

Student Teachers' Views on Doing EFL Practicum: Evidence from a Vietnamese Context

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the view of two cohorts of student teachers on their practicum which was as part of their master's degree program in teaching English as a foreign language in Vietnam. We used a mixed-methods design to collect quantitative and qualitative data from 53 students who did their teaching practicum online in July 2021 and March 2022. The study results revealed that there were few statistical differences between the two cohorts in their preparation, practice, reflection, and engagement of the students. In addition, the online environment made it difficult for the student teachers to implement learner-to-learner discussions during the practicum lessons. The study offered some practical implications for the organization of practicum in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).

Keywords: practicum, EFL, reflection, online environment, Vietnam

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/13-14-06

Publication date: May 31st 2022

1. Introduction

Teaching practicum is a compulsory part of any teacher education program. It is a good testing ground for the student teachers to prepare for their future careers. In a master's EFL program, students are of different backgrounds and have various teaching experiences, and the practicum may be a challenge for the new and inexperienced students. The online environment and unfamiliar target learners can also cause issues for the student teachers in their practicum lessons. Before, during and after the practicum, student teachers generally make the most of what they have learned in the program (e.g., training sessions with professors, micro-teaching sessions), but it is during the practicum that they have a chance to put into practice the learned knowledge and skills in a natural context.

In an environment where English is a foreign language, there are quite a few issues that must be taken into consideration, for example, the use of the first language (L1) in classroom instructions and interactions. Collaboration between the main teacher and the student teachers is another issue. Dealing with a big-size and mixed-level class is another aspect that the student teachers have to face in most educational institutions in developing countries (Balbay et al. 2018). These issues were researched and discussed in this study which investigated the views of two groups of student teachers who were doing practicum as part of an English language teaching practice in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

In any teacher education course, practicum plays a critical role. It is when the student teachers put what they have learned (theories about teaching) into practice (Köksal & Genc 2019). It is also when student teachers realize that dealing with unexpected issues in the real context can be more complicated than the theory. While they do the practicum, they are also observed by the main teacher, their supervisors, and probably peers. Under that stressful condition, their performance can be negatively influenced (Balbay et al. 2018; Merç 2015). The practicum is also when a pre-service student teacher starts to form their teaching style and shape their future career from the various lessons learned (Nair & Ghanaguru 2017; Riyanti 2020).

The teaching practicum, also called internship, field experience, practice teaching, apprenticeship, etc., requires the student teachers to design lesson plans, deliver the lesson and then reflect on what they have learned from that delivery, taking into account comments from their supervisors. The following session presents what has been researched about the student teachers' views on the three phases mentioned above of their practicum.

Regarding the preparation for the practicum lesson, designing a lesson plan is often one of the essential tasks that the student teachers have to do (Merç 2015). A lesson plan often follows a particular template that often includes lesson aims, objectives, and different stages for implementation (Emiliasari & Jubaedah 2019). While some student teachers want to put as much as possible (e.g., aims, objectives, activities) in the lesson plan, others are more flexible and only note down key teaching points as well as a backup strategy to deal with the unexpected (Emiliasari & Jubaedah 2019; Köksal & Genc 2019). Many student teachers also feel anxious when they design and implement the lesson plan, and one of the reasons is that they are not sure if the different activities in the plan help them meet the lesson aims and objectives (Köksal & Genc 2019; Nair & Ghanaguru 2017).

While the lesson plan is like a prescription, the delivery in the real classroom matters more to the student teachers. The literature has revealed that the student teachers have expressed their concerns and challenges, lessons learned, and many other issues (Emiliasari & Jubaedah 2019; Köksal & Genc 2019; Nair & Ghanaguru 2017). The results of past studies indicated that the student teachers appreciated the chance they had to work with real target learners. Little by little, they develop a sense of being the classroom owner and managing the lesson in a more effective way than in the first days. They become more confident in managing the class, engaging students, and dealing with the unexpected. However, the results of some studies also indicated that the student teachers found the reality of doing the practicum was different from what they had learned or expected (Riyanti 2020; Vo et al. 2018). The results of a study by Yüksel (2014) found quite a few issues that the student teachers had to work on. For example, working with dissimilar students, error correction, providing feedback, and using modern information and communication technology for teaching, including using the online applications to convey the content of a lesson and to facilitate online interactions during the disruptive time (Ha et al. 2021; Thach 2020).

