

Evaluation of ELT Practicum Courses: Exploring the Perspectives of Student Teachers and Graduated Student Teachers

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Abstract

Practicum as a component of the English language teacher education program has been welcomed by pre-service teacher education institutes. Despite the great emphasis laid on practicum by Farhangian University, it has not been evaluated comprehensively by the student teachers and graduated student teachers up to now. The main objective of the study was to explore the benefits and problems of the practicum program. To do so, a qualitative case study was employed. 25 informants were recruited using a purposive sampling procedure. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with student teachers and graduated student teachers. The interpretational and reflective analysis techniques were employed to analyze the data. The findings were content analyzed in terms of benefits/advantages and challenges of the practicum. They indicate that practicum courses make the student teachers ready for real teaching, help them learn about the realities of real teaching and overcome the negative attitudes and feelings about the teaching profession. It has been also found that the practicum program needs revision in terms of evaluation, quality of placement schools, and cooperation between mentors, university educators and student teachers. Findings can be used by teacher training institutes, practicum educators, school mentors, and EFL student teachers.

Keywords: practicum, EFL student teachers, teacher education, pre-service training

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the English language has turned out to be a *lingua franca* in the global village and the education program for English as Foreign/Second Language (EF/SL) teachers is globally underscored. Teachers, therefore, need to be instrumentally equipped through teacher education programs to secure a learning environment for English language learners (Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2017; Mirici & Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017). One of the ultimate objectives of almost all pre-service teacher education programs is to equip student teachers with both theoretical knowledge of their field of study and practical experience of teaching through practicum courses (Akcan, 2010; Akcan & Tatar, 2012; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karim et al., 2019; Kerakas, 2012; Mirici & Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017; Peacock, 2009; Salehizadeh et al., 2020; Seferoglu, 2006).

As Farrell (2008) believes teaching practicum has preserved its high status within the realm of teacher education programs during the last few decades. Teaching practicum in real classrooms greatly affects the student teachers' development (Farrell, 2008). In this sense, through teaching practicum, student teachers can have an opportunity to "experience the real classroom atmosphere in which a real curriculum is applied with actual students and teachers" (Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017, p.277). Practicum not only links the theories of teacher education with practical opportunities but also helps student teachers develop their personal teaching competencies (Allen & Wright, 2014; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Similarly, it has been of much importance in English Language Teaching (ELT) education programs in which ELT student teachers are given a chance to acquire knowledge on teaching language and practicum experience in real schools with real students.

1.1. Practicum Courses in Farhangian University

Among higher education institutions, Farhangian University has different roles including improving the general competencies of student teachers as university-educated citizens as well as providing the ground for the student teachers to achieve professional qualifications and professional competencies. Therefore, this university can be considered as one of the most effective and important components of the educational system, because the success and failure of creating a change in this system depend on creating the necessary professional capabilities in teachers who are the main executors of programs in the real environment (Hennissen et al., 2017).

At Farhangian University, with reference to the provision of "Executive Plan for Teacher Training Internships", special attention has been paid to the subject of internship (practicum) and it has been considered as an integral part of the four-year teacher training course. In other words, senior undergraduate students, in each semester, in addition to passing specific courses, take certain internship courses. In the curriculum developed for these courses, priorities such as establishing a link between theory and practice based on critical thinking approach, understanding the complexities of the course and

internalizing the need for continuous improvement of teaching quality, recognition of the limitations, theoretical knowledge capacities for solving general problems of teaching, and familiarity with the rules and norms of teacher training and readiness to accept and improve it are taken into account (Basiri et al., 2016).

As the great emphasis has been laid on practicum courses for all majors more particularly the ELT program within the last six years, the ELT practicum courses at Farhangian University went through great changes in recent years; hence, it is of much significance to evaluate them from the student teachers and recently graduated student teachers. However, the analysis of the related body of literature indicates that only a few studies have globally (e.g., Akcan, 2010; Akcan & Tatar, 2012; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karim et al., 2019; Kerakas, 2012; Peacock, 2009; Seferoglu, 2006) and locally (Masoumpanah et al., 2019) evaluated EFL teacher education practicum program.

