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A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE: FROM THE VIEW PRESERVICE EFL TEACHERS

Research Article

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Abstract

Practicum is regarded to be a pivotal component of initial teacher education programs and such a considerable significance taken on by practicum necessitates more research regardless of the abundance of research on it. This case study explores a) how eight preservice EFL teachers (PEFLTs) evaluated the overall effectiveness of the practicum they took in the last term of the English language teacher education program they were enrolled in, b) the impact of keeping diaries and filling out self-evaluation forms on their professional learning, c) to what extent the courses offered at the program supported them in real teaching, and d) what they would change in the structure of practicum if they had the chance to do so. The results yielded by the inductive analysis of the data drawn from focus group interviews, the data from diaries and self-evaluation forms showed that PEFLTs deemed practicum experience crucial for both their professional learning and putting subject knowledge into practice while stating a set of negative experiences they had in practicum. The findings also reported that reflecting on practicum experiences helped them enhance their professional learning. Besides, the courses taken at university were not recognized as adequate to prepare PEFLTs for real teaching.

Keywords: associate teachers, initial teacher education program, PEFLTs, PEFLTs' evaluations of practicum

1. Introduction

Practicum constitutes a pivotal part of English language teacher education programs like the place held by it in other teacher education programs as it affords an opportunity for preservice teachers (PTs) to work out what is covered with respect to theoretical knowledge in the teacher education program they are enrolled, and to delve into what happens in real classroom environments (Gebhard, 2009; Grundnoff, 2011; Farrell, 2012; Ulvik and Smith, 2011), which is highly unlikely to be comprehended in the absence of teaching practice in real classes. Maintaining the value of practical knowledge, Ulvik and Smith (2011) contend that practical knowledge cannot be transmitted from one person to another, but held by the individual, giving prominence to the teaching practices of PTs on practicum. Moreover, what is theoretically learned at universities may not be applied to real settings, which is revealed in the study conducted by Kömür (2010), because teaching knowledge test and teaching competency scale administered before the practicum experience of PTs showed that all the participants scored above average. Nonetheless, the results yielded by open-ended questionnaire indicated that PTs could not use their teaching knowledge in a real class.

Aside from undergoing real teaching, teaching practice may engage PTs in pondering how the context in which they work might impinge on their instructional practices, because as has been posited by Borg (2009), the context in which PTs work occupies no less significant

place than what they think and believe in making sense of why they do what they do. Learning to teach is a situated and contextual activity (Gebhard, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). PTs keep extending their knowledge of teaching and/or fine-tuning their teaching in accord with disparate contexts in regard to students with diverse needs and interests, workplaces, and expectations of schools and the ministry of education etc. One of the studies reporting on the influence of contextual factors on school-based learning is conducted by Kokkinos & Stavropoulos (2016). The concern of that study was probing the relationship among “perceived practicum-related stressors, perceived general practicum stress, trait anxiety, epistemological beliefs, conceptions about teaching and learning, general and teaching self-efficacy and dimensions of burnout among student teachers” (p. 553). The findings revealed that all burnout dimensions were related to contextual factors rather than the personal ones, which requires attention to be ascribed to the contextual factors and their improvement. By the same token, the participants in the research carried out by Ulvik, Helleve and Smith (2018) had practicum experiences displaying variations in accord with different placement schools.

1.1.The influence of practicum on PTs’ professional development and teacher identity

The effect of practicum on PTs’ professional development and teacher identity has been examined in a number of studies, one of which is the research done by Choy, Wong, Goh and Low (2014). The results of the study aiming to reveal professional development of PTs during three practicum placements yielded the gradual development of PTs from observing experienced teachers towards independent teaching in a gradually structured practicum program, in which they found the opportunity to implement theoretical knowledge in teaching practice. Cohen, Hoz and Kaplan (2013) reviewed 113 studies on practicum experience, which indicated that activities and goals in diverse practicum settings impacted PTs’ teaching competencies, and enabled gaining familiarity with diverse student groups. In that study, the researchers also accentuated the importance of undertaking initiatives to offer a better field experience in teacher education programs in conjunction with schools. The role played by practicum in PTs’ professional development is also investigated by Gebhard (2009), according to whom practicum experiences cater for both aiding student teachers in unearthing and comprehending their teaching values, and acquiring skills to resort to in their prospective professional lives. Grundnoff (2011) examined perceptions of 12 beginning primary teachers regarding the effect of practicum experience on preparing PTs for their transition from initial teacher education to first year teaching. The results of the study showed that the participants viewed practicum as a vital constituent of the initial teacher education program; nevertheless, they stated that what they experienced in teaching practice was not always sufficient in order to assist them in their transition to real teaching considering the non-negligible expectations for PTs such as imitating associate teachers, and the inadequacies in practicum in regard to figuring out the complexities of being a teacher.

