum process. However, some problems related to mentor teachers, classroom setting, classroom management, technology and pedagogy expertise might still

influence pre-service ELT teachers negatively. Therefore, it is critical to revisit the practicum issues to understand the current situation at placement schools and to observe the consequences of the latest revisions in teaching practicum.

The underlying assumption of this research is that the quality of ELT teachers might be increased through an effective teaching practicum developed by considering the problems experienced by pre-service teachers. When defining what needs to be taught in teacher training programs, it is important to consider the perspectives of the candidate teachers who will be participating in it (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Thus, this research addressed the issues related to teaching practicum process of pre-service ELT teachers at placement schools after the new practicum program was implemented in 2021. In other words, this study aimed to investigate teacher candidates' experiences in terms of benefits of practicum and challenges (if any) they encounter in practicum school. Basically, this study sought to answer the following questions in order to investigate teacher candidates' practicum experiences.

- In what ways did teacher candidates benefit from practicum?
- How supportive and guiding were the supervising teachers during practicum?
- What problematic issues did the teacher candidates have throughout their practicum?

Method

Research Design

This study has a qualitative-oriented research design to investigate effectiveness of practicum and challenges that pre-service English teacher experience after a new regulation was launched in Turkey in 2021-2022 academic year. More specifically, the study utilizes a case study approach which is a kind of "qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system ...through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2013 p. 73). Case study is regarded as an effective way of exploring the issue in detail and unearthing related results that are highly unlikely to be conducted through quantitative methods (Dörnyei, 2007).

Sampling and Participants

This study employed convenience sampling to recruit the participants. According to Dörnyei (2007), convenience sampling is a kind of non-probability or non-random sampling in which members of the target population are selected based on meeting particular practical conditions, such as ease of access, closeness, availability during a specified time period, or a strong willingness to take part. Therefore, participants of the research were chosen according to convenience sampling method due to their simple accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate in the research.

This exploratory case study was conducted with 32 fourth-year students studying in ELT department at a state university in Turkey. All participants were attending the compulsory "Practicum Course" for their degrees. In this course, students were expected to practice teaching skills and apply theoretical knowledge into practice. Therefore, each participant had a chance to observe mentor teachers and teach in a real classroom setting, and the data were gathered depending on the participants' authentic school experience. The student-teachers' age ranged from 22 to 25, and 19 of them were female while 13 of them were male. They went to various types of practicum schools, including private middle school, state vocational training high school, state Anatolian high school, and religious vocational high school.

Research Instruments and Processes

The purpose of this research was to explore teacher candidates' experiences and identify the obstacles they face during their practicum process so that solutions might be developed for the future. Therefore, their views were collected through a reflection form in which they explained the issues they encountered during practicum at placement schools. In this reflection form, they were asked to state the details of their own practicum experiences and solutions through a series of six questions. The second data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview based on participants' answers in reflection forms. The interviews aimed to elaborate on several aspects of participants' experiences during practicum in terms of in-class issues, mentor teachers, school administration, and students. In this

way, this study utilized data triangulation (Brown, 2016; Dörnyei, 2007). More specifically, it employed methodological triangulation, namely, data gathered through multiple methods (reflection forms and interviews) in order to strengthen the reliability and validity of the results. Participants were also sought consent to participate in the study and informed about the confidentiality of the data.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis process, the reflection forms obtained from the participants were categorized according to participants' types of practicum schools. This was followed by the transcription and translation of interviews. Then, using content analysis, main themes and sub-themes were identified and improved. To achieve this, researchers investigated the transcripts several times by taking notes and assigning codes to thematic categories in order to respond to the research questions (Creswell 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recurring student statements' themes were color-coded during the content analysis to categorize the raw data into relevant themes. Finally, the themes were coded, categorized, and interpreted using thematic analysis in which emergent themes constitute the categories for investigation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Findings

The findings are presented in line with the order of the research questions which seek answers for benefits of practicum, guidance level of mentor teachers, and problematic issues in practicum. Each theme is explained below respectively.

Benefits of Practicum

Participants of the study commonly stated that they gained valuable experience in teaching English to various age groups in middle and high schools by observing and feeling the real environment. They specifically emphasised several points regarding the benefits of implementation of practicum, including observation of mentor teachers, gaining teaching experience and getting individualised feedback as well as realising the difference between theory they learned at the university and actual practice in language education. Each point is elaborated with

support of interview and reflection form extracts below successively (names of the participants are pseudonyms).

