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# Challenges in Practicum: Pre-Service and Cooperating Teachers' Voices

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**Abstract**
Novice teachers are often found to face many difficulties when they start their profession, which may be attributed to the ineffective aspects of practicum practices conducted in teacher training institutions. For this reason, one possible way to eliminate the problems of beginning teachers would be to improve the quality of practicum component of teacher education programs. In the hope that detection of the challenges may shed light on which aspects of practicum needs to be improved to increase quality, the present study exmained the self-reported challenges of PTs and cooperating teachers (CTs) experience during their practicum practices. Data for the study were collected in the spring term of the 2013-2014 academic year through in-depth interviews with eight PTs studying at the English Language Teaching (ELT) department of a state university in Turkey and three CTs mentoring this group of PTs. The responses indicated that there were serious concerns about practicum practices conducted in Turkey, and thus a revision of those practices was needed.
**Keywords:** Teacher education, Practicum, Pre-service teachers

## 1. Introduction

A large body of research indicated that teacher education programs fail to adequately prepare pre-service teachers (PTs) for facing real classroom (Kagan, 1992; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Novice teachers reported that they have especially difficulty in coping with problems such as classroom discipline, assessing students' work (Veenman, 1984), dealing with individual differences, relationships with parents (Vaughn, Boss & Schumm, 1997). These problems makes the teachers feel discouraged and strange from their profession.

In teacher education programs, practicum has been acknowledged as the most significant component and lying at the heart of teacher development process. It is the study where PTs "…combine teaching and nonteaching experiences" (Stoynoff, 1999, p.146). Stoynoff (1999) suggests that these experiences should be organized in the way that the knowledge and the act of teaching are effectively integrated. The effective integration can be provided through the improvement of the quality of practicum studies and thus, in a way, the possible problems experienced in the beginning of the profession can be eliminated.

One possible way to improve the quality of the practicum study would be the detection of the challenges experienced in this process. In this regard, the present study investigated the challenges that were experienced by two parties of the practicum period: PTs and cooperating teachers (CTs) mentoring them.

## 2. Literature Review

Since the present study aimed to uncover the challenges experienced by both PTs and CTs during the practicum, previous studies about practicum were reviewed and presented below under two main categories, challenges of PTs and challenges of CTs.

### *2.1. Challenges of Pre-service Teachers*

Challenges experienced by PTs have been an interest for the researchers in different settings. Most of the recent studies focus on the PTs' perspectives on practicum period of teacher education programs to detect the sources of the difficulties they encounter. For example, Murray-Harvey *et al.* (2000) invited 607 Australian students having completed their practicum studies to respond to a questionnaire to elicit information about their concerns on teaching. The concerns reported by the PTs were being observed and evaluated by the supervisor, managing the class and enforcing discipline, managing time and coping with the overall teaching workload. The participants in Gan's (2013) study also revealed that they had difficulty in experimenting innovative pedagogical practices they learned in their methodology courses, managing the class and modifying their language according to students' level. Similarly, the data in Yunus *et al.*'s (2010) study showed that the PTs had problems with students' discipline and motivation to learn language in addition to the challenge they experienced in choosing appropriate teaching methodology and strategy.

With a similar focus, Kabilan and Izzaham (2008) asked a Malaysian pre-service English language teacher to choose and reflect upon three challenging aspects of class teaching and the participant told about the challenges related to dealing with mixed ability classes, the use of mother tongue and students' expectations of teacher-centeredness. On the other hand, Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) found that school principals were not perceived by most of PTs in teacher education program in Israel as supportive during their practicum studies. The researchers

commented that this may happen because of "…little contact between student teachers and school principals during the practicum: the school as a whole is not engaged in the preparation of future teachers; it seems to be the task of specific people within the school, mainly the mentor" (p.299).

In a different way, Cook-Sather (2010) called the process of preparing to teach "translation" which means "understanding learning to teach as a continuously unfolding process of re-rendering selves and interactions" (p.188). She focused on PTs' "translation" regarding their understanding the role of teacher and their interaction with students. The data collected from four PTs attending a public high school in USA showed that PTs had difficulty in "translating" themselves into teachers and in "translating" the language that they use to communicate with students.