The role played by practicum in the development of PTs’ teacher identities has been scrutinized by scarce number of researchers one of whom is Trent (2013). The likelihood of conflicts over how PTs positioned themselves as teachers and were positioned by schools was pointed out in that study as a factor carrying weight in the development of PTs’ teacher identities. The probability of encountering contradictions in a variety of issues such as the ones between PTs’ and associate teachers’ approach towards teaching, and between the ideal lesson in their minds and the contextual factors to hinder its realization was presented in the research by Nguyen (2016) as something to serve a function in the development of PTs’ teacher identities. PTs’ emotions that presumably affect what they will do in the classroom environment in their prospective professional lives also account for the development of their

teacher identities (Yuan & Lee, 2015; Yuan & Lee, 2016). The research undertaken by Yuan & Lee (2016) examined how a PEFLT negotiated conflicting emotions he had during his teaching practice, which induced the formation of his teaching identity.

1.2. Reflection-in and -on practicum experience

The place of reflection in teacher education programs has been investigated by Wright (2010) in a study the concern of which was exploring whether microblogging supports PTs in developing their self-reflective practices. The results revealed posting to Twitter about their practicum experiences helped them with respect to reading other people's posts and receiving support from other PTs when they encountered any challenge in their practical teaching experience. Reflecting on practicum has also been examined by Zhu (2011) in a research paper exploring PTs' reflection-in and on practices. The results showed that PTs engaged more in reflection-on action, yet less in reflection-in action, as a result of the presence of lots of issues involved in teaching. Zhu (ibid) highlighted the need for more practical instructions and creating more opportunities for reflection during teaching practice. Likewise, in the study by Makina (2019), the need for aiding PTs in conducting reflective practices is emphasized. The research carried out by Jones and Ryan (2014) reported on the significance of getting PTs to engage in reflective practices by using online discussion forums to reflect on their practicum practices. The results demonstrated the inclination among the participants towards participating more in unstructured forms of online discussions in comparison to those that are structured, and postings by lecturers on discussion forums did not adequately stimulate more reflection in the forums by PTs.

1.3. Importance of increasing collaboration between schools and universities

The extant literature on practicum involves considerable number of research on the necessity for enhancing collaboration between schools and universities (Karen & Beckford, 2010; Montecinos, Walker & Maldonado 2015). In a study carried out by Grudnoff, Haigh and Mackisack (2017), the purpose was examining the impact of a reframed practicum structure as to redefined roles of the parties on practicum and heightened collaboration between schools and universities on the outcome for school and university participants. The findings showed that the collaborative work carried out by schools and universities generated a practicum model enabling reinforcement in professional engagement and learning for all the parties, teachers, teacher educators and student teachers.

The study conducted by Allen and Wright (2014) uncovers PTs' views concerning what factors impede and allow the incorporation of theory and practice in practicum. The results of this study reported that the participants valued linking theory and practice. Another finding was the emphasis being laid on the necessity for transparent understanding of the responsibilities of school and university staff. Preparedness of colleague teachers and involvement of university supervisors in the process of teaching practice was emphasized by the participants too. Another finding related to the need for the collaboration between school and university was about integrating coursework assessment into practicum because in the context of that study, only colleague teachers assessed student teachers' performance on practicum while university supervisors had no say on the assessment of their progress.

The findings of the study undertaken by Karen and Beckford (2010) highlighted the significance of determining the roles of associate teachers through collaboration with faculty staff. Farrell (2012) underscores the realization of such collaboration between university and school by bringing to the forefront the value of training mentor teachers on how to explicate their intuitive knowledge of teaching to novice teachers, because according to him, this could be achieved by collaboration between schools and teacher education programs. The importance of collaboration between schools and universities has been emphasized in another

study by Yan & He (2010), the findings of which indicated the need for a change in the existing model of practicum via transforming the existing model into a model that contains joint work of school and university.