In the same vein, to guarantee the effectiveness of ELT or TEFL programs and teacher quality, consistent and dynamic evaluation is highly recommended (Musset, 2010). Peacock (2009) believes, teacher education program, particularly its main component, practicum, needs to be critically investigated and internally evaluated by regularly assessing its weaknesses as well as strengths and providing suggestions for program improvement and development. He strongly recommended considering the points of view of those who graduated from this system especially after a year of teaching experience. To that end, this study attempts to include the graduated teachers as one group of informants.

2. Review of Related Literature

Qazi et al. (2012) argued that practicum is very necessary to enhance student-teacher pedagogical skills and to prepare them for the realities of classroom teaching through developing some skills such as preparation of subject relevant teaching aids, worksheet lesson planning, and classroom management skills. Furthermore, Szabo et al. (2002) stated that practicum is required for student teachers in making connections between theory and practice. They also stated that practicum has the power to critically shape student- teacher's perceptions of teaching and learning. Generally speaking, the practicum is often referred to as the school-based field experience that enables pre-service teachers to find an opportunity to improve their knowledge and teaching skills in a classroom setting (Grootenboer, 2005).

The invaluable impact of practicum on the professional development of pre-service teachers have been mentioned in several studies (e.g., Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Şahin et al., 2013) and instructors at universities strongly believe in the significant place of practicum in teacher education programs (Dereobalı & Ünver, 2009). It is also believed that practicum teaching helps pre-service teachers develop their classroom teaching skills and help them gain self-confidence (Koç, 1998). As pre-service teachers' teaching skills are developed, their attitudes toward the profession, teaching, teaching self-efficacy, and other profession-related skills and dispositions are enhanced positively (Caires et al., 2012; Tarman, 2012).

Much along this line of thought, there has recently emerged a substantial theoretical and practical shift of emphasis, mostly in mainstream education, towards acknowledging that teachers are among the principal components of any pedagogical program and that they are said to be an educational system's principal resources (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). Concomitant with this shift of emphasis, in the past ten years, a burgeoning research base has provided increasing empirical evidence that teachers are the most important factors influencing student achievement and that they hold the key means to seal the gaps in students' achievement outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b; Ferguson, 1991, 1998; Goldhaber, 2002, 2006; Sanders, 1998, 2000).

Several researchers in the field have argued that practicum might affect the belief systems (Gan, 2013; Yuan & Lee, 2014) and future feelings and decisions of student teachers (Celen & Akcan, 2017; Merç, 2015; Yan & He, 2010). It has also been reported to be "the longest and most intensive exposure to the teaching profession" for would-be teachers (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 345). Although teaching practice experience is a necessary component of TEFL programs which is important for its achievement (Richards & Crookes, 1998), it has not been given appropriate attention concerning the "specific experiences of learner teachers" in the field of TEFL (Farrell, 2008, p. 226), nor has it been sufficiently and carefully investigated in the literature (Mattsson et al., 2011).

Moreover, the learning extent and scope during the practicum need closer investigation. As an example, Canh (2014) states that no deep learning occurs during the practicum unless socio-constructivist approaches along with reflective thinking are adopted. Adopting an approach and claiming to follow it is one story and the way it is appropriately performed is another one. Therefore, though the practicum courses are newly claimed to be developed based on constructivist view should be analyzed from the perspective of their stakeholders to shed more light on their advantages and probable disadvantages.

3. Research Questions

This study aims at exploring student teachers and graduate student teachers of English as a foreign language about the advantages and problems of implementing the newly designed practicum courses of ELT teacher education at Farhangian University. To be more specific the following research questions were raised:

1. What are the advantages of the practicum courses of the ELT teacher education program from the student teachers and graduated student teachers' perspectives?
2. What are the problems of the practicum courses of the ELT teacher education program from the ELT student teachers and graduated student teachers' perspectives?

