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'I Think My Teacher Needs A Change': A Reflective Exploration on the Practicum of Prospective Teachers of English

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ABSTRACT

The teaching practicum is a valuable source of experience for prospective teachers of English. This study aims to scrutinise prospective teachers' experiences throughout a practicum course by investigating their written reflective reports collected over a ten-week period. In order to examine the dimensions of practicum-based experiences, qualitative data collected from 24 participants have been analysed through a thematic content analysis. Findings show that prospective teachers form their practicum experiences primarily based on three dimensions: (a) learning environment, (b) mentor teachers, and (c) students. Themes emerging from these dimensions have been found to include both positive and negative aspects according to participants' reflective viewpoints. Consequently, it is discussed that how these experiences pertaining to different dimensions interrelate with each other is important for understanding what affordances practicum can offer to prospective teachers of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is a comprehensive process designed to train pedagogically competent prospective teachers by equipping them with necessary theoretical and practical knowledge and skills. In this line, teacher education has the responsibility to maximise prospective teachers' learning experience to make them effective instructors. A key contributor to this is a component widely referred to as the teaching practicum, which teacher trainees are required to complete before finishing their initial education programmes (Gebhard, 2009; Tang, 2004; Yuan & Lee, 2014). The teaching practicum aims to introduce prospective teachers to a real classroom environment and to help them bridge the gap between theory and practice through hands-on experiences with teaching materials, mentor teachers, and students in practicum schools (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020; Grudnoff, 2011). Therefore, the practicum has long remained a point of interest in educational research with different facets and features investigated (Cabaroglu & Oz, 2023; Cohen et al., 2013).

It is shown that experiences gained in the course of practicum play an important role in determining prospective teachers' future endeavours (Yuan & Lee, 2014) and teacher identity (Olsen, 2008; Trent, 2013; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Although such experiences make it a valuable opportunity to reflect upon their beliefs about teaching and learning, not every prospective teacher attending a practicum course goes through the same set of experiences or improves their related competencies in the same way (Tavil & Gungor, 2017). What prospective teachers learn is not always maintained over time (Scheeler, 2008), or their perceived beliefs and ideas may not necessarily transform into observable actions (Hall, 2011). These dilemmas that may stem from a hands-on practice in a real classroom environment signify the teaching practicum as a critical component of teacher education upon which trainees could reflect and explore the extent of their pedagogical identity development (Hong et al., 2017).

In keeping with the socially complex nature of teaching in a language classroom (Breen, 2001), the present inquiry aims to examine the internal mechanisms of the teaching practicum from the perspective of prospective teachers of English. Whilst the teaching practicum has gathered widespread acknowledgment as a crucial component of teacher training (Wright, 2010), what prospective teachers may (or should) choose to focus on in this process remains an issue of controversy. Given the significance of the practicum experience in shaping future teaching practices (Yuan & Lee, 2014), a closer look at the points chosen to be reflected upon by prospective teachers during a practicum course could be revealing as to how the teaching practicum may contribute to their pedagogical competence and teacher identity. Accordingly, this qualitative study aims to give voice to what prospective teachers say, criticise, or uphold about their teaching practicum experience. Concerning this, the current objective is to investigate the nature and the extent of prospective teachers' written reflections on a practicum course in an English language teaching (ELT) programme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An In-depth Look at the Practicum

Prospective teachers tend to gradually shape their teaching practices and beliefs as a result of interacting with university supervisors and those in practicum schools (Wang et al., 2022). In this respect, the teaching practicum signifies an important landmark in prospective teachers' developing pedagogical identity (Gebhard, 2009; Tang, 2004; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2019). Notwithstanding slight variations across different contexts, a practicum in ELT usually takes place in the last year of teacher education programmes and places prospective teachers into practicum schools under the supervision of a university supervisor and a mentor teacher for a specified period (Cabaroglu & Oz, 2023). As one of the basic requirements for becoming an in-service teacher, a practicum typically includes reflective observations and teaching experiences under the supervision of a mentor teacher.