1.4. The role of university supervisors and associate teachers in practicum

Barahona (2019) researched the role of supervisors in initial teacher education, which revealed that supervisors functioned as quality assurers of teacher candidates' subject knowledge, and their accurate application of theories and methods; however, they needed to act as specialists supporting PTs in optimizing their learning. Another implication stated in that study was the necessity of professional development for supervisors with regard to their supervisory practices. The role adopted by a university supervisor was described by Donovan and Canon (2018) in the following words "someone who visits preservice teachers infrequently and checks the boxes for the university" (p. 6). The researchers pointed out the requirement for timely and effective support provided to PTs by university supervisors. In the study carried out by Barahona (2019), the participating university supervisors had limited school experience, which was believed to be a factor adversely influencing the effectiveness of the supervision provided to PTs. Another striking issue specified in that research is that university supervisors had to accept to work as a supervisor in the university at which they were employed due to the absence of other available staff to take over their role. In that study, the findings also reported that some supervisors adopted a directive style of supervision in order to support PTs in their teaching practices and meet the standards set for them. The indispensable role played by university supervisors was exhibited in the research conducted by Başıyurt & Tüzel (2009). PEFLTs were subjected to language awareness training to tackle with the difficulties with target language use they faced as doing their practicums, and the results suggested the need for working on the challenges PTs might confront in real teaching environments in place of leaving those problems to be resolved as they gained more experiences in teaching.

The impact of mentor teachers on the effectiveness of practicum experience has been examined in the research conducted by Maddamsetti (2018), the findings of which showed that mentor teachers played a crucial role in the success of practicum experience in that their willingness to supervise PTs and to engage in open conversations had a facilitative effect on enhancing PT learning. Thomas (2017) produced a paper by taking into account his own experiences of accompanying PTs in their practicum experiences, using interview transcripts obtained from participants and critical discussions with other scholars in teacher education. Unfolding probable incongruities between how a PT viewed practicum, and university supervisors and mentor teachers deemed it, the researcher accentuated the need for emotional and effective support provided to PTs during their field experiences and suggested collaboration between university supervisors and mentor teachers, in that in doing so, they could support each other in helping PTs strive for responding to the challenges they encountered on practicum.

The uncontroversial importance held by practicum in teacher education warrants expounding how practicum is conducted in diverse contexts and what initiatives could be undertaken to maximize the effectiveness of practicum for PTs. This study, which is highly likely to contribute to the extant literature on practicum taking into consideration the absence of an in-depth evaluation of practicum by PEFLTs, aims at finding out answers to the below-mentioned research questions:

- How do PEFLTs evaluate the overall effectiveness of their practicum experiences?
- To what degree do keeping diaries and filling out self-evaluation forms contribute to PEFLTs' professional learning?



- To what extent do the courses offered by English language teacher education program support PEFLTs in practicum?
- What would PSEFLTs change in the current structure of practicum if they had a chance to do so?

2. Method

This study was designed as a case study, because as has been maintained by Neuman (2007), “in case study research, a researcher examines, in depth, many features of a few cases over a duration of time with very detailed, varied, and extensive data, often in a qualitative form” (p. 20). Similar to what is purported by Neuman (2007), Creswell (2007) states that case studies necessitate the use of a range of information source for detailed exploration of the topic.

2.1. Participants

The study participants, who were selected by using convenience sampling, were eight senior PEFLTs. The average age of the participants was 22,5. Two of the participants were female whilst the remaining were male. All the participants were enrolled in the last term of the English language teacher education program of a state university. The participants were placed in the same Anatolian high school, which is a mixed-sex school providing education after secondary school for at least four years. Every two participants were mentored by the same associate teacher.

2.2. Context of the study

This study was carried out in a state university in Turkey where teaching practice course is offered in the last year of English language teacher education programs. The purpose of the course is explicated by Turkish Ministry of National Education (2018) as aiding PTs in gaining teaching skills, teaching a lesson or more than one lesson in a planned way, and discussing and evaluating practicum practices. The ministry puts an emphasis on the multifaceted nature of teaching practice program by drawing the attention to the fact that the program is comprised of a process of planning, exploration, research, participation, analysis, evaluation and development. Since practicum practices are planned and implemented with the collaborative work of university supervisors and associate teachers, the evaluation of PTs’ performance on practicum similarly needs to be conducted via a joint work by university supervisors and associate teachers. Teaching practice course is offered in the 7th and 8th terms of teacher education programs, and in each term, PTs are to teach at least 4 times under the guidance of associate teachers. University supervisors have to visit practicum school minimum 4 times to observe PTs’ practicum practices, and to carry out evaluations with associate teachers and PTs. PTs’ performance on teaching practice is evaluated both by university supervisors and associate teachers.