After each practicum lesson, and at the end of the practicum period, the student teachers are asked to reflect on their performance through different forms and formats, for example, keeping portfolios and using comments from peers and university supervisors (Merç 2015). However, there are advantages and disadvantages to each way of reflection. While portfolios are a helpful tool for gathering the practicum events, they are time-consuming and more subjective. Comments from peers, the school teachers and university supervisors can help the student teachers to realize what they have done well and what needs improvement. According to Nair and Ghanaguru (2017, 146), *"the assistance from supervisors and cooperating teachers is crucial in guiding these novice teachers to identify and implement best practices to achieve the intended learning outcomes."* Similarly, Merç (2015) asserted that the university supervisor's comments on the lesson plan, frequent visits to the practicum lesson and constant feedback on the student teachers' performance provide a better objective reflection of the practicum. However, there is a problem with the time availability of these people (Merç 2015; Nair & Ghanaguru 2017).

Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that practicum plays a significant role in the professional development of student teachers. Given all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that the student teachers follow three steps in each practicum event: preparing lesson plans, performing in a real context, and reflecting on what has been done. In an effort to respond to the issues raised in the studies reviewed above, this study investigated the reflections from the student teachers of a language teaching practice course in Vietnam. The two research questions of the current study were:

1. What did the participants perceive about the importance in the different stages of a practicum lesson?
2. Were there any differences among the participants in the different stages of a practicum lesson?

In this study, the term 'student teacher' refers to those who were training to become teachers, while the term 'target learner' refers to those studying in the classes where the student teachers did their practicum.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research framework and design

The research framework of the current study is presented in Figure 1.

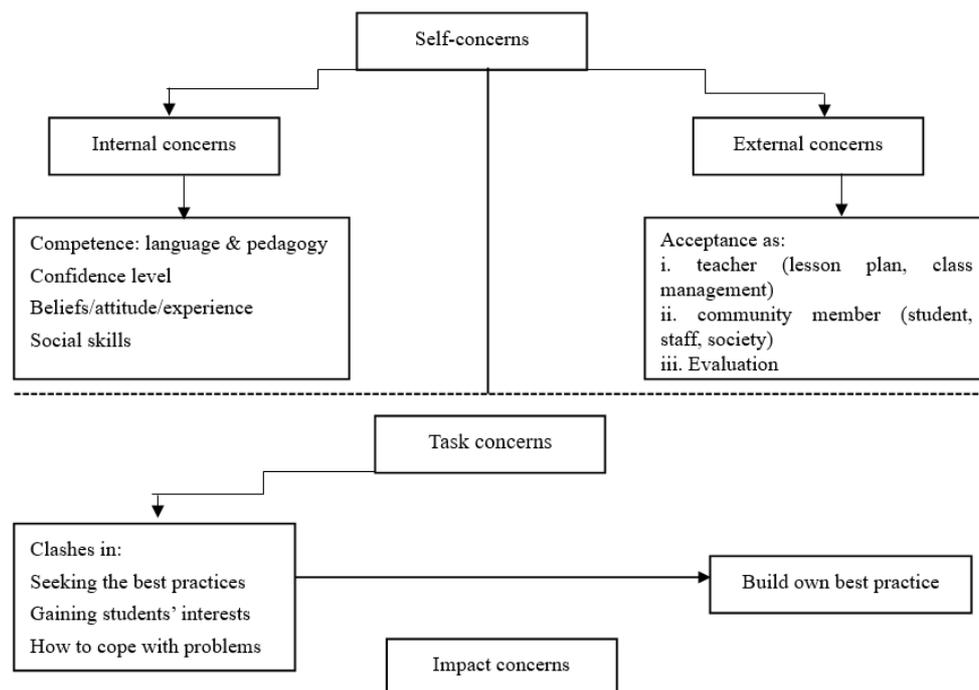


Figure 1. Concern-based model (Fuller & Brown 1975)

Figure 1 shows two main phases in a student teacher's practicum, divided by the dotted line in the middle. The upper part depicts the theory and the self-concern of the related student teacher. These include what they have learned in language and pedagogy, attitudes and beliefs, and social skills, anxiety about being accepted by other teachers, students, and the supervisor's evaluation of their practicum.