4. Method

4.1. Informants

Informants were selected through purposive sampling and the sample size was determined based on data saturation point. Two groups of participants were selected: Student teachers (STs) and Graduated Student Teachers (GSTs). The first group of informants consisted of 14 student teachers of TEFL who had passed at least three courses of practicum at two branches of Farhangian University in Mazandaran province. The student teachers were selected through convenience sampling. The second group consisted of 11 GSTs with two years of teaching experience who were selected through snowball sampling from the recently TEFL graduated STs teaching in Mazandaran Province. The criterion for the sample size of each group was data saturation point which occurred while the 14th ST and the 11th GST were interviewed. To control the effect of possible extraneous variables, the participants of the second group were all selected among those who graduated two years ago.

4.2. Design and Data Collection Procedure

For this study, the researchers' interest was delving into the students' experience. The intention was to get the STs' narratives and GSTs' interviews in order to gain profound insights into their experience of participating in the curriculum program. The researchers tried to explore how the informants evaluate the curriculum and what themes arise in the data, which as Silverman (2014) believes, is conducive to a qualitative approach. According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), "qualitative methods... start from the perspective and actions of the subjects studied" (p.7). This study aims to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the practicum courses as a case or unit of investigation through the direct experiences of the STs and GSTs who were selected as informants. A case study is a design particularly suited to achieve an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Yin (2014), for example, defines a case study in terms of the research process. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16).

Therefore, the intended data were collected through interviews, focused group discussions, and the students' reflections or narratives on practicum courses. Interviewing, in qualitative case studies, is a main needed source of data for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. As Cohen et al. (2018) believe, structured and open-ended questions enable the interviewees to address issues in their own words. The interview questions were asked to elicit the informants' perspectives and beliefs about the challenges and problems of theoretical and practical teaching courses, the problems and shortcomings of practicum courses in terms of both theory and practice, matches and mismatches between what they are/were learning at university and what they do in their practice teaching at schools (during the practicum courses and after graduation). The interview questions were sent to a panel consisting of four applied linguists.

They confirmed the relevance, comprehensibility, and clarity of the questions. All interviews were recorded using an audio recording device. The interviews lasted between 20-35 minutes. The researchers also conducted a group interview with the intention to elicit responses in the form of a dialogue. The advantage of group interviews is that it opens up for a discussion and the possibility for a wider range of responses.

4.3. Data Analysis Procedure

Based on the data collected from these interviews and narratives, the researchers have attempted to perform a thematic analysis to highlight commonalities and patterns in the informants' responses in reference to their experience with the practicum courses. Thematic analysis is an approach to analyzing qualitative data "that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning" (Lapadat, 2010, p.2). The purpose is to identify the relationships and commonalities through coding and categorizing themes within that data in order to make meaning of the content. This type of analysis focuses on the participants' authentic responses and gathering their stories of what they experienced with the aim to gain 'access to how the social world is lived' (Silverman, 2014, p.213). To conduct the thematic analysis, once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed, coded and categorized. The researchers chose to do the transcriptions themselves to get closer to the data and connect with the responses. Part of this process entailed remembering the tones of the responses, reflecting on how the questions were asked, which follow-up questions were asked and possible gaps in the questioning. The verbatim transcriptions were done in Persian and as extracts were summarized they were translated by the researchers into English. All interviews were transcribed in the week following they were completed. This was to keep the context of the interviews fresh in our minds. Using an inductive approach, all interview transcripts were closely reviewed and coded, categorized and categorized into themes.

Guided by the research questions, the analysis began by going into the data and observing which patterns emerged from the participants' responses. This started by giving codes to different topics and organizing them into categories. Initial interaction with the interviews revealed that the STs and GSTs had something to say on the topic. At times the tone of their responses resembled something other than their own responses; they were cross-checked from different sources. It was important in analysis to be aware of this and treat the responses as such. Extractions were chosen based on their experience as they explained it. As patterns emerged, it was a way of securing their responses when they related to others' or were similar to other responses.

5. Results

Detailed analysis of the interviews, focused group discussions, and informants' reflections and narratives on practicum has shown that practicum courses of ELT teacher education have both advantages and disadvantages.