2.3.Data Collection Tools

2.3.1. Diary

The participants were asked to keep a diary on each day they went to the school they were placed with an eye to jotting down about from what went well/did not go well in lessons either taught by their associate teachers or by them to any noteworthy incident about students,

associate teachers or the operation of the school system. The diaries kept by the participants during their practicum experiences lasting 14 weeks were submitted to the researcher. The diaries provided invaluable information about participants' field experiences.

2.3.2. Self-evaluation form

The participants, supposed to teach at least four times on practicum, were asked to fill out a self-evaluation form adapted from the one introduced by Cambridge assessment international education (2018). The form subsumes a number of subsections: planning/preparation, physical environment, relations with students, lesson pacing, student motivation, use of resources, assessment and homework. The self-evaluation form contained a part entitled "key points for action" under each subsection allowing a space for the participants to write down what plans they had in their minds to strengthen their weaknesses in the concerned subsection.

2.3.3. Focus group interviews

Following the completion of the practicum, the researcher organized focus group interviews with the participants to evaluate their practicum experiences because as maintained by Creswell (2012), focus group interviews could yield better results on the condition that "interviewees are similar to each other and cooperative with each other" (p. 218). The PEFLTs in this study were in the same group in the department and had known each other for almost four years; furthermore they had begun to talk to each other about their experiences of practicum before the researcher told them to do so. The participants were divided into two groups and the interviews with the two groups were carried out on different days. The main purpose of dividing the participants into two groups was ensuring to get detailed responses from each participant and not to lengthen the duration of the interview. Each interview in which four questions were asked lasted 90-110 minutes. The interview was video recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

2.4. Procedure

School attachments of the participants were completed before the commencement of the eighth term, during which this study was conducted. The researcher, the university supervisor of the participants as well, had an informal meeting with the participants prior to the outset of the study to inform them about the importance of practicum in their professional learning and to provide them detailed information concerning the content of practicum and what was expected of them in the time they would spend on practicum. The researcher additionally told them to keep a diary every day they went to the school, and to evaluate their teaching on the day they did it not only by making entries in their diaries but also filling out the self-evaluation form. The university supervisor accompanied the participants on their first day on practicum and met the associate teachers and the principle of the school. The participants went to the school two half-days in each week for 14 weeks, marking the duration of the teaching practice.

2.5. Data Analysis

With a view to analyzing the transcribed data gathered from the focus group interview, general inductive approach was adopted, which is described by Thomas (2006) in the succeeding words: "the general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings" (p. 1). Coding was carried out by two researchers, one of whom is the researcher. The inter-rater

reliability was calculated by using the formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), and 85% agreement was found between coders, indicating sufficient agreement between coders (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To maintain the credibility of this qualitative research, which is significant to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher maintained the contact with the participants and spent sufficient time with them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Meriam, 1995), provided feedback to the participants on the lesson plans they prepared, had open conversations with them about the things that worked well in classroom environment, and tried to generate solutions to the problems they had with their students and/or associate teachers. In addition, triangulation was achieved by using three different data collection tools. Moreover, member checks were realized by sharing the transcript of the interview with the participants to ensure that the words in the transcript were a projection of what they had in their minds. The data collected from diaries and self-evaluation forms was utilized to evidence what was found out from the analysis of the focus group interview.

3. Findings

3.1. Overall evaluation of the effectiveness of practicum

The content analysis of the participants' responses in the focus group interviews in relation to how they would explain the effectiveness of their practicum experiences revealed that the participants had both positive and negative experiences in practicum; therefore, the responses given by the participants are divided into two categories as positive and negative experiences and the themes that emerged from the content analysis are presented. For the purpose of supporting the developed themes, diary entries and participants' evaluations in self-evaluation forms are shared.