The studies on the challenges that PTs face in practicum period in Turkey have mostly focused on specific potential sources. For example, Tüzel and Akcan (2009) investigated the challenges of four Turkish PTs of English about target language use during their practicum and found that the PTs faced common difficulties about teaching certain grammatical structures and unknown words, modifying language according to students' level. From a broader perspective, Merç (2010) examined the problems Turkish PTs experienced in five different categories. Preparation for teaching, linguistic incompetence and decision-making were some of the challenges under the student-teacher based problems category, whereas student-based problems consisted of the ones such as students' motivation and pace. Lack of cooperation, cooperating teacher interference were found under the category of cooperating teacher-based problems. Additionally, course material, curriculum, lack of resources were identified as system/educational context-based problems and supervisor-based problems were found as supervisor interference. Similarly, Sarıçoban (2010) focused on the problems that PTs encounter specifically with reference to the students, the coursebooks, the curriculum and the classroom environment. Absence of supplementary materials such as the internet, cartoons and audio-visual aids was found to be a problem. Students' needs and interests, motivation, curiosity, discipline were found as the problems resulted from the students. It was also found that problems resulting from the curriculum were speaking skills, pronunciation activities, translation practices and grading.

*2.2. Challenges of Cooperating Teachers*

The research on CTs' opinions related to experienced challenges in practicum is limited compared to the ones of PTs. As one of the few studies exploring this issue, Kahn (2001) aimed to understand the views of CTs on what they think could enhance successful mentoring. The data were collected from 20 CTs through semi-structured interviews. The researcher found that CTs called for greater support from the university community. He further defined this support as improved communication about university expectations, more courses and inservicing for CTs, more input from CTs about the content and delivery of methods courses, and more input from CTs in the development of teacher education programs. In a similar way, Sinclair *et al.* (2006) examined the factors encourage and discourage CTs to do mentoring. The responses of 322 primary school teachers indicated that mentors thought themselves ineligible to take students because of the workload pressures. The mentors also thought that PTs were unprepared for practicum and that they had not been asked to supervise a student, and their classes were not suitable for PTs.

Approaching the problems of CTs from a different dimension, Hastings (2004) examined the perceptions of CTs related to the emotional intensity of their role. The data revealed that the CTs felt guilty because of the little time allocated for practicum, lack of progress of the pre-service teacher as well as their pupils, and choice of cooperating teacher; anxious due to the fear of being seen incorrect by the faculty supervisor about their assessment of PT; disappointed since they thought that they could not do their best for PTs; frustrated because of the pressure of work.

Sağlam (2007) aimed to investigate the challenges of 130 Turkish CTs, specifically related to the feedback process and their cooperation with PTs. The results showed that CTs contributed to PTs' development of their teaching skills, but this contribution was based on their personal experience and common sense instead of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. Similarly, Cincioğlu (2011) conducted his study to better understand the perceptions of CTs about practicum. The data showed that mentors believed they were randomly chosen, instead of being chosen according to a set of academic criteria or requirement. The mentors stated that they were not happy with the professional and financial support they got from the universities, they needed in-service training for a better mentorship and they thought that teaching for one semester was not adequate for PTs.

The review of literature has shown that the problems experienced by any parties of the practicum process have been analyzed from one side; either from CTs' perspectives or from PTs' perspectives. This arouses the need to have a more detailed insight to the challenges by approaching the issue from both PTs' and CTs' perspectives. To fulfill this need, the present study aims to investigate the challenges that both Turkish PTs and CTs experience during the practicum.

## 3. Context and Practicum Structure

The context of this study is four-year English Language Teaching (ELT) program in a university, in Istanbul,

Turkey. The ELT program, taking its current form and prescribed by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) in the 2006-2007 academic year, require students to complete courses such as language acquisition or linguistics; educational courses such as, classroom management or special education and general knowledge courses including history or research methods (Salihoglu, 2012).

As it is stated in Ministry of National Education (MoNE) reports (1998) and CHE reports (2007), practicum takes place in the last year, in the educational faculties of Turkish universities. The practicum process mainly consists of the administration of the cooperating schools, the faculty supervisor, the supervisor teachers (or CTs) in the cooperating school and supervisor lecturers from the university faculty members. The administration of cooperating schools assigns CTs and provides appropriate and effective practice teaching environment for PTs. Faculty supervisor is responsible for guiding PTs, planning and evaluating the activities that PTs do in the cooperating school and cooperation with CTs. CTs need to guide six prospective teachers at most and they are responsible for helping PTs for preparing themselves for teaching and providing them the opportunity to observe lessons of different teachers in the school. Supervisor lecturers from the university faculty members observe and mark PTs' teaching sessions.