When performing in the practicum lesson (described in the lower part of Figure 1), they have task and impact concerns. In other words, they have to worry about putting all what they have learned into practice, gaining interest from the target learners (who are new to them), and coping with the unexpected). If they do all these things well, they may positively impact the related parties (target learners, other staff, and the supervisor), based on which they can build their own best practice.

This study used quantitative approach as the main design to collect and analyze data. However, the researcher also explored qualitative data from the answers to the open questions at the end of the questionnaire to triangulate with the results of quantitative analysis. In other words, qualitative data were processed using content analysis (Miles et al. 2014), and a triangulation technique was adopted in which the quantitative results were supported and explained by findings from the qualitative data (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009).

3.2. Research context

In the joint training program for masters' students in teaching English as a foreign language, the student teachers had to do their practicum in two teaching contexts: English language classes for undergraduate students at a Vietnamese university and classes for other target learners (school or private center students and learners). Their practicum performances were supervised by professors from the Vietnamese university and mentors (usually heads of language divisions of their respective workplaces). They also had to do many unsupervised lessons and reflect on what they had learned. In this study, data were collected from the student teachers' practicum lessons under the supervision of the university's professors.

The practicum lessons were arranged for the student teachers by a group of supporting staffs and the main teachers, who were teaching the target learners and also present during the practicum lesson for any necessary technical support. The practicum lessons were conducted online using Zoom and other video conferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams. The student teachers were also encouraged to use other applications to deliver the lessons. Two cohorts of students did their practicum in July 2021 and March 2022, respectively.

3.3. Sampling and Participants

The participants of this study were the student teachers of two cohorts (73 in total) who had completed their practicum as part of a language teaching practice course. Most of them had already been teachers before enrolling in the course but with different teaching backgrounds and experiences. Some were permanent staff of public educational institutions, while others were teaching part-time at private language centers. They taught various subjects, but the majority were assigned to help their learners improve macro language skills (listening,

speaking, reading, writing) or knowledge (grammar, vocabulary) and even test-taking techniques. As preparation for the practicum, especially the one under the supervision of university professors, they had to write a lesson plan based on the textbook that the target learners were using. Table 1 presents demographic information about the participants.

Table 1.

Participants' demographic information

| Information | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| Group | | |
| July 2021 | 17 | 31.5 |
| March 2022 | 37 | 68.5 |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 46 | 85.2 |
| Male | 8 | 14.8 |
| Place of work | | |
| Public | 21 | 38.9 |
| Private | 33 | 61.1 |
| Teaching experience | | |
| < 5 years | 26 | 48.1 |
| ≥ 5 years | 28 | 51.9 |
| App used | | |
| One | 45 | NA |
| Two | 38 | NA |
| More than two | 26 | NA |
| Device | | |
| Laptops | 40 | 74,1 |
| Others | 14 | 25.9 |

Data in Table 1 shows that the participants in the March cohort were nearly twice as July cohort (68.5% versus 31.5%) and that the females were nearly four times higher than the males. This phenomenon is expected in the area of EFL. More than 60% of the participants worked for private organizations, including schools, universities and language centers. The participants were of similar teaching experiences: under and over 5 years, accounting for 48.1 and 51.9%, respectively. As for online applications, the majority of the participants used Zoom and Microsoft Teams as the main environment, but many used other specialized apps to collect answers from the learners, e.g., Padlet, or to provide practices in vocabulary and grammar, e.g., Wordwall, Kahoot!, Mentimeter. Some participants used less common applications like Nearpod and Skype. Most of the participants (74,1%) used laptops in their online lessons, while 25.9% used other devices like desktops and tablets to teach. Only one participant used a smartphone for the online practicum lesson.