3.1.1. Positive experiences

Putting what is learned theoretically into practice

All the participants in this study stated during the focus group interviews that practicum gave them the chance to practice what they theoretically learned in the department. Below are the two participants' comments on the effect of practicum on finding the opportunity to implement subject knowledge in real classrooms that epitomize those of others and one participant's diary entry:

I found the chance to see if or not the methods, approaches, theories and classroom management techniques we learned in the department really worked when teaching English. If this chance had not been offered to me, a question mark over the usefulness of everything we learned in three and a half years would stay in my mind. (PEFLT 3)

I think I faced the realities. I say realities because I was in a real classroom with real students and problems. What I learned in the department would be meaningless if I hadn't done practicum. I believe that practicum constitutes 60% of teacher education program and weighs more than theoretical knowledge. (PEFLT 7)

Today, I taught a lesson for the first time. It was very exciting for me. The subject was present perfect tense. I used the smart board to show past participle forms of the verbs and prepared a worksheet for the students. They were all interested in the lesson and listened to me carefully. It was a good experience for me, of course I made mistakes but I liked being a teacher. (Diary entry-PEFLT 1)

Developing self-confidence

Whilst evaluating their experiences in practicum, the participants expressed the impact of practicum on developing self-confidence as regards teaching. The participants noted that teaching practice helped them gain self-confidence.

I was thinking about whether or not I could teach English to real students. I am saying real students because we all microtaught last year but while microteaching, our friends listened to us carefully and gave answers to all the questions we asked. Because of this, I have always doubted if I had the ability to teach and practicum helped me have self – confidence, now I can say I can teach English. (PEFLT 2)

3.1.2. Negative experiences

Not being valued by other teachers

The analysis of the data revealed that the participants had some concerns about the way teachers approached them on practicum. Participants' conceptions of this issue are typified by the comments of one of the participants and one diary entry.

At breaks, I wanted to be in contact with my associate teacher but starting from my first day on practicum, teachers, not only mine but also other teachers, did not want to communicate with PTs. We used to sit in one of the corners of the teacher's room whereas associate teachers were in another one. This made me feel like I was not valued. I would be one of them only four months later, but they did not accept me as one of them. (PEFLT 6)

Today, I wanted to talk to my mentor about immediate correction of students' pronunciation mistakes. At 3rd break, I approached her in the teacher's room to talk about the best way for correcting students' pronunciation mistakes, but she said she was too busy and had to do document work and she did not tell me when she would be available to share her ideas about the issue. I really felt worthless. (Diary entry-PEFLT 7)

Disappointment at how English was taught

In the interview, the participants voiced their disappointment at how English was taught to students. Statements of one participant typify other participants' perceptions concerning this issue.

We had courses in the department on teaching language skills, materials development and testing. I was shocked when I saw how the teacher who mentored me was teaching English. She used GTM in almost all the lessons but in the courses we took in the department, we were encouraged to use communicative language teaching and engage students in pair and group works. When I talked to her to learn about why she used GTM, she told me: "forget about the things you have learnt at university, here is the real world". (PEFLT 5)

In addition to what was stated by the participants in the focus group interview, the diary entries presented below depict the disappointment felt by the participants at how students were taught English.

My mentor always speaks Turkish in lessons. She even greets students in Turkish but I think if a teacher wants to teach students how to speak English, the first thing the teacher needs to do is speaking English because we are a model for our students. The teacher also never uses pair or group work but without collaboration among students how they can they improve their speaking skills? (Diary entry-PEFLT 3)



This week is my fourth week on practicum, but the teacher is just using the coursebook and focusing on grammar. She does not consider students' individual differences and prepare materials that can appeal to them. (Diary entry- PEFLT 4)

The teacher taught simple past tense today. She wrote the rules on the board, subject + verb 2 +object. It was boring, extremely boring. (Diary entry-PEFLT 6)

Not getting adequate feedback from associate teachers

Another commonly stated negative experience in practicum is not receiving sufficient feedback from associate teachers. Two comments presented below represent the common conception among the participants.

I can say that I haven't got any feedback from my associate teacher. I really do not understand how a PT could learn how to teach better if he does not learn what he needs to improve in his teaching practices. (PEFLT 4)

All the feedback I got from my associate teacher was about classroom management and time management yet she never told me about the effectiveness of the techniques I used to teach reading or whatever I taught in the lesson. (PEFLT 8)

3.2.The impact of keeping diaries and filling out self-evaluation forms on PEFLT's professional learning

Contributing to improvement in PEFLT's teaching skills

All the participants articulated that keeping diaries, filling out self-evaluation forms, and referring back to them at times led to development in their teaching skills owing to a number of reasons encapsulating having heightened awareness of the mistakes they or their associate teachers made as teaching and of the areas in which they needed to improve themselves.