Practicum lasts for two terms. PTs observe the classes of the teachers assigned by the cooperating school administration in the first term. In the second term, PTs need to do practice teaching and teaching sessions are designed as micro and macro sessions. A micro teaching session is a part of a whole lesson (15-20 minute of a 45 minute lesson) whereas a macro session is a whole lesson. In general, PTs need to teach for at least 24 hours in this term, a whole day or two half days each week. PTs are expected to write their experiences on a practicum report after each teaching experience and it has to be presented to the faculty supervisor to get feedback. The faculty supervisor has to make many visits to see and evaluate PTs' performance. The performance pre-service teacher is assessed by the supervisor lecturer and the supervisor teacher together. That grade is combined with the grade given by the faculty supervisor.

## 4. Methodology

### *4.1. Participants*

Eight PTs and three CTs supervising them were asked to participate in the study. PTs were 4$^{th}$ year students studying at ELT department of a state university in Istanbul, Turkey. The students, five females and three males, were doing their practicum in primary and secondary levels of different schools. For CT participant group, four CTs were contacted, but three of them accepted to take part in the study. Three female CTs all had bachelor degrees in English Language Teaching field, six to ten years experience in teaching and one to five years of experience in mentoring.

### *4.2. Data Collection and Analysis*

The data for the study were collected in the spring term of the 2013-2014 academic year, through semi-structured interviews with both PTs and their CTs. The interviews with PTs were focus-group interviews. During these interviews, open-ended questions about the challenges of PTs were asked and some prompts related to the components of practicum period, such as faculty supervisor, mentor teachers, cooperating schools and administrators, were used. Interviews with CTs were conducted with each CT separately and questions related to their expectations from PTs, the problems they experienced, their needs as a CT were asked during the interviews.

All the interviews were conducted in Turkish, native language of the participants, and took approximately thirty minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. The data then was transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. To ensure the reliability and accuracy, the researcher asked each participant to review and approve the transcripts. Transcribed data were analyzed through pattern coding in Miles and Huberman model (1994) of qualitative analysis.

## 5. Results

All participants stated that the practicum period provided them an effective understanding of the real teaching during the interviews, negative points were presented here due to the fact that the specific focus of this study is the challenges that PTs and their CTs experience in this process.

### *5.1. Challenges of PTs*

The review of interview texts in order to answer the first research question aiming to explore the challenges Turkish PTs experience during the practicum resulted in seven different categories, *the way CTs teach, CTs' attitudes, language proficiency, classroom management, the duration of the practicum and the place of the practicum in the curriculum.*

#### 5.1.1. The way CTs teach

Two PTs thought that their cooperating teacher were not qualified enough to show them the way how they should

teach. Comments coming from PTs related to their mentor teachers are presented below:

> When I learned that I would do my practicum in a private school, I thought teacher would be very effective, they would really show us how to be a good teacher. However, I see that their way of teaching is very different from the way we learn how teaching should be in our methodology courses. I think we do our practicum not to see how teaching should be, but to see what we should not do when we become a teacher. When I did my micro-teaching, I felt that I showed her what real teaching was.
>
> I really go to my cooperating school halfheartedly because my cooperating teacher is really unsuccessful in teaching. She is like a lecturer, always speaks herself, she does not ask any questions to students and she does not encourage the participation, either. I do not believe that practicum is helpful for me at all.

5.1.2. CTs' attitudes

Three of the PTs addressed their mentor teachers' threatening behaviors towards them as one of the challenges they face during their practicum studies. The following three comments indicate this challenge of PTs:

> The teachers in the cooperating school are very rude to us. For example, the first time I and my friends went to our practicum school, the teachers said that it was forbidden for us to sit in teachers' room and there was a small room upstairs allocated for us. They did not let us enter that room, they always said that we were not teachers; we were only trainees so they would call us when they needed us. They even sometimes make us do their own things, we worked for extra two hours to prepare worksheet for them to use in their classes.
>
> I really feel that they are disturbed by our presence in their classes and even in the school.
>
> Especially female teachers do not want to answer our questions and usually give short answers just to get rid of us.
>
> I think teachers do not want to accept us as their colleagues as they still see us as students. They do not allow us use their equipments and I am really curious about the reason behind this. For example, one of the teachers said to me that I could not use the photocopy machine to copy my activities and I needed to copy them somewhere outside.

5.1.3. Language proficiency

The challenges that PTs encounter related to language proficiency include two sub-categories: students' language proficiency and CTs' language proficiency.

*a. Students' language proficiency*

One of the PTs reported that the high language proficiency of the students made him concerned about his teaching, as it is indicated in his comment:

> The students in the school where I do my practicum speak English very well. Before my first micro-teaching, I had deep concerns about my pronunciation. To be honest, I still have the concern for the following teaching sessions.