Regarding the observation of mentor teachers' way of teaching and students during the class, participants stated that it was a valuable opportunity for them to observe teaching and learning context and evaluate the effectiveness of teacher's behaviours from various perspectives such as teaching strategies, class management, improvisation, drawing students' attention, and the relationship between the teacher and students. Practicum enabled them to be aware of what is applicable in class room context in terms of adjusting language use and teaching strategies and materials depending on students' proficiency level. One participant (Merve) summarised her experience as follows.

I have the chance to observe how high school teachers teach, what experiences they have, what expectations high school students have, and how a real class is planned and taught. Therefore, it is a valuable experience for me to have prior to working in the field.

As stated above, Merve expressed several benefits of practicum in high school. Despite the school context difference, Nesrin identified some more examples regarding the positive impact of practicum in middle school.

I now have a clearer mind on how to start a lesson with a warm-up activity, how to teach the focus of the lesson effectively, how to approach students in specific cases and in general, and how to decide on appropriate activities for middle school learners.

Following observation of the classes, teacher candidates had an opportunity to have an actual teaching experience in a real classroom environment. At the time of data collection, their teaching hours ranged from eight to 22 depending on the placement school and mentor teachers. Participants regarded it as a great chance to get familiarized with teaching and improve their practice with the help of mentor teachers' individualized feedback. Some highlighted that they improved their confidence considerably as they did more teaching practice. Emrah explained it as follows.

One of the great benefits was self-confidence. I thought it very challenging to teach and manage the class before going to the placement school, but I can do it easily now. I can also clearly understand how to overcome possible problems stemming from students' behaviours and low proficiency level.

Since they went to different types of schools such as vocational high school, religious vocational high school, Anatolian high school, and private middle school, participants argued that learned context-specific information during their practicum. Some confessed that they had concerns about the type of the school but being present at that context changed their minds. For example, one participant (Mehmet) shared alteration of his opinions about vocational high school as follows.

Prior to beginning the practicum in vocational high school, I had a mix of feelings – both anxious and hopeful because I thought that it would be both challenging and beneficial in terms of improving me in every aspect. However, the student profile I expected and encountered was completely different from each other, and students eliminated my prejudices. I did not have any difficulty in class management.

Finally, practicum-enabled teacher candidates to realise the difference between theory and practice. They stated that teaching in a real classroom had considerably different from doing micro-teaching at the university in line with the theoretical features. In this regard, they reached a conclusion that they needed to customise the theories considering the contextual factors, particularly students' motivation and proficiency level. Murat explained it as follows. I am aware that I need to speak in English so that students can be exposed to target language. However, I sometimes notice that I am trying to explain a simple word in English for a long time and feel that I need to use Turkish to give a clue to the students whose proficiency level is really low.

In the above extract, Murat mentioned the controversy between exclusive L2 use that was taught at the university and the need for translanguaging use in the field due to practical reasons such as students' low English level. With the help of practicum, he noticed the unmanageability of this theory and

developed his own way of teaching by adjusting his language use in line with students' needs.

Mentor Teachers

Teacher candidates had various experiences with their mentor teachers in terms of their support and guidance. While one group argued that their mentor teachers were helpful and friendly towards them as well as being a good role model, the other group were not quite happy with their mentors because of several reasons such as lack of support, insufficient feedback to their teaching, and mentor teachers' way of teaching. Regarding the former group's experiences, despite going to different schools, they stated that their mentor teachers were so professional in teaching that they had ample opportunities to improve themselves as confident teachers equipped with sufficient skills. Some also stated that mentors' way of teaching was interactive with support of various strategies such as effective use of intonation, asking display questions at the spot, use of Web 2.0 tools, and building a good rapport with students. In this way, mentors encouraged students to engage in the class, which served a good role model for teacher candidates. An illustrative extract regarding the views on a mentor teacher is provided below.

Our mentor is very helpful and friendly. She tries to help us with every issue, including providing us with course books to follow the classes better. She has an energetic personality even though she has to teach the same topics three times for different classes in a single day. I also like her teaching style.

However, some participants who went to state schools for practicum explained a number of areas in which mentor teachers needed some improvement. One emergent finding was mentors' insufficient support during practicum in terms of planning of teacher candidates' teaching planning and providing them with constructive feedback. Regarding the planning of their teaching sessions, one participant (Emrah) stated that he was never informed of teaching in advance and hence had to teach spontaneously. This could be regarded as a crucial problem since necessary preparations should be done by teachers by preparing lesson plans and teaching materials. His explanation of the situation is provided as follows.

I have taught more than ten hours so far and I have never been informed prior to class. I did not have time to get prepared. My teaching is done during break time spontaneously. It might be due to lack of planning.

Some participants also shared feedback-related problems on their teaching. They stated that their mentor teachers did not pay enough attention to observation and feedback despite the crucial role of constructive feedback for professional development of teacher candidates. One participant (Zeki) shared his experience and emphasized the problems regarding getting feedback from his mentor teacher as follows.