I think keeping diaries and filling out questionnaires developed me professionally as a PEFLT. I evaluated my teaching by filling out the questionnaire after teaching lessons, and while I was reading the items in the form I evaluated myself better because it gave me the chance to think about what did not go well and what I could do to improve myself in those areas. (PSEFLT 2)

The comment written down by one of the participants in the "key points for action" part of the self-evaluation form could make it clear how filling out self-evaluation forms contributed to their professional learning.

Even though the students were engaged from the beginning till the end of the lesson, I did not establish expectations for the class at the beginning of the lesson but I will do that for every lesson from now on. (Self-evaluation form-PEFLT 8)

Helping PEFLT's develop self-confidence

Another theme emerged out of the content analysis is that PEFLT's gained more self-confidence as a consequence of keeping diaries. The extract given below exemplifies the perception of other participants regarding gaining self-confidence by virtue of keeping diaries.

I think the most important advantage of keeping diaries is gaining self-confidence because I did so. I kept reading my diary entries and the thing I realized in my first entries is that I had lots of problems addressing students, coping with time constraints, giving students' enough wait time etc. But reading the entries I made towards the end of practicum showed

me that I had overcome most of the problems. This helped me gain self-confidence. Now, I guess I will be a good English teacher. (PEFLT-1)

3.3.The extent to which the courses they took in the program were sufficient to prepare them for teaching practice

Apart from few courses, useless in real teaching

According to the participants, except few courses in the department, other courses did not aid them in getting ready for teaching in real settings. The participants noted that there was almost no correlation between the courses they had taken at university and what actually took place on practicum in regard to the realities of teaching in real classroom environments, ranging from hardships in teaching crowded classes to predominantly used GTM and testing-based teaching.

We took a course on teaching methodologies and we learnt about communicative language teaching, silent way, total physical response and many other approaches and methods but in real classrooms, I saw that GTM was used. I mean only grammar was taught and my associate teacher told me to teach grammar though what I had in my mind was totally different because I wanted to use communicative language teaching but my associate teacher told me not to lose time and grammar would be asked on the upcoming exams. (PEFLT 3)

We took a course on literature and language teaching but I had no chance to apply what I had learnt on that course because the content of English exams was already determined and grammar would be asked on exams. Therefore, let alone using literary works in English lessons, I was discouraged when I said that I wanted to design a lesson to teach listening. (PEFLT 8)

Not sufficient to teach how to design lessons

Five of the participants stated that the courses they took at university did not teach them how to prepare lesson plans. The comment below represents the common conception of the participants.

I had serious problems with preparing an appropriate lesson plan because we learnt to write scenarios in lesson plans in the department, but the scenarios I produced never occurred in classes with real students. (PEFLT 2)

3.4.Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of practicum

Training associate teachers on how to mentor PEFLTs well

The need for educating associate teachers on how to be good associate teachers was one of the themes that developed from the content analysis of the responses of the participants to the question of what they would do to improve the effectiveness of practicum for PEFLTs in focus group interviews.

I believe only the teachers who really want to mentor PTs should be associate teachers because otherwise they do not put enough effort into training PTs. They just have us teach lesson for four times but they do not give feedback on our performance, they do not communicate with us, and they do not value us either. (PEFLT 4)

Associate teachers should be subjected to training on how to be a good associate teacher and informed about their responsibilities and I believe that PTs should be given the right to

evaluate the performance of associate teachers, and by doing so, associate teachers may try harder to be a good mentor. (PEFLT 6)

Teaching more on practicum

All the participants verbalized the necessity for teaching more on practicum. The succeeding statements by one participant typify those of others.

I believe that we must teach more lessons on practicum. For example, I taught just four lessons and this was not enough for me. I know that on practicum we have the chance to observe our mentors but I believe I can learn to teach better by teaching not just observing. For this reason, if I had the power to change the structure of practicum, I would make PTs teach more during their practicum experiences. (PEFLT 5)

Extending the time allocated to teaching practice.

Another theme developed during content analysis is the urge to extend the time allocated to practicum. The extract below illustrates participants' conceptions of this suggestion.