Teacher education programmes have long recognised the importance of providing prospective teachers with the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts and pedagogical strategies learnt in their coursework to a real-world classroom setting. It allows prospective teachers of English to practise teaching (Clarke & Collins, 2007; Farrell, 2008; Gebhard, 2009; Nguyen, 2014; Vo et al., 2018), develop their pedagogical skills (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Phan & Locke, 2016), and gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the profession under the guidance of experienced mentor teachers and university supervisors (Grudnoff, 2011). For instance, prospective teachers of English may learn about classroom management strategies in their coursework, but it is only through a real classroom setting that they can put these strategies into practice (Cheng et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2017) and see whether they function as intended or not. It also creates an opportunity for prospective teachers of English to gain a set of responsibilities (Tuli & File, 2009), try new techniques (Debreli, 2019), and raise their awareness of critical issues like social justice (Sun, 2021). Mastering such diverse abilities is complementary to successful teaching and cannot be entirely cultivated through theoretical understanding.

Furthermore, prospective teachers of English observe and gain insights from knowledgeable mentor teachers during practicum sessions (Virtic et

al., 2023). These mentor teachers can serve as role models (Lunenberg et al., 2007) and provide valuable feedback and guidance on teaching practices (Aydin & Ok, 2020; Haigh et al., 2008). As well as mentor teachers, teacher educators act as co-inquirers in the development of effective teaching practices (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Overton, 2018; Schwille, 2008). Acting as university supervisors during the practicum period, teacher educators provide proper guidance and 'educative mentoring' (Trevethan, 2017) for prospective teachers of English as they navigate through the complexities of the classroom environment and critically reflect upon their observations and new experiences. Moreover, Overton (2018) has emphasised that mentor teachers and teacher educators should work closely with prospective teachers as partners in the process of exploring and understanding the challenges in a real classroom setting. In this respect, prospective teachers of English could develop a deeper understanding of the teaching profession and gain a greater appreciation of the knowledge and skills that are required for effective pedagogy. It is, however, important to understand that the teaching practicum is also prone to tensions between school and university communities due to possibly conflicting ideological beliefs and practices (He & Lin, 2013), which are likely to influence the identity formation of prospective teachers.

The Reflective Engagement of Prospective Teachers in the Practicum

Previous studies on the ELT practicum have indicated that prospective teachers' active involvement in the teaching practicum can yield substantial development, both professionally and personally (Bilki & Irgin, 2022; Cakmak & Gunduz, 2019; Christiansen et al., 2021; Clarke & Collins, 2007; Trevethan, 2017). Whilst engaging in reflective and observational practices, prospective English teachers often form a range of feelings and thoughts about their practicum experience (Celen & Akcan, 2017). Some may feel nervous or anxious about their ability to teach actual students whilst others may feel excited and eager to put their skills to the test, which highlights reflections made by prospective teachers as an important source of data that could help acknowledge probable issues

and then make an effort to find a solution (Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2023) and evaluate the usefulness of practicum for their development (Celen & Akcan, 2017; Genc & Buyukkarci, 2013).

Hickson (2011) aptly states that reflection transcends mere contemplation of past experiences, since it incorporates a critical element into the process. This reflective process should ideally encompass not only discrete teaching incidents but also the wider context of prospective teachers' development throughout their training programme (Mansvelder-Longayroux et al., 2007). In Lane and colleagues' (2014) framework, reflections in teacher education may be done at varying levels, ranging from descriptive accounts of lived experiences to evaluative perspectives on pedagogical practices based on one's preferred principles and theories (see Chan & Elliott, 2004). Research accordingly shows that as a result of reflective engagement in the practicum, prospective teachers may become aware of the realities of school environments (Tavil & Gungor, 2017; Seban, 2015), develop positive or negative experiences (Kosar & Bedir, 2019) and attitudes towards teaching (Atay, 2007), and find opportunities to (re)calibrate their pedagogical beliefs and actions (Loo et al., 2019).