5.1. Research Question 1

The advantages of the practicum which were mentioned by at least 40% of the informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Advantages of the Practicum Course

Theme	Number/percent
Replacing passive learning with active learning	20(80%)
Raising the learners' awareness of real teaching demands	18(72%)
Helping the participants realize some concepts about textbooks, facilities, school atmosphere and socializing with the school community	18(72%)
Develop the student-teachers' confidence	16(64%)
Helps the student-teachers' assess their weaknesses	16(64%)
Develops the student –teachers' psychological and mental readiness	15(60%)
Relating the theories to practice in schools	12(48%)
Helping the practicum participants understand the overall practice of schools	11(44%)
Developing the participants research skill	11(44%)
Acquire important skills and knowledge from experienced teachers in the placement school (experience sharing)	12(48%)
Developing attitudes to teaching profession	10(40%)
Developing values and professional ethics of teaching profession	10(40%)

The first advantage of the practicum, as reported by majority of the participants (80%), is that it can replace passive learning (learning about teaching theories) with active learning (employing the theories and evaluating the effectiveness of learning and teaching theories). The following comments exemplify the theme:

Practicum was really needed for paradigm shift in ELT education. Through practicum, we, the student teachers, could actually put into practice the theories we learned, in our methodology courses (ST 3).

Only through practicum and real teaching the student teachers can understand the real school environment and gain practical experience. (GST 3)

The second advantage of the practicum as mentioned by 72% of the participants is that STs get familiar with the real teaching demands. Through practicum program, they gain information about teaching demands, requirements, problems, etc. As an example, one of the STs commented “while attending the practicum program, I learned about a teacher’s demands, duties, and responsibilities”. One of the graduated teachers commented, “practicum changed my perceptions of teaching demands and I got prepared for that”.

The third advantage of practicum as reported by 72% of the STs and GSTs was that practicum helps the STs get familiar with the textbooks used in the schools, the educational facilities of the schools, and most particularly school atmosphere. One of the participants stated:

Through the practicum, I gained information about the textbooks, common classroom size, students' behaviors, teachers and learners' interaction. Such a familiarity with school climate made me eager for real teaching. (GST 8).

Practicum develops the student-teachers' social life with the school community including teachers, school managers, students, and students' parents. Through interaction with the school community members, they learn how to communicate with the above-mentioned members. One of the graduate STs commented: "I watched how the school staff politely and gently talked to one of the students' mother who was arguing with the school staff harshly and impolitely". Another student teacher added, "Through practicum course I learned that I am responsible for keeping in touch with the parents and giving them feedback about their kid's progress".

The fourth advantage as 80% of the interviewees stated is that practicum courses increase the participants' confidence. Both STs and GSTs believe that observing teachers' real teaching at schools increases their confidence. One of the STs commented:

Before attending practicum courses, I had little self-confidence for teaching. After watching teachers' classes and making connections with the atmosphere and students, I gradually overcame the negative feelings of anxiety and stress.

The other advantage is that only through teaching and receiving feedbacks from the mentors and students, one can assess his/her weaknesses in teaching. Practicum looks like a mirror, which shows the STs' main weaknesses and even their capabilities. One of the GSTs commented:

Indeed practicum was very useful. Mentors, practicum coordinators, and my classmates detected my weaknesses in teaching. Before, starting my teaching profession, through watching educational videos and receiving feedbacks from experienced teachers, I learned some teaching strategies to improve the quality of my teaching.

Another positive consequence of practicum (the sixth one) is associated with the STs' psychological status. Some of the interviewees strongly believed that practicum courses improved their psychological and mental readiness for teaching. One of the GSTs stated:

Learning about language and language teaching theories does not make the student teachers ready for teaching, because of their stress, anxiety, and self-esteem. In fact, practicum as a teaching exercise reduces most of the psychological filters and makes the student teachers psychologically ready.