I think the time we spent on practicum, I mean one semester, is not adequate to learn to teach and to be a good English teacher. If I had an opportunity, I would get graduate students to continue taking practicum for one more year. According to their performance on practicum during that time span, I would make a decision about the teachers deserving to work as a teacher at schools because as you know well the criteria for being allocated to work as a teacher include passing the base point and the interview. (PEFLT 1)

4. Discussion

The findings on the overall effectiveness of practicum yielded that all the participants viewed practicum effective in giving the participants a chance to implement the theoretical knowledge conveyed at university in real classroom environments. This finding aligns those of the research undertaken by Kömür (2010), Ulvik, Helleve and Smith (2018), and Choy, Goh and Low (2014) as the results in those studies also indicated that the participating PTs evaluated practicum as a medium for practicing theoretical knowledge acquired at university. Practicum serves a vital role in teacher education because what teaching is and its complexities are can be contemplated in a more comprehensive manner while teaching real students in real classes. Another finding on positive experiences in practicum was that the participants could develop self-confidence in teaching by the medium of teaching real students. The participants realized that they could teach English and improve their teaching skills when they engaged in teaching on practicum. This result appears to be parallel to the ones reported in the research by Gebhard (2009) because that study also revealed that practicum was a means for PTs to acquire teaching skills to use in their future professional lives. The results reported not only in this study but also the others suggest the fundamental importance of practicum in initial teacher education and display the necessity for probing different ways to augment the quality of practicum.

Aside from the positive experiences gained in practicum, the findings as to the participants' overall evaluation of their practicum experiences also revealed that they confronted some problems. The participants did not feel being valued on practicum because they stated during the interview that they did not feel like being a part of the school in which they were placed and their associate teachers did not set a high value on their enthusiasm they had for making the most of practicum to be a good English teacher. This issue is a serious one and worth pondering on for so long as PEFLTs feel they belong to the school, they can

demonstrate all their teaching skills and make every effort to benefit from practicum. Not getting adequate feedback from associate teachers emerged to be another negative experience had in practicum, which is again another acute problem requiring rigorous work to be overcome. The rationale behind doing practicum is observing experienced associate teachers and practicing teaching, and by doing so, developing PEFLT's teaching skills; nonetheless, unless associate teachers provide feedback to them on their teaching, the question of how they can gain and develop teaching skills arises. Another important theme was the disappointment felt by PEFLT's once they witnessed how English was taught to students because the way English was taught was in stark contrast to what was taught theoretically to them by their teacher educators. This finding seems to parallel the research done by Trent (2013), for that study also underscored the contradictions that might arouse because of varying approaches of associate teachers and PTs towards teaching. This result also brings to the forefront the need for increasing collaboration between universities and schools, to put it in other words, between university supervisors and associate teachers. University supervisors need to follow what happens on practicum and have regular short meetings with associate teachers to talk about not forcing students to teach by imitating their instructional practices because as mentioned by the PEFLT's in this study, PEFLT's might want to implement communicative language teaching whereas associate teachers might expect them of applying GTM in lessons merely due to the content of exams and struggles with time limitations.

The results of this study showed that keeping diaries and filling out self-evaluation forms supported the participating PEFLT's in developing their teaching skills. By keeping diaries and filling out self-evaluation forms, the participants reflected on what they experienced on each day in practicum. The studies carried out by Jones and Ryan (2014), and Zhu (2011) also suggested engaging PTs in reflective practices so as to enhance their professional learning, which is in line with the findings in this study. Reflecting on field experiences can support PEFLT's in comprehending what works and does not work with specific group of students. Furthermore, PEFLT's could raise their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in teaching by writing entries in diaries and reading them occasionally in that they could question if or not they succeeded in overcoming challenges they encountered in the first lesson they taught and strengthened their weaknesses. Additionally, on the condition that PEFLT's are promoted to reflect on their teaching practices in practicum and recognize the crucial place of reflection in professional development, they might carry on reflective practices in the forthcoming years of their profession.