3.4. Instruments

This study employed mainly quantitative means to collect data from the participants. A survey was adapted from the literature, especially the concern-based model, on the same issue to suit the context of the student teachers in this particular language teaching practice course. Although the researcher did not pilot the questionnaire, the Delphi technique was used to adapt the survey questions to ensure the clarity, readability, and content validity of the item. The survey consisted of two parts. The first one aimed to obtain background information such as gender, age, teaching experience, and their use of online applications for the practicum. The second part included 36 Likert-scale statements (strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree and strongly disagree) about the participants' performance before, during, and after the practicum, as well as their engagement with the target learners. Finally, there was an open question for the participants to add further reflections.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

This study used the purposive sampling technique. The data collection was conducted online through Google Forms due to the outbreak of Covid-19. The participants were invited to respond to the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. They had ten days to fill in the questionnaire, and as a means to facilitate responses, a friendly reminder was also sent to them through Zalo groups of the two cohorts. After ten days, 53 out of 79 students (67%) responded to the questionnaire, and 36 participants provided additional comments and reflections on the open questions, accounting for 68%. Although the survey items were not piloted (due to the small number of potential participants), the Cronbach's alpha (reliability) of the survey's 36 items (second part) was higher than 7.0, which is acceptable (Hair et al. 2010).

As for data analysis, two main analytical methods, namely correlation and independent sample t-tests and

were employed with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22. First, frequencies of responses from the student teachers on their preparation (before), practice (during), reflection (after) of the practicum lessons, as well as their ways to engage the target learners, were analyzed. Then, correlational analysis was performed to see if these four categories were related. After that, independent sample t-tests were used to identify the differences among the participants in the categories mentioned above. Independent-samples t-test is a technique that explores statistically significant differences in the mean scores for two groups of participants. More specifically, the study explored if there were statistically significant differences between two cohorts of participants, between those teaching in public and private educational institutions and between those under and above five years of teaching experience. The following sections present key findings of the analyses.

4. Results

4.1. The quantitative findings

To answer the first research question, mean scores obtained from the survey were calculated for each item and each category as a representative of the criterion measures for teaching practicum. Table 2 presents the mean scores for each item.

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics for the items in the survey

| | Mean | SD | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---|------|-------|------------------|
| Before lesson: Mean = 4.14; SD = .329 | | | |
| Writing the lesson plan carefully | 4.57 | .499 | .734 |
| Contacting main teacher | 4.57 | .767 | .743 |
| Researching about target students | 4.43 | .602 | .736 |
| Asking peers about target students | 4.28 | .787 | .744 |
| Testing online app in advance | 4.22 | .861 | .740 |
| Allocating appropriate time for the lesson activities | 4.02 | .901 | .741 |
| Being confident about using English | 3.96 | .776 | .724 |
| Anticipating potential problems | 3.87 | .848 | .727 |
| Being confident about the pedagogy | 3.80 | .786 | .730 |
| Observing peers' lesson | 3.63 | 1.186 | .754 |
| During lesson: Mean = 3.65; SD = .396 | | | |
| Presenting lesson objectives clearly | 4.19 | .702 | .730 |
| Using feedback from the micro-teaching | 4.07 | .640 | .732 |
| Designing various interactions among students | 4.06 | .712 | .729 |
| Using knowledge from the workshop | 3.87 | .754 | .723 |
| Using online apps well | 3.78 | .816 | .724 |
| Using various ways to collect answers | 3.76 | .910 | .724 |
| Following stages in the lesson plan | 3.72 | .920 | .733 |
| Attracting students' interest | 3.65 | .731 | .721 |
| Dealing well with problems | 3.65 | .828 | .720 |
| Setting up rapporteur with students | 3.46 | 1.161 | .718 |
| Implementing all tasks in the lesson plan | 3.35 | .974 | .735 |
| Implementing all tasks in the textbook | 2.87 | 1.117 | .745 |
| Asking peers to observe the practicum lesson | 2.85 | 1.123 | .750 |
| After lesson: M= 3.83; SD = .492 | | | |
| Reading supervisor's comments | 4.30 | .792 | .750 |
| Building best practices for future | 4.15 | .787 | .741 |
| Revising the lesson plan | 4.11 | .839 | .740 |
| Writing notes after the practicum | 3.48 | 1.077 | .739 |
| Reading literature about issues in the lesson | 3.26 | 1.136 | .745 |
| Asking opinions from the main teacher | 3.13 | 1.082 | .733 |
| Students' engagement: M = 3.71; SD = .609 | | | |
| Cooperating well in the lesson | 3.91 | .734 | .728 |
| Doing the tasks instructed | 3.89 | .634 | .723 |
| Having suitable English proficiency | 3.76 | .642 | .730 |
| Being active in the lesson | 3.65 | .872 | .721 |
| Answering of the questions | 3.63 | .896 | .724 |
| Being active in pair and group work | 3.30 | 1.021 | .726 |