In this vein, reflective observations on teaching experiences in the practicum school play a crucial role in enabling prospective teachers to engage in the process (Aslan et al., 2022; Merc, 2015) and afford them a valuable opportunity to voice their opinions based on their shifting teacher identity (Hong, 2010; Hong et al., 2017). One of the main objectives of reflective observations is to provide teacher candidates with an opportunity to evaluate and critically analyse the teaching strategies and techniques used by mentor teachers (Karagoz & Ruzgar, 2020; Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2023). According to Trevethan (2017), mentor teachers are expected to serve as role models by showcasing their expertise in contemporary practices and resources, along with exemplary teaching skills. Similarly, prospective teachers could expect to learn from their mentor teachers through critical observation, feedback, and collaboration (Aydin & Ok, 2020; Nguyen & Ngo, 2018; Vo et al., 2018).

Relevant research shows that prospective teachers, indeed, become acquainted with the

practicalities of instructional processes in a real classroom during the practicum and, through reflecting upon their experiences, they 'can develop strategies to cope with the problems and challenges of teaching the target [English] language' (Komur, 2010, p. 292). This reflective process also makes it possible to construct a more confident and authentic teaching style (Lawson et al., 2015; Poulou, 2007), grounded in a clear sense of their professional identity through evidence-based learning (Bilki & Irgin, 2022). As well as engagement through observation, field practice provides an invaluable opportunity for prospective teachers to participate actively in an authentic teaching experience (Loughran & Hamilton, 2016; Worthy, 2005), confronting the challenges and entanglements of the real classroom environment (Buchanan & Maher, 2018; Komur, 2010; Lu et al., 2022). It is, nonetheless, the fact that what is necessary for a prospective teacher to focus on or interact with during a practicum course is largely taken for granted. There is little research exploring the multidimensional structure of heterogenous experiences reflected upon in the course of teaching practicum, which is the gap aimed to be filled by the current study.

Method

This study employs a basic qualitative research design to investigate the experiences of prospective teachers of English during their teaching practicum. The research centres its focus on individuals' lived experiences and how these experiences are realised in one's consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A comprehensive qualitative data set has been formed using a series of written reports that contain the participants' reflective observations during the practicum. Focusing on the descriptions and evaluations of prospective teachers' various experiences throughout a semester, the study aims at an in-depth investigation of subjective reflections on the teaching practicum.

Setting and Participants
The study setting comprises a state university and two public middle schools located in Turkey. In this context, the practicum takes place in the final year

of the ELT bachelor's degree programme. Throughout this practicum course, prospective teachers of English have attended theoretical classes at their university and carried out some teaching tasks under the supervision of mentor teachers in a real-life classroom setting. The participants are enrolled in the same programme, yet they have been divided into two groups, each group attending a different public school. The module of practicum has lasted a total of 12 weeks in which the participants were asked to write reflective reports based on their experiences for a ten-week period. These reflective observations have encompassed general subjects related to the field of ELT, such as the features of learning environment, mentor teachers, and students.

A total of 24 prospective teachers of English have given their consent to participate in the study, who have been under the supervision of two faculty members at their university and four mentor teachers at the practicum schools where they have conducted reflective observations. 16 of the participants were females, and 8 were males, whose ages ranged from 23 to 28 with an average of 23.8 (SD=1.1). Table 1 presents information regarding the distribution of the participants in practicum schools and across the mentor teachers as well as supervisors. The schools have been categorised into two groups, labelled A and B. In school A, the mentor teachers for participants 1 to 6 and for participants 7 to 12 were Ms. E. and Mr. F., respectively. Similarly, in school B, participants 13 to 18 were placed under the mentorship of Mr H., whereas participants 19 to 24 were assigned to Mr. M.

Table 1. School and mentorship distribution amongst participant groups

Participants	School	Mentor Teacher
P1-P6	A	Ms. E.
P7-P12	A	Mr. F.
P13-18	B	Mr. H.
P19-24	B	Mr. M.