This research attempted to answer the question of to what degree the courses taken in the program helped PSEFLT's get prepared for practicum as well. The findings indicated that the courses they took in the department were not by and large adequate to equip them with the skills they needed to teach in practicum because as suggested in the research conducted by Kömür (2010), participants could not implement what they theoretically learned at university. For this reason, the courses in English language teacher education programs need to be reframed to be able to educate PEFLT's about the realities of real classrooms and how to deal with the problems they are likely to encounter such as the difficulty they may face when applying communicative language teaching approach in a classroom consisting of 50 students. However, the problem is that an indispensable number of university supervisors have never taught at a primary, secondary or high school, and thus, they may lack the ability of designing courses keeping in mind what happens in the real world. Considering the findings in Barahona's study (2019), there seems to be parallelisms with that study and this one because Barahona (ibid) also highlighted the necessity for university supervisors to develop their supervisory practices as the university supervisors taking part in the study had limited school experience which unfavorably affected their supervisory practices. This could be reduced to minimum by frequent visits of university supervisors to the school, and

observing as many lessons as possible to familiarize themselves more with what happens in the real world. By so doing, they might enrich the content of their courses and provide alternative solutions and strategies that could help PEFLTs cope with the problems they might confront. Another result under the subheading of the effect of the courses taken at university on practicum is the inadequacy of teacher education programs in preparing PEFLTs for designing lesson plans. Since planning a lesson is the primary and a pivotal step in conducting an effective lesson, courses aiming to help PEFLTs learn to teach language skills could provide a chance for university supervisors to work on preparing lesson plans with PEFLTs.

The last research question was added to the study to figure out PEFLTs' recommendations for ameliorating the effectiveness of practicum. The findings revealed participants' complaints about the insufficiency of associate teachers in providing feedback to PEFLTs on their instructional practices, and not having open conversations with them. The research carried out by Maddamsetti (2018) is in parallel with this study in terms of the results as the participants in that study emphasized how associate teachers' willingness to mentor PTs, and having open conversations with them had a facilitative effect on the success of practicum experience on the part of PTs. The point deserving contemplation is the willingness of associate teachers to mentor PTs; therefore, it is of high significance to select associate teachers out of competence not convenience. Additionally, associate teachers should be trained on what is expected of them on practicum and how they could fulfill their responsibilities. There needs to be a close relationship between associate teachers, PEFLTs and university supervisors to learn about each party's expectations from the other/s. Such an increased collaboration between associate teachers, PEFLTs and university supervisors may initiate the process of giving adequate and effective feedback to PEFLTs, and bridge the gap, if any, between how associate teachers and PEFLTs view practicum. Likewise, Farrell (2012) maintains the importance of training held for associate teachers to be a good mentor.

Being given the chance to teach more on practicum is another result yielded in the findings. The participants articulated in the interview and wrote down in diaries their need for teaching more lessons on practicum. Observing how English is taught by associate teachers can undoubtedly help PEFLTs realize what works and what does not work. Besides, they may have the opportunity to observe how students' disruptive behaviors are managed. Nonetheless, the place of practicing teaching in gaining and developing instructional skills cannot be overlooked, which bears resemblance to creating opportunities for students to speak English to learn to speak English. The more chance PEFLTs have to practice teaching, the better they can learn to teach. Succinctly, as purported by Mackinnon (2017), PTs are in need of "freedom with support".

Extending the time allocated to teaching practice was another recommendation of the study participants to ameliorate the quality of practicum for PEFLTs. Spending more time on practicum and teaching more lessons could be beneficial for PEFLTs as long as associate teachers and university supervisors do want to supervise them and are clear about their responsibilities for enhancing PEFLTs' professional learning. The suggestion made by one of the participants about integrating teacher candidates' performance on practicum into the decision process of teachers' appointment is really intriguing as practicum could be taken more seriously by all the parties involved in the procedure if PTs' performance on practicum is one of the criteria affecting the case of being appointed as a teacher. Moreover, making slight amendments in the initial teacher education program could pave the way for engaging PEFLTs in practicum practices in the spring term of the third academic year in the program, and hence, they can observe associate teachers in that term and commence to teach in the fall term of the last academic year before graduation.

5. Conclusion

The vital role played by practicum in initial teacher education programs is unequivocal taking account of the findings demonstrated in the studies carried out thus far on the investigation of PTs' practicum experiences. The results yielded in this research also reinforce the importance attached by PTs to practicum in getting ready for teaching profession. To help PEFLTs make the most of their teaching practice, teacher educators and associate teachers need to engage in collaborative work as the ultimate purpose of both parties are assumed to optimize PT learning, and in doing so, to prepare qualified teachers.



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