Data in Table 2 reveals that the participants realized the importance of preparing, practicing, reflecting, and engaging the target learners with the mean scores of over 3.0 out of 5.0, and standard deviations of less than 1.2. The analysis focused on the individual categories, even single items. Among the categories, ‘preparation’ measured the highest score (M=4.14), while the mean for ‘during the lesson’ was the lowest (3.65). In the preparation stage, writing the lesson plan carefully and contacting the main teacher (who was teaching that particular lesson) were considered the most important activities (M=4.57), while observing a peer got the lowest score of 3.63. In the teaching stage (during the lesson), the participants considered ‘presenting lesson objectives clearly’ as the most important task, while less attention was paid to implementing all tasks in the textbook and asking peers to observe their lessons (mean scores of 2.87 and 2.85, respectively).

In the reflection stage, the participants placed high importance on reading the supervisor’s comments (M=4.30) but less significance on asking for opinions from the main teacher (M=3.13). Indeed, communication with the main teacher after the practicum lesson was limited. The target learners cooperated well with the student teachers in the lesson (M=3.91), but they were not very active in pair and group work (M=3.30). In other words, it seems that the interaction between the target learners and the student teachers was relatively smooth, but the interactions among the target learners were not as expected. This was possibly due to the constraints of the online learning environment, and the fact that the target learners were new to the student teachers and vice versa. A bivariate analysis was conducted to validate the findings obtained from the mean scores and investigate the relationship between the four categories. Table 3 shows the analytical results.

Table 3.

Correlations among four categories

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-------------------|---|-------|------|--------|
| 1. Before lesson | 1 | .308* | .101 | .057 |
| 2. During lesson | | 1 | .113 | .426** |
| 3. After lesson | | | 1 | -.081 |
| 4. Ss’ engagement | | | | 1 |

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between the four categories. There were correlations between the activities before and during the lesson as well as between the ‘during the lessons’ and the ‘engaging the target learners’ ($p < 0.01$). The correlations among these categories were of medium level (Cohen, 1988). Interestingly, the activities after the lesson (reflection) did not have any correlations with other stages.

To answer the second question of the study, i.e., finding the differences among the participants in the four categories, independent samples t-tests were performed. Table 4 presents the results of the analyses.

Table 4.

Differences of the participants on four categories

| Preparation stage | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|----------|--------|----|------|------|--------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| | | Levene | N | M | SD | t | Sig. | Conclusion |
| Cohort | July | .316 | 17 | 4.12 | .372 | -.175 | .862 | No |
| | March | | 37 | 4.14 | .313 | | | |
| Teaching experience | <5 years | 9.712 | 26 | 4.14 | .223 | .155 | .878 | No |
| | ≥5 years | | 28 | 4.13 | .408 | | | |
| Place of work | Public | .768 | 21 | 4.30 | .332 | 3.068 | .003 | Yes, Eta = 0.15 (large) |
| | Private | | 33 | 4.03 | .288 | | | |
| Practice stage | | | | | | | | |
| | | Levene | N | M | SD | t | Sig. | Conclusion |
| Cohort | July | .310 | 17 | 3.71 | .375 | .926 | .359 | No |
| | March | | 37 | 3.60 | .405 | | | |
| Teaching experience | <5 years | 1.461 | 26 | 3.52 | .315 | -2.086 | .042 | Yes Eta = 0.08 (moderate) |
| | ≥5 years | | 28 | 3.74 | .438 | | | |
| Place of work | Public | .344 | 21 | 3.70 | .371 | .875 | .385 | No |
| | Private | | 33 | 3.60 | .412 | | | |
| Reflection stage | | | | | | | | |
| | | Levene | N | M | SD | t | Sig. | Conclusion |
| Cohort | July | 3.622 | 17 | 3.84 | .325 | 1.070 | .289 | No |
| | March | | 37 | 3.69 | .549 | | | |
| Teaching experience | <5 years | 9.496 | 26 | 3.87 | .334 | 2.023 | .049 | Yes, Eta = 0.07 (moderate) |
| | ≥5 years | | 28 | 3.61 | .581 | | | |
| Place of work | Public | 9.358 | 21 | 3.89 | .260 | 2.144 | .037 | Yes, Eta = 0.08 (moderate) |
| | Private | | 33 | 3.64 | .578 | | | |