Dividing the participants into two practicum schools under the supervision of a total of four mentor teachers has made it possible to capture multi-faceted features of the teaching practicum. In addition to enabling us to investigate how individual

perspectives shape the reflections on the practicum, this approach has provided rich data regarding the overlapping or differing variations of the implementation of practicum across different schools and mentor teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the beginning of the data collection, the university supervisors provided prospective teachers of English with general guidelines regarding the dimensions of classroom practices that were to be observed in the course of the practicum. Of a 12-week practicum course, the process of data collection has lasted for a ten-week period. Throughout the data collection, each participant was asked to submit ten reflection papers based on their observations conducted in their assigned mentor teachers' classes in respective practicum schools. Excluding missing ones, a total of 225 reflective observation reports collected from 24 participants have constituted the qualitative data set. In the 12-week practicum, the participants have been provided with opportunities to receive guidance and clarification in regard to any questions or concerns that arose in relation to the reflective process. They were, nevertheless, free to choose what specific points to focus on in these reports, which has been encouraged by the university supervisors in order to highlight how their perspectives might coincide or differ around the shared practicum experience.

A brief review of the literature posits written reflection papers as a robust data collection tool in discovering prospective teachers' own insights or challenges (Cabaroglu & Oz, 2023; Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2023). Similarly, the current study has utilised reflective observation reports as the primary data source. The written qualitative data have been analysed through a thematic approach that enables the identification and interpretation of common patterns in the data, with the aid of MAXQDA software. This analysis has allowed for an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and interactions in their natural settings. The use of MAXQDA software can be said to have further facilitated the organisation and management of the vast amount of relatively unstructured qualitative data examined in the study.

The written reports have been coded collaboratively and iteratively by the two researchers, in alignment with the principles of collaborative qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). In detail, the thematic analysis of the data has consisted of four consecutive steps. First, the fundamental dimensions of the teaching practicum, as touched upon by the participants, were identified (i.e. learning environment, students, and mentor teacher) to provide a basis for the following coding cycles. Second, a first cycle coding was carried out concerning the dimensions identified in the previous step. The first cycle coding adopted an exploratory inductive approach, and methods utilised by the researchers largely involved a combination of descriptive-coding and process-coding procedures (Saldana, 2016). Third, the coding categories created in the first cycle period were negotiated and refined through discussion to ensure internal validity (Miles et al., 2019). In this negotiation, the codes that were excessively overlapping with one another in terms of content and labelling were merged into common themes, and the ones with inconsequentially low frequencies were aggregated under more comprehensive themes. Fourth, a focused coding procedure was carried out as a second cycle process to classify the codes into positive and negative themes. In addition to the coded themes presented in frequencies and percentages, corresponding quotations from the participants have been provided to support the findings and substantiate the in-depth qualitative approach.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The practicum experience is not confined to the mere participation of prospective teachers in a classroom setting for a limited duration, as it consists of a complex system surpassing individual considerations (Clarke & Collins, 2007). To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate nature of the practicum, it is crucial to consider the diverse elements involved in it. Each component brings a unique perspective and set of expectations to the teaching practicum, and it is essential to understand how their interactions and relationships might affect prospective teachers' shared experiences in different ways.

Over the course of the ten-week period, the participants have touched upon both positive and negative points in their reflective observations. This finding supports the idea that the practicum could yield both positive and negative attitudes or experiences for prospective teachers (Atay, 2007; Loo et al., 2019). Overall, a total frequency of 862 positive and 827 negative reflections have emerged in the analysed data. This reveals a balance, or perhaps an ambivalence in some cases, about the nature of the teaching practicum, signifying the complexity of a real classroom environment (Grudnoff, 2011). Our exploratory qualitative approach to the practicum experience makes it feasible to present the research findings in three major dimensions. These are related to the participants' reflections about the learning environment, mentor teachers, and students, which coincide with the main elements that prospective teachers interact during a practicum course (Wang et al., 2022).