The seventh advantage of the practicum was coded as relating the theories to practice in schools. 50% of the informants believe that at college, student teachers learn a lot about learning theories. While in

schools, teachers are practicing the learning theories, management strategies, and assessment methods. Therefore, practicum is the only opportunity, through which STs can not only practice teaching methods but also evaluate the teaching methods with regard to local feasibilities. The following comment by the ST14 supports this theme:

At university, I learned a lot about learner autonomy, but while observing the school climate, I found out that in some schools learner autonomy leads to failure but in some other schools because of the particular context and the learners' specific socio-cultural background, teachers can successfully promote the learners' autonomy.

The eighth advantage of the practicum was that it helps participants understand the overall practice of schools. Detailed content analysis of the interviews and narratives (specially during the first course of practicum) also showed that practicum gives an opportunity to the student teachers to get familiar with the school climate, organizational culture of the students, the duties and responsibilities of school staff, educational regulations, school timing, etc. As an example, one of the interviewees stated:

I did not know that much about duties of a full-time teacher; I did not know that a school had two or more assistants, neither did I know that there was a consultant at each school (ST 11).

One of the GSTs also commented: "while attending the schools during the practicum course, I learned that I have to teach 24 hours a week in at least four working days. I also learned that teachers needed to attend some workshops and meetings held by the school as well as educational groups.

Dewey described teachers' contributions to educational research as an 'unworked mine' (1929). It is teachers who in the end will change the world of the school by understanding it (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). One alternative is to treat teachers themselves as the main (but not only) source for creation of professional knowledge'. Practicum has supposed teachers to be more than the subjects or consumers of educational research and to have a particular role in the generation of knowledge and solving their educational problems. As the ninth advantage, the participants have argued that during practicum courses they have learned how to practice reflective observation and conduct action research and lesson studies.

The tenth advantage is that through attending practicum courses, teachers can share their experiences of teaching methods, management strategies, action research findings and coping strategies for the learners' misbehaviors and their lack of motivation and confidence for learning a foreign language. One of the student teachers commented: "while walking with the school teacher, she narrated that once she had two noisy students who always disrupted the class. She said that I invited them to a coffee shop and tried to get closer to them emotionally, after giving compliments on their talents, I asked them to help me in creating effective contents for the classroom. In this way I made the best use of their energy. I noticed that later on those noisy students rarely interrupted me while I was teaching".

The eleventh extracted theme as reported by 15(60%) of the participants was coded as developing attitudes to teaching and professional identity. The interviewees believed that while registering at Farhangian University, they were motivated and eager to start but the theoretical courses put out that

internal fire and lowered the good attitude towards teaching profession. However, after taking the practicum course and visiting the schools, their attitude flourished again. Practicum as they believed changed their attitudes drastically. For instance, one of the graduate STs commented:

If I had not attended practicum program, I would have quitted Farhangian University. Schools I visited, students I met, and the school climate all changed my attitude and let me feel like a teacher.

The last advantage is that through attending practicum program, most particularly visiting schools, discussions with teachers at the placement schools, and joining the school community, student teachers are acquainted with ethics of teaching profession, its values, and the public services of teaching profession. For instance, student teacher 12 commented:

In the practicum course, I learned how a teacher could be effective, I learned teachers should respect the students and their parents, they have to be punctual and dedicated to their profession, they should not waste the time and they have to be fair in their decisions.

5.2. Research Question 2

The main challenges and problems associated with the practicum course of the ELT education program are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Problems of Practicum Course

Problem	Number/percent
Mentors' lack of dynamic assessment and monitoring	20 (80%)
Mentors' lack of skills and confidence to support the student teachers	19 (76%)
Mentors' and teacher educators' working overload	17 (68%)
Mismatch between student teachers and mentors' pedagogical and language knowledge	15(60%)
Economic and logistic problem	12 (48%)
Teachers' resistance to student-teachers' innovations	12 (48%)
Unfavorable physical climate of the school	11 (44%)
Unfavorable psycho-social climate of the school	10 (40%)
Lack of concerned teachers' dedication to program	10(40%)
Lack of standard rubric for program evaluation	10 (40%)
Lack of group reflections on program	10 (40%)