*b. CTs' language proficiency*

Two PTs commented that their CTs' low language proficiency as a challenge having a negative effect on their practicum studies:

> I could not believe my ears when I heard her English. I often find her mistakes when she is speaking. I really see how I should not speak.
>
> I always listen to my mentor's English carefully and I do not think that she is proficient enough to teach English.

5.1.4. Classroom management

Two PTs addressed the classroom management problem they faced in their practicum as shown in their comments below:

> I see that the teachers teaching that class always shout at the students. The students speak to each other a lot. I also had hard times to control them during my teaching.
>
> The classes are really hard to manage and I am worried about what I will do when I become a teacher next year.
>
> Before the practicum, I was expecting that it would be very helpful for me to transfer the knowledge that I got through methodology courses I took. However, real classroom atmosphere is very different. In real classroom, I was not able to apply the things related to teaching I know. I have seen that managing a class is very different.

5.1.5. The place of the practicum in the curriculum

Following comments of PTs show that the place of the practicum in the curriculum served as a challenge for them:

> We should have started teaching in our two or third year because the last year is full of

concerns such as finding a job, taking some exams such as KPDS, YDS etc.

The time of the practicum is late to learn how to teach and to be in a real class because time is very limited to be ready for teaching. It should have been in our third year at university.

To be honest, I do not care about my practicum study now, because I have a more important concern: to find a job. If it was in last year, it would be more meaningful for me and I believe for my friends, too.

If I were to change anything related to curriculum, this would be absolutely, the time of it because teaching is not something that can be gained in a semester or a year. We need to start teaching earlier.

5.1.6. The duration of the practicum

Two PTs addressed the duration of the practicum as one of the challenges they experienced:

One semester, four or five micro-teachings, one macro-teaching. It is impossible for us to get used to students, classroom environment and teaching itself with these activities.

Teaching in a real classroom is very different. For this reason, we need more time to get used to it. Also, in the first meeting held with the faculty supervisor, she said that we should do micro-teaching as many as possible. Of course, the more micro-teaching we do, the more experience we get but I do not believe that it is fair.

*5.2. Challenges of CTs*

The interviews conducted to answer the second research question which was asked to discover the challenges Turkish CTs experience in practicum resulted in four different categories: *regulations, the duration of the practicum, inefficient feedback, and cooperation with faculty.*

5.2.1. Regulations

One of the CTs commented that the PTs did not obey the regulations in the school, which posed a problem both for them and for the schools. Her comment is given below:

There is not a serious problem with the PTs but I think they need to be more careful about the school regulations since they will be working in this kind of school next year. They need to be careful about their clothing, the school time. When they do not do so, the administrators warn us.

5.2.3. The duration of the practicum

Two CTs addressed the time spent for practicum study as a challenge. They thought that time was enough neither for them nor for the students to have an efficient practicum period as it is indicated in their comments below:

The students come to our school one day in a week; they just observe what we do in the classroom in the first semester and do some teaching in the second semester. This is not enough for them and also for us. We cannot get to know each other, they cannot get used to teaching. We cannot spend enough time to talk about the school, their thoughts, their experiences and etc.

We see the PTs only once a week. I do not feel that this time period is efficient for them to learn how to manage the students and also I do not feel that what I do with the PTs is efficient for them. It is like we do the things for the sake of doing them.

5.2.4. Inefficient feedback

Two of the CTs indicated in the interviews that they were satisfied with neither the feedback they gave to the PTs after their teaching nor the feedback they got from the PTs after they observed her class.

I think the practicum should consist of efficient reciprocal feedback sessions. In the first semester, the PTs observed us teaching. However, in that time, the PTs were so passive.

I even do not think that they have a command of criteria that they should be careful about during the observation. They should give feedback to us, we can learn from them. Also, I do not believe that the feedback I give after their teaching is effective.

5.2.5. Cooperation with faculty

One cooperating teacher interviewed stated that the cooperating teacher in the schools needed guidance on how to deal with the PTs. Her comment supporting this claim is given below:

I think faculty supervisors should have regular meeting with us on what we, as CTs, should do in the practicum. Honestly, I do not know what I really should do, what criteria I should keep in mind while giving feedback to students, what I can ask them to do for me.. etc. The faculty supervisors just come to school once a year and it is for grading, that's it.

**6. Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by PTs and CTs during the practicum process. The in-depth interviews conducted with both parties of practicum have unearthed several important hindrances on the

efficacy of the practicum.