We have never received constructive feedback from our mentor. She only highlights our strengths. I am sometimes aware of some of my deficiencies during teaching, but the teacher does not mention these at the end of the class. Therefore, we are not sure which skills we should improve for a better teaching. It seems to me an important problem.

In addition to Zeki's experience of insufficient feedback, another participant (Buse) from another placement school shared her experience of absence of mentor teacher during her teaching. Her mentor was not present in the classroom or left the class before the end of the class, and hence Buse was unable to get feedback on her teaching at all. She also stated that it had a negative effect on her mood while teaching.

There are some moments when she [mentor teacher] goes out earlier without giving any feedback or never shows up during my teaching. At these moments, I teach alone with 25 students, which makes me a little anxious.

Mentor teachers' way of teaching was also another commonly reported problem. Depending on their observations, participants stated that they noticed several problems in their mentor teachers' way of teaching such as using old-fashioned strategies (e.g., Grammar Translation Method and over-dependence on lecturing), lack of using interactive materials (e.g., technology and Web 2.0 tools), and over-reliance on Turkish use during teaching. Considering these, participants believed that their mentors did not set a good role model for themselves. Turan shared his

views on his mentor's teaching style as follows.

... she follows an obsolete way of teaching. Although she rarely uses interactive and creative materials, she mostly uses GTM, namely, explains grammar rules and students write these in their note books. She probably does it due to students' low proficiency level.

In the above extract, Turan was aware that it was not a desired way of teaching by means of Grammar Translation Method, as current methodology they learn at the university contradicts with this idea. Several participants from different practicum schools observed similar teaching styles which do not attract students' attention such as explanation of grammar rules and lecturing (Duygu), over-reliance on course books and lack of interactivity (Yasemin) and frequent dictation and lack of focusing on oral skills (Mehmet), and lack of English use (Simge). Participants emphasized the negative impact of such practices on their own teaching. Simge explained it as follows.

The teacher uses Turkish all the time. 100% Turkish in all classes. We have no other choice but to imitate what she does. We take her as a role model and always use Turkish in English classes, as well.

Problematic Issues

According to the findings, teacher candidates encountered several problems in practicum schools. As explained previously, there were several participants who were not happy with their mentor teachers because of lack of observation and feedback as well as insufficiency in being good role models in terms of effective teaching. One striking finding was that this problem occurred only in state schools rather than in private school where all participants were content with their mentors in all aspects. Therefore, it has important implications for the education of mentor teachers working in state schools for a better guidance for teacher candidates.

Another problem that some participants experienced during practicum was insufficient technological infrastructure of the classrooms in a vocational high school. They stated that technological tools were not maintained well, the Internet connection was very slow, some Interactive

White Boards (IWBs) were broken down. Lack of maintenance of IWBs was also confirmed by various participants who went to the same school in different academic terms, which implies that IWBs are not maintained on a regular basis. Moreover, they were not able to use some common Web 2.0 tools such as Word wall and Kahoot due to connection problems, and hence their teaching was negatively affected. One participant (Hasan) shared his experiences by reproaching as follows.

Smart boards do not work properly, and they are not repaired. Therefore, neither other teachers nor we can use the technology as we want in our classes. We currently live in the age of technology; therefore, it is impossible to understand this situation.

Another common problem stated by the participants was the frequent occurrence of idle classes. This problem particularly occurred in high schools during a few months towards the end of spring terms. Participants stated that their mentor teachers did not teach English due to several reasons such as students' unwillingness to listen to them and 12th graders' preparation for the university entrance exam. Since this occurred very frequently during all classes in the practicum (six hours), teacher candidates argued that they could not fully benefit from practicum as it was supposed to be. They were told by their mentors to be still present in the classroom, sit at the back silently, and deal with any thing they wanted such as reading. In this respect, participants stated that they were very disappointed with the practicum, as it was literally time-wasting for them. Melis shared her experience as follows.

The teacher did not teach regularly. We hardly ever had the opportunity to observe our mentor and benefit from her experience. Everyone, including the teacher, students and us, spent time individually during the classes we participated in. Since there were no classes, we studied for our own exams in the practicum.