The most frequently reported problem of practicum as implicitly and explicitly stated by 20(80%) of the participants is that mentoring and dynamic assessment by the practicum instructors and school mentors are rather weak. They believed teacher educators do not continuously give feedbacks to student teachers and do not follow the student teachers' progress to see whether they are getting better or not. For instance, GST10 commented:

School mentors did not assess our teaching at all; off and on they might have given oral feedback to us. Though some of the practicum educators at university, tried hard, read our reports and supervised all steps we took during the courses, most of them didn't take practicum serious. If mentors and university educators assess the student teachers' teaching activities in the school and give them necessary feedback on the spot, they can do their best to overcome the negative and weak aspects"

In the same vein, ST7 commented:

"While I attended the school, no one evaluated my performance dynamically. The mentors and school staff signed and sealed a letter, indicating that I observed the classes"

The second problem of practicum as reported by 19(76%) of the participants was thematically coded as mentors' lack of skills and confidence to support the student teachers. Though based on the documents of Farhangian University, mentors or experienced teachers at school should play an important role in helping the STs, the informants believe that some of them do not have the required skills and enough confidence to support and give effective feedback to the student teachers. As an example, ST1 commented:

Once I asked my school mentor what happens if the students do not like learning English, and what I should do in that case, I expected him to give a solution, surprisingly; he said why you expect everyone to learn English.

The next extracted theme as reported by 17(68%) of the participants was coded as working overload of teacher educators and school mentors. Based on the interviews, it was found that school mentors teach in different schools and institutes. Teacher educators also teach many courses at different universities and handling the practicum courses is very demanding by itself. They need a lot of time reading the STs' reports and giving on the spot or delayed feedbacks or suggestions. The following comments exemplify the theme:

School teacher who was supposed to supervise and help was rarely available after the class, because he had to go to another class in a different school (GST9).

The fourth problem of practicum courses as reported by 13(52%) of the informants was thematically coded as mismatches between the student teachers and school mentors' pedagogical and language knowledge. Student teachers are fresh, more proficient in English language skills and they are very familiar with the recent theories of learning, teaching, educational psychology, and the use of technology in EFL classes. However, the school teachers are aware of ineffectiveness of some teaching methods and develop their own teaching theories. For instance, ST3 commented:

The teacher whom I visited at school was not aware of CALL, and educational apps, he had many pronunciation errors and believed that task-based language teaching, and collaborative teaching are ineffective.

The fifth extracted theme was thematically coded economic and logistic problem. About 48% of the informants argued that commuting to the placement schools was not easy and they were not able to afford the travel fees. ST 14 stated:

I had to wait at least half an hour each day for the bus. I had to go to a school, which was about 25 kilometers away from the university campus. Sometimes I had to rent a car and car fee was too expensive

One of the recently graduated student teachers (GST 13) commented:

On rainy and snow days, there was no taxi to take us to the schools. There were buses and cars at university but they were not used for transmitting the students.

The sixth extracted theme turned out to be “Mentors’ resistance to student-teachers’ and teacher educators’ innovations and suggestions”. 12 (48%) of the informants believed that school teachers did not welcome their innovations in teaching and suggestions. GST 10 stated:

Once I told the school teacher that it is better to use educational games in the classroom to teach vocabulary rather than asking the students to memorize them in isolation, however, the school teacher said “memorization is the best strategy for learning vocabulary.

The seventh extracted theme was coded as “Unfavorable physical condition of the school”. Based on the informants’ observations and reflections (11, 44%), because of lack of air-conditioner, lack of enough seats for the students and visiting student teachers, small size of the classroom, and its overcrowdedness, the physical climate of the schools was rated as unfavorable. ST 9 commented:

Some classes, which I observed were overcrowded, three students stood up and gave their seats to me and the other two visiting student teachers.

The eighth extracted challenge turned out to be “Unfavorable psychosocial climate of the school”. About 40% (10) of the informants believed that the school and university climates are psycho-socially different. At schools, some rude students make fun of each other and insult the teachers and their classmates. The students’ behaviors greatly affect the student teachers’ attitude and motivations for teaching. Quotation from GST 11 exemplifies the theme:

Each session I visited the school, I heard the students insulting each other, backbiting the teacher, breaking the chairs, making noise and making fun of each other.