| Student engagement | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|----------|--------|----|------|------|--------|-------------|----------------------------|
| | | Levene | N | M | SD | t | Sig. | Conclusion |
| Cohort | July | | 17 | 3.73 | .401 | .840 | .405 | No |
| | March | | 37 | 3.61 | .685 | | | |
| Teaching experience | <5 years | 1.060 | 26 | 3.40 | .601 | -3.138 | .003 | Yes, Eta = 0.16 (large) |
| | ≥5 years | | 28 | 3.88 | .527 | | | |
| Place of work | Public | .664 | 21 | 3.63 | .648 | -.123 | .903 | No |
| | Private | | 33 | 3.65 | .593 | | | |

Table 5 shows that the two cohorts (July 2021 and March 2020) did not differ in any of the four categories. In the preparation stage, there was a significant difference in scores for the participants working in public (M = 4.30, SD = .332) and private organizations (M = 4.03, SD = .288; $t(54) = 3.07$, $p = 0.03$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference was large ($\eta = 0.15$) (Cohen, 1988). Participants working in public organizations placed a higher level of importance than those working in private ones for activities like writing the lesson plan carefully, researching the target learners, and testing online apps. However, there was no statistically significant difference between under and above five years of teaching experience.

During the lesson, the teaching experience had an impact on the participants' performance ($p < 0.05$). Student teachers who had under five years of experience (M = 3.52, SD = .315) did not seem to pay as much attention to the very time they were teaching as those with over 5 years of experience (M = 3.74, SD = .438, $t(54) = 2.09$, $p = 0.042$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference was moderate ($\eta = 0.08$). Finally, place of work (public or private) did not impact the performance in the practicum lesson.

Both teaching experiences and place of work had impacts on the participants' reflection after the lesson. More specifically, there is a significant difference between the under five years of experience (M = 3.87, SD = .334) and those above 5 years (M = 3.81, SD = .561, $t(54) = 2.023$, $p = 0.049$, two-tailed) in their post-lesson reflections. The magnitude of the difference was moderate ($\eta = 0.07$). Public employed participants (M = 3.89, SD = .26) were keener on reflecting their lessons than those in private organization (M = 3.64, SD = .578, $t(54) = 2.14$, $p = 0.037$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference was moderate ($\eta = 0.07$). Finally teaching experience also had impacts on the participants' engagement of target learners. The more experience the participants had (M = 3.89, SD = .26) the better they were at engaging the target learners (M = 3.40, SD = .601, $t(54) = 3.138$, $p = 0.003$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference was large ($\eta = 0.15$).

In short, while the two cohorts did not differ in their preparation, performance, reflection, and engaging the target learners, their teaching experience did in three out of four categories. The workplace impacted their preparation and reflection stages of doing the practicum. These issues need further investigation to find out the details of the differences.

4.2. The qualitative findings

Thirty-five participants gave further comments in the open question, accounting for approximately 65%. They had comments on all four categories, and the most significant proportion could be categorized in the reflection stage (42%). In reflecting on what they had done, the participants expressed their concerns about class time management, the value of feedback from the supervisor, and lessons learned:

I think the practicum is a precious opportunity for the student teachers ourselves to teach the real students at the university level. Besides, the feedback from the lecturer helped me detect my weaknesses clearer, and I gained a lot of experience from the teaching practicum (ID29).