Discussion

This research examined the experiences of teacher candidates in practicum schools in terms of benefits, mentor teachers, and problematic issues. The findings revealed that practicum provided

teacher candidates with considerable benefits such as observation of classes and examination of various factors such as teaching strategies, classroom management, and teaching materials. From this view point, the findings are quite in line with the previous studies (İşcan, 2017; Şimşek & Müftüoğlu, 2017; Tan, 2008). In addition to observation, actual teaching experience and individualised feed back were regarded by participants as a valuable opportunity to get familiarised with teaching and improve themselves as professional teachers. In this way, they were able to more clearly understand what was applicable in practice compared to theoretical aspects. As Guyton and Mc Intyre (1990) emphasised, their mentor teachers' role and feed back were useful in this process. Teacher candidates' awareness of difference between theory and practice was also found in Tan (2008) and Şimşek and Müftüoğlu (2017). While some participants believed the difference to be useful to customise the theory accordingly, others found it challenging for their own teaching. Regardless of what trainees viewed it, it could be argued that practicum served a good tool to enable future teachers to combine theory and practice by customising the theory accordingly (Wilson & Scalise, 2006).

However, although some mentor teachers were helpful and friendly as well as served good role models, some trainees had very negative experiences with their mentors particularly in state schools. They highlighted several points including being absent during trainees' teaching, providing insufficient constructive feed back, lack of planning, and setting a bad teacher example due to using obsolete teaching strategies (e.g., GTM). Although practicum is considered as a valuable opportunity for trainees to strengthen their teaching skills with the help of mentors (Randall, 1992; Richards & Crookes, 1988), the opposite occurs in this specific case, since trainees adopt mentors' undesired way of teaching such as GTM and long explanations with excessive L1 use. Dissatisfaction with mentor teachers were also reported in previous studies in various contexts such as Hong Kong (Gan, 2013), Rwanda (Otara, 2014), USA (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010), and Turkey (Genç, 2016; Sarıçoban, 2008). Lack of constructive feed back was one of the most common problems that

trainees encountered among these studies, including the current one. It was also one of five recurrent problematic issues recently highlighted by Uysal and Savaş (2021). Therefore, it implies that similar problems still occur despite the implementation of new practicum curriculum for teacher candidates.

The findings also showed several other problematic issues during practicum. The technological infrastructure was not sufficient in one of the practicum schools and nine of the participants were negatively affected by this situation. Although they learned how to integrate technology into language teaching by means of several ways such as Web 2.0 tools, they were not able to put this knowledge into practice properly. This could be regarded as a novel finding, as it did not emerge in previous studies which investigated the implementation of practicum. It has got important implications to maintain the high efficiency of practicum for teacher candidates.

As a final challenge that trainees had during practicum, the findings indicated a serious problem, idle classes, that has a high potential to inhibit the achievement of practicum objectives. It particularly occurred in the classes with the twelfth graders in the spring term during which high school students were reluctant to have class but wanted to study for the university entrance exam. The participants stated that they did not benefit from the practicum at all during this period and regarded it as a total waste of time, as they only sat in the classroom silently and did nothing else.

According to the findings of this study, some challenges and problems encountered by teacher candidates are not previously stated (e.g., idle classes) while most of them are recurrent ones which were already highlighted in literature (e.g., mentor teachers' lack of guidance and insufficient feedback). Therefore, it could be inferred that the revisions on teacher practicum initiated by CHE in 2021-2022 have not made sufficient contribution to the solutions of long-lasting practicum-related problems. In this regard, it could be useful to deal with the more detailed issues in practicum rather than focusing on cosmetic changes such as changing the name of practicum module offered in teacher education programs. Several recommendations are

provided below to overcome the above mentioned problems.

Recommendations and Conclusion

As previously highlighted, the role of mentor teachers is considerably important for trainees to improve their teaching skills in practicum (Randall, 1992). Since trainees are constantly seek support from and interact with them, it is vital to provide mentor teachers with trainings on giving efficient guidance and support to trainees. More over, efficiency of practicum could be assessed on a regular basis through feedback from different stakeholders including trainees and mentors in order to ensure high quality of practicum in various schools.

The findings showed that choice of school is very important, as not all schools were appropriate in terms of technology infrastructure for the trainees to develop their skills. In this regard, the most convenient schools that could best serve trainees' development could be selected as practicum schools. Alternatively, IWBs and Internet connection should be maintained regularly so that trainees can make use of them at maximum level. Furthermore, the occurrence of idle classes is a big problem for trainees in the practicum, as it is time-wasting for them. Therefore, it is important to eliminate this problem by making necessary regulations or having trainees observe and teach in lower grades other than the twelfth grades in high schools.

This study is not without any limitations, though. First, it is a small-scale study comprising only one university and a few practicum school contexts with relatively small number of participants. More studies in different contexts with larger number of participants should be conducted to improve the implementation of practicum so that teacher candidates benefit from efficiently. Moreover, this study entirely focused on teacher candidates' viewpoints. It would be important to obtain mentor teachers' and consulting academics' perspectives to verify the data and achieve a better understanding of the effectiveness of practicum.

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