The ninth problem as explained by 10(40%) of the informants was thematically coded as the “Lack of mentors’ dedication to the practicum course and not cooperating with the STs”. Based on the interviews and the informants’ reflections, it is inferred that the school teachers and staff are not fully dedicated to the program. They do not send the student teachers to English language classes and they do not care whether the student teachers are satisfied or not. The following quotations exemplify the extracted themes:

I remember when I entered the school, the manager told me there is no vacant seat in English class, and you can go to the yard and play football with the students (ST 2).

“We should have had practice teaching at school but some mentors didn’t allow us to deliver our teaching activities either for lack of trust or time” (GST6).

The tenth problem was coded lack of objective criteria for program evaluation. Informants believe that there is no valid rubric to evaluate the student teachers’ achievement. In other words, practicum program is evaluated subjectively rather objectively. ST 5 commented:

My practicum courses were evaluated based on the number of narratives or reflection essays and the school teachers and educators’ comments on our reports and presence at school. Even if the rubrics are well designed they are not implemented correctly. Some of our university educators didn’t read our narratives before the final assessment while the others were so strict. I guess a clear and standard rubric is needed to be administered at all universities for all teachers.

The last extracted problem was coded lack of group reflections and discussion on practicum courses. Based on the interviews with the informants, it could be inferred that practicum courses lacks appropriate group discussions and reflections. The teaching practice of a teacher candidate needs to be discussed by a group consisting of experienced teachers, student teachers, mentors, and teacher educators. GST 8 commented:

We didn’t have enough reflective discussions on the quality of the practicum course. Each student was supposed to write reflective report, but there was no group discussion. Now, at school, we have group discussion and we learn from each other.

6. Discussion

The main aim of teacher education programs is to prepare student teachers for their future profession in both practical and theoretical aspects of language teaching. At the ELT Department of Farhangian University branches in Iran, in addition to the courses related to the field of study and general knowledge, practicum courses are offered. Therefore, the main rationale for the inclusion of practicum courses is to help the student teachers link theories to practice by taking related theoretical courses at university and practicing teaching skills at the placement schools during the practicum. This study aimed at evaluating the practicum courses from the STs’ and recently GSTs’ perspectives. Results showed that despite some advantages, practicum courses have their own problems. With regard to the advantages of this type of course, it was found that they replace passive learning with active learning and help the practicum participants realize some essential concepts about textbooks, facilities, and school atmosphere. The findings are echoing Yin (2012, 2018 & 2019) and Hennissen Beckers, and Moerkerkeal (2017), who

argued that practicum courses help student teachers link their preconceptions and theoretical knowledge of teaching with their practices while attending the placement schools.

It was also found that practicum courses develop the student teachers' confidence and their psychological and mental readiness. Therefore, in line with Yin (2019), it can be strongly suggested that practicum courses increase the student teachers' motivation and their self-efficacy and when they have high self-efficacy, they can overcome the negative feelings and, as a result, get ready for the teaching profession.

Another finding was that student teachers through attending placement schools during practicum courses develop their social life with the community, change their attitudes towards the teaching profession, and assess their weaknesses in teaching. These extracted advantages of the practicum are in line with a few of the related studies (e.g., da Silva & Teixeira, 2013; Ng & Feldman, 2007; Linnehan, 2003). The main finding of these studies is that when students apply theoretical knowledge to practice and actively assume responsibilities, the learning gained from the internship effectively turns into skills, which in turn contributes to the feeling of being mentally prepared for professional practice. The internship also helps the student teachers define interests and their identity which results in gains in terms of vocational exploration and increases their confidence to do the future profession.