I need to reduce teacher talk and create more opportunities for my students to raise their voices (ID10).

Regarding feedback from the class (main) teacher, while one participant appreciated the support, three others wished they had received comments from this source, "The main class teacher did not attend my practicum, so I couldn't get any feedback from her." (ID16), "I wanted to get feedback from the main class teacher" (ID 36). Their other concerns included the lack of support from the university for their online teaching, "The lesson should be provided more technology applications which help all students give their answers" (ID 13). These findings go hand in hand with the quantitative results in which the item 'Reading supervisor's comments' had the highest mean score (4.30). In contrast, the item 'Asking opinions from the main teacher' received the lowest score (3.13).

Similar proportions of comments were given to the student teachers' performance (29%) and skills in engaging their respective learners (27%). The student teachers had problems engaging the target learners, possibly because it was the first time they worked together, coupled with the online environment. One participant commented:

Most of the students seemed not engaged in the lesson. I did not require all of the students to switch on the camera. When I asked them to work in pairs or groups, I went through the breakout rooms and saw that many groups were not working. It is hard for the teacher to control the online class with a big size (about 50 students) (ID 30).

The student's English level is mixed. They also do not often practice English when they work in pairs or groups. Furthermore, this is an online lesson too. For future lessons, I need to be more flexible and select fewer activities to be more appropriate for the class features and online learning environment (ID 19)

The above results are in line with the quantitative findings in which the item *'Being active in pair and group work'* received the lowest mean score. It seems that some of the student teachers had known about the difficulties of working with large, mixed-level students. Hence, they had designed some activities to encourage them better, *"I tried to use humour in the lesson plan (via jokes, memes), which I suppose is appropriate for target students' interest, to engage students more during the lesson IID 23)*. However, they also realized that it was not easy, *"Motivating student's interaction in an online large-sized classroom is a challenging task (ID 41)*. Concerning the participants' performance during the lesson, the comments could be divided into three sub-categories: flexibility, time management, and the online environment.

I should be more flexible with in-class activities and allow time for problems (ID 48)

I am teaching a bit fast, even though my students are able to catch up with me. However, after the micro-teaching and practicum, I am thinking of changing my teaching speech in the real classes (ID 3)

The allotted time was extremely short, and it was an online lesson, so it was hard to achieve substantial aims or rapport (ID 22)

The first category (preparation) scored the highest among the four ($M=4.41$), but it received only two percent of comments from the participants. This was possibly because, in this category, only one item was about the lesson plan; all other items were on preparatory activities like testing the online apps, contacting the class teachers, etc. One of the student teachers wrote:

My teaching practicum was completely different from what I expected. This was the first time I have taught university students. Although I asked the main class teacher about the target students and prepared some solutions to deal with issues in practicum, very few students interacted with me. About the lesson plan, I covered the key knowledge and implemented the main tasks in the required textbook. Besides, I added some other knowledge that is not mentioned in the textbook for students to help them complete the final task of the lesson (ID 25)

This comment included all issues in the four categories of the current research: preparing, performing, reflecting, and engaging target learners. This student teacher tried to prepare well for the lessons. However, one of the persistent issues or problems reflected in this comment and many other ones was (the lack of) interaction in the online environment.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of EFL student teachers in doing practicum as part of a language teaching practice course in Vietnam. Through the analyses of quantitative and qualitative data, the study revealed a number of findings that will now be compared to the results of previous work.

First of all, it was discovered that before performing the practicum, a careful design of lesson plans, getting to know about the practicum class and target learners, and testing online apps were some of the important activities that student teachers should do. Among these activities, designing a careful lesson plan was crucial, and the student teachers should take into account the specific context of each class. These findings corroborate the ideas of Emiliyasi and Jubaedah (2019), who suggested that the implementation of the lesson plan should be based on the conditions of the real lesson. The participants of this study also indicated that they could not complete all the tasks designed in the lesson plan due to time limitations. This result is consistent with those of other studies, which revealed that the inability to complete all the activities designed in the lesson plan might cause some levels of anxiety for the inexperienced student teachers (Emiliyasi & Jubaedah 2019; Nair & Ghanaguru 2017; Riyanti 2020). In this regard, it was suggested by Nair and Ghanaguru (2017, 155) that *"Supervisors and cooperating teachers should not impose their beliefs on the student teachers but instead allow them to explore and discover for themselves the best practice through trial and error"*.