First of all, PTs perceive classroom management as a challenge in their practicum as this problem was also documented by many other studies (Murray-Harvey *et al.*, 2000; Kabilan & Izzaham, 2008; Yunus *et al*., 2010; Gan, 2013). Since the practicum is the first time the PTs face with the students, they have difficulty in deciding on how to behave towards the students, how to deal with a problem occurred during their teaching. This alert the need to pay close attention to this issue by faculty supervisors during the training. Another challenge stated by PTs is the language proficiency of students. In contrast with Tüzel and Akcan (2009) and Gan (2013) who found that PTs have difficulty in simplifying their language for students to understand themselves, this study found that students who were highly proficient in English made PTs feel nervous during their teaching. They especially have fear of not being able to answer the question of a student and mispronouncing a word when speaking to them. This situation can actually be common for PTs who are doing their practicum studies in very competitive schools.

Furthermore, PTs were found to believe that the way CTs teach was not what they learned about how to teach English at their university. For this reason, they stated that rather than seeing what teaching English should be like in a real classroom, they understood how they should not teach English the following year when they become teachers. They also thought that the CTs did not have high English proficiency. This result suggests that selection of CTs to do the mentoring should base on a number of specific criteria, such as years of experience, education, so that PTs can benefit from CTs at maximum level.

On the other hand, the interviews conducted with CTs indicate that they do not feel efficient in helping PTs in their practicum studies and they called for a better cooperation with faculty supervisors to solve this problem. These results, echoing the findings of previous studies (Kahn, 2001; Hastings, 2004; Sağlam, 2007; Cincioğlu, 2011), alert the need for disciplined, periodical and detailed training for the CTs to give information on what they should be careful about during the practicum. In the training, specifically, the problems of CTs, the criteria they need to look for when they observe PTs teaching should be emphasized. How to deal with PTs should also be paid close attention since this directly has a negative effect on the atmosphere of the practicum. PTs stated that CTs seemed to be disturbed by the presence of PTs in their classes and they were mistreated by CTs. This appears to be a result of extra workload they have and unsatisfying financial support, as it was also found by Cincioğlu (2011). To overcome this challenge, what actually needed is to turn the practicum process into an attractive work they would like to take part in. Providing CTs with some off time in which they can specifically focus on PTs' needs would encourage them more for mentoring than the financial support. This way would sweep their perception on dealing with PTs away, which is extra work.

In line with Murray-Harvey *et al*. (2000), Hastings (2004) and Cincioğlu (2011), both PTs and CTs had concerns about the duration of the practicum since both groups stated that the time allocated for the practicum was very limited to achieve their goals. In addition to the problems about the practicum time, PTs also saw the place of the practicum in the curriculum as a challenge since they had many other concerns about themselves, for example finding a job, in the last year of their university education. Based on these results, it can be suggested that practicum study should be reorganized by starting it earlier and extending the practicum time to four semesters. Instead of taking this course in fourth year, PTs should be required to start it in their third year, together with their methodology courses, so that they have the chance to perform or observe the method itself right after the theoretical knowledge they receive. As an alternative suggestion, rather than just observing the CTs in the first semester of fourth year, they can both teach and observe throughout their last year, so that the number of teaching opportunities increases.

The results, in general, indicate that practicum studies conducted in Turkey have still had deficiencies, although many changes and developments have taken place regarding the importance teacher education so far. One important change was the Education Development Project for Pre-service Teacher Education funded by the World Bank in 1999, which aims to increase the quality of teacher education programs and resulted in university-school partnership (Baltacı, 2002 as cited in Somuncuoğlu, 2003). The other and most recent one was the reorganization of Education Faculties in 2006-2007 academic year to improve the defective parts (CHE reports, 2007). However, reveal of what actually takes place and refreshment seem to be needed in practicum component of ELT programs, which will address the PTs' current needs.

Given the importance of uncovering the problems experienced in the practicum period, future research will compliment this study by reaching more PTs and CTs in different parts of Turkey. The challenges faced by PTs and CTs in different education levels, high school and primary school, and comparison of them have the potential of revealing significant implications for the practicum structure of the universities. Observations are needed to elucidate the details of the real practicum practices taken place. These observations may focus on the way PTs are guided by supervisor teachers in teacher training institutions and CTs in cooperating schools, as well as the reflections of this guidance on the performance of PTs during their practice teaching in the classrooms. The challenge of other components of practicum, namely administrators in cooperating schools, faculty supervisors, supervisor teachers, seem to be of utmost importance for having a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the problems.

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