With regard to the shortcomings of the practicum courses, we found that student teachers were not satisfied with the assessment procedure. They believed that the practicum program is not assessed dynamically and there is not enough monitoring and feedback. As the main objective of the practicum course is to help the student teachers learn about teaching, the best type of assessment is assessment for learning rather than an assessment of learning. Wiliam (2007) and Brookhart (2007) believe that formative assessment provides information about the learning process that teachers can use for instructional decisions and students can use for improving their performance. The next extracted problematic area is teachers' lack of group reflective thinking about the practicum. The participants' justification for reflective thinking confirms Choy and Oo (2012) who argue that reflective thinking is very essential for pre-service teachers, as it will help them to make good professional decisions rather than simply follow the scripted and transcribed lesson plans without reflection and improvising.

Informants of the study also contend that school teachers' resistance to the student teachers' motivations and differences between student teachers' and mentors' pedagogical and language knowledge are some other weak points of the practicum courses. The main justification is that student teachers are fresh, updated, and more familiar with the advancement in the teaching methods than the school mentors are. Such a gap between mentors and student teachers results in mentors' reluctance to welcome the student teachers' ideas and suggestions. Moreover, they are not willing to offer their classes to STs to conduct their practice teachings.

The findings also confirm some of the related studies (e.g., Hobson et al., 2008; Korthagen & Wubbels, 2001; Mattsson et al., 2011; Yan & He 2010; Zeichner, 2010) who have argued that lack of

communication between the practicum and the academic program in the university is one of the major shortcomings in teacher training programs. Furthermore, the physical and psycho-social climate of the school makes practicum courses less interesting for the student teachers. Therefore, based on this finding, it could be inferred that at least less crowded classes at the placement schools should be assigned to the student teachers.

Regarding the assessment procedure of the practicum courses, as pointed out by the informants of this study, the student teachers' scores on the practicum program should be used as an indication of their competency for real teaching at schools and part of the criterion for graduation from university. Accordingly, a re-examination of the current pre-service ELT curriculum is needed to evaluate the balance between the test takers' scores on theoretical courses and the practicum program.

More specifically, the courses offered before the practicum need to take into account what reflection and teaching are essential to help student teachers to use their maximum potentiality during the practicum. This reflection can allow the student teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts besides evaluating their applicability in the EFL classrooms.

Most importantly, the results call for an urgent educational policy that can maximize the student teachers' experience during the practicum. This shift toward expanding the student teachers' experiences does not necessarily mean an increase in microteaching practices in ELT program courses (Chang et al., 2008). However, it means that it is urgent to go beyond the university by collaborating with and sharing knowledge with school teachers (Bartholomew & Sandholts, 2009) and building a strong connection between the practicum and the theoretical courses of the ELT program (Eom & Uhm, 2010). In line with Lee (2014), a follow-up program, which provides opportunities for student teachers to stay in touch with the school settings and teachers, is needed. Such a partnership help the school teachers bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical courses and make a smooth transition from the theoretical and practical courses of the pre-service training to the real classroom.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, the practicum courses change the student teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession and make them mentally and psychologically ready for real teaching. They also increase teachers' cognition of the realities of teaching and help them diagnose their shortcomings and strength. Although through attending practicum, the student teachers can improve their teaching skills, an objective rubric for assessing the ELT student teachers is needed to be considered as a standard criterion of their qualification. In addition, reflective discussions are needed through which the student teachers, mentots, and practicum educators share knowledge and comment on the student teachers' presentations in EFL classes. More importantly, the school principals', mentors', and school teachers' cognition of the significant role which practicum courses play need to be reshaped through in-service training courses. Though at Farhangian University the principles and framework of practicum courses are well-developed,

what is much more important is how they are implemented. Unfortunately, the major problem from which the participants mostly suffered was the administration of these courses. Finally, as this study was undertaken in a specific context, large scale multi-method research studies are needed to see whether sample size, the context of the study, and the student teachers' major affect the findings. In this study, practicum educators', student teachers', graduated student teachers', and school mentors' perceptions about practicum courses were not compared. The other researchers are suggested to replicate the study to see whether these groups have the same perceptions on how practicum courses work. Findings can be used by teacher training institutes, practicum educators, school mentors, and EFL student teachers.

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