Secondly, in the actual teaching process, the current study's findings indicated that time management was one of the key concerns for the student teachers, especially in an online environment. This finding supports previous research, which revealed that classroom management in general and time management or inability to finish the lesson as prescribed in the lesson plan in particular were some of the challenges for inexperienced student teachers (Köksal & Genc 2019; Nair & Ghanaguru 2017; Yüksel 2014)). Some of the main reasons for the student teachers' inability to manage the class effectively were their dissimilarity with the target learners (school versus university students, mixed levels) and the online environment. It took longer time for the online teachers to explain task instructions and to engage them in doing the online tasks as well as engaging in pair and group work, which was considered as the least valuable strategy and had low quality (Ha et al. 2021; Viet & Linh 2021). Indeed, working with a diverse population and time management were the two weakest domains of the student teachers, as revealed in Yüksel's (2014) study. Hence, it is suggested that in a teacher education training course, more time should be allocated to helping the future EFL teachers to have different strategies in

dealing with learners of mixed language competence and time management in the real teaching context. Sometimes, theories can be very different and did not work in the real classroom (Nair & Ghanaguru 2017).

Another interesting finding of this study was the engagement of the target learners in the lesson. This issue received quite a few comments and concerns from the participants, who seemed dissatisfied with the target learners' interactions with one another in the breakout rooms. There are several possible explanations for this result. First and most importantly, the target learners were working online; hence, they might not have in the mood to talk to one another due to the absence of the visual (camera off) and bad Internet connections. Second is the unfavorable environment because when the learners were in the breakout rooms, they could have forgotten the teachers' instructions (given in the main room). The teachers could have visited their rooms to give instructions again, but this took much time, and other groups did not hear the repetition of the instructions. Third, the learners might not have been trained on how to work in groups, especially in online working groups. Fourth, due to the large size of the classes, the student teachers did not have sufficient time to visit all the groups and encourage peer discussions. These results match those observed in earlier studies in which the participants had concerns about their target learners' paying attention to the classroom instructions and doing the tasks as instructed for various reasons, including that of technology (Köksal & Genc, 2019; Nair & Ghanaguru 2017).

Thirdly, this study revealed that, on the one hand, comments from the university supervisors were helpful to the student teachers; on the other hand, feedback from the main (class) teachers was limited. One possible explanation for this result was the design of the language teaching practice in which the supervisors had to provide comments to the student teachers. In contrast, the main (class) teachers were not obliged to do so. However, in the second stage of the practicum, the student teachers would receive comments from the cooperating teachers (teachers from the institution). These results agree with the findings of other studies, in which the participants "*found both the supervisors and cooperating teachers helpful in providing guidance and support*" (Nair & Ghanaguru 2017, 153). However, Merç (2015) suggested that the supervisors visit the student teachers' institution more to evaluate their performance better.

In conclusion, the findings of this study matched those in the literature in that the student teachers placed a high level of importance on preparing carefully for the practicum, which should include not only designing a careful lesson plan but also getting to know about the class they would teach. Classroom management, including engaging target learners in both teacher-to-learner and learner-to-learner interactions, was a key concern for the student teachers. Nonetheless, in an online environment and big-size classes, the study teachers had quite a few challenges in this regard. Finally, while the participants found the university supervisors' comments helpful, more feedback should come from other people like the main (class) teachers and peers.

The findings in this report are subject to at least two limitations. First, these data apply only to the EFL context in which the student teachers had to work in a new online environment with the absence of face-to-face contact with the target learners. This limitation means that study findings need to be interpreted cautiously as the findings might not be transferable to other disciplines and contexts (non-English, face-to-face). Secondly, the analysis mainly used quantitative data from a questionnaire survey, limiting an in-depth understanding and interpretation of the findings. In other words, it is essential to conduct more qualitative research to shed light on specific perceptions among the student teachers towards EFL practicum and identify strategies to facilitate professional development for future teachers of English in Vietnam.

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