Overall, the participants' reflections are composed of a fairly balanced relationship between positive and negative observations (f=862 positive, f=827 negative in total). Nonetheless, when examined in detail, it becomes evident that the prospective teachers of English have shown a considerable variation in how they approach to the different constituents that shape their teaching practicum experience. Similar to what has been reported in previous research as efficient or inefficient aspects of the practicum (e.g. Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2018; Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2023), the participants have reflected on what they found useful positively whilst remarking negatively on certain shortcomings or challenges. In terms of overall percentages, the comments made by the participants are largely negative for the learning environment in

which they have practised teaching (f=65 positive, f=199 negative), somewhat neutral for the mentor teachers who have guided and supervised them in English classes (f=442 positive, f=431 negative), and mostly positive for students with whom they have interacted during practicum hours (f=355 positive, f=197 negative). The details and themes that have been identified within these three dimensions are presented in the following sections.

Practicum Experiences Related to the Learning Environment

The participants have focused on 15 common aspects related to the learning environment in which they have practised teaching and conducted observations. The themes that are associated with positive experiences include physical properties and amenities (e.g. physical condition of classrooms, amenities present in the school, technological equipment, clean areas), good classroom layout (e.g. liability to in-class activities, visibility of the teacher and students etc.), peripheral learning (e.g. English content located in the near environment), safety (e.g. measures taken to prevent accidents), and efficient materials (e.g. coursebooks and other materials). The following quotations show some examples of the participants' positive experiences.

> When I entered the school, I saw that there was a gymnasium, and it was quite large. It was located on the ground floor of the school. I walked towards the entrance section of the school. I saw such a colourful wall that I examined it for almost ten minutes. Some historical events were pictured, and this was so impressive for me. (Physical properties/amenities, P5)
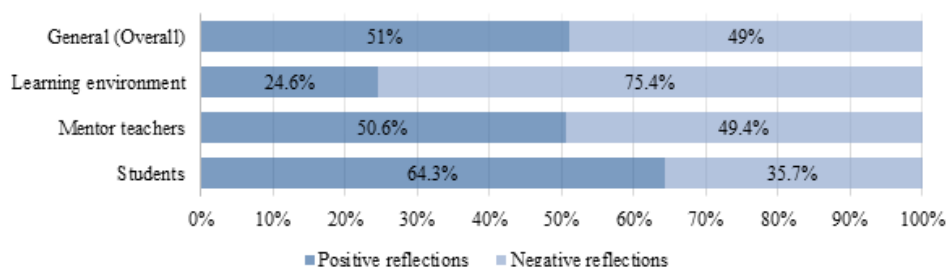

Fig. 1: The participants' reflective inclinations towards the ELT practicum

The teacher's desk was by the window in the classroom and the teacher could be seen by all students. Also, the teacher sees each student easily. (Good classroom layout, P16)

On the other hand, the negative themes comprise inefficient materials (e.g. unproductive activities in coursebooks, lack of supplementary teaching materials), class size/crowdedness (e.g. crowded classes, insufficient classroom sizes), bad classroom layout (e.g. layout preventing doing certain activities like groupwork), not being attractive (e.g. environment being dull and boring), traditional educational context (e.g. effects of wider socio-cultural context on education), exam-orientedness (e.g. preparing students for a specific exam, causing a sort of tunnel vision), poor sanitation (e.g. not creating an environment safe from pathogens and other contaminants), lack of security (e.g. not taking steps to ensure students' safety in the school), and short lesson hours (e.g. duration of lessons limiting the way of teaching). The following are a few examples that represent negative experiences encountered.

I think that the MEB [Ministry of National Education] books used in our education system also have an effect on this. Because if we look at the speaking activities in the book, it limits the interaction between the student and the teacher. It does not contain dynamic, real-life texts. Speaking activities do not prompt students to speak. (Inefficient materials, P15)

The rows are arranged in rows with the traditional front and back configuration. It is exceedingly challenging to create an interactive learning environment at this time. The students at the rear may not occasionally focus on the lesson as a result of this. (Bad classroom layout, P8)

There are classes where the teacher is active rather than the student. The student does not defend any opinion, put forward an opinion, argue, or do anything to support his or her opinion. If the teacher asks, he/she answers and remains silent. (Traditional educational context, P23)

Considering that the learning environment is a significant factor in determining how the teacher and

Table 2: Themes and frequencies related to the learning environment

Emerging themes	Number of segments coded	
	f	%
Positive experiences		
Physical properties/amenities	25	9.5
Good classroom layout	15	5.7
Peripheral learning	9	3.4
Ideal class size	8	3
Safety	6	2.3
Efficient materials	2	0.8
Negative experiences		
Inefficient materials	33	12.5
Class size/crowdedness	32	12.1
Bad classroom layout	32	12.1
Not being attractive	31	11.7
Traditional educational context	26	9.8
Exam-orientedness	14	5.3
Poor sanitation	12	4.5
Lack of security	11	4.2
Short lesson hours	8	3

students behave and interact with each other in many ways (Buchanan & Maher, 2018), what prospective teachers perceive to be positive aspects could be facilitating whilst those that are negative could come across as possible challenges. Therefore, prospective teachers need to comprehend the contextual details pertaining to the environment of the teaching practicum (Starkey & Rawlins, 2012), which could affect the types and profoundness of experiences they are likely to gain. Given the impact of the learning environment on emotional and cognitive engagement (Halverson & Graham, 2019; Seban, 2015), it holds a crucial position in this study for interpreting the participants' critical reflections.

The findings have revealed that the participants perceived the foreign language classroom as a multi-faceted environment encompassing various physical and educational aspects. This finding, in a way, shows that the physicality of a particular learning environment should not be taken for

granted, as what is (not) present in that environment becomes inextricably intertwined with one another, constituting a sort of complex educational ecosystem (Clarke & Collins, 2007; Grudnoff, 2011). Because environmental analysis is a critical process that requires a principled awareness of external and internal factors (Nation & Macalister, 2010), it could strike as a positive outcome that the participants have been able to recognise different elements existing in their instructional settings. As such, the reflections regarding the learning environment have focused on both physical and educational aspects and tended to be rather negative on average (see Figure 1).

Most of the positive aspects highlighted by the participants are related to physical properties, such as the physical condition of the school and classrooms; whilst the majority of negative ones tend to include educational factors. It is long discussed that environmental variables play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics and motivation of teaching and learning in the classroom (Olsen, 2008; Wu, 2003). Thus, it could be interpreted as a dire situation that there is a scarcity of positive reflections regarding the participants' instructional environment in the practicum. These negative experiences stemming from the surrounding environment could adversely affect prospective teachers' continuous identity development (Seban, 2015). However, the practicum does not only yield negative experiences for prospective teachers since the participants have tended to focus on the positive aspects related to students in classes they have taught or made observations despite their negative sentiments about the learning environment (see Figure 1).

In general, it has been observed that the participants tend to give greater attention to negative experiences than positive ones regarding the learning environment. This suggests that prospective teachers of English may have some unrealistic expectations for the learning environment, possibly leading to disappointment when they are not met. In this line, the teaching practicum can be said to function as a platform for introducing the various realities of a learning environment to prospective teachers (Grudnoff, 2011; Komur, 2010; Tavil & Gungor, 2017). Considering the participants' emphasis on

educational aspects like 'inefficient materials', it is crucial to investigate the factors that contribute to the negative perception of the learning environment concerning dynamic and static features. Whilst it is difficult to make a change in static features in the short term, such as physical properties; dynamic features, including teaching materials, could be comparatively easy to treat. Thus, inefficient materials and how such educational aspects impact the effectiveness of the learning process during a practicum course should be approached in a context-sensitive manner because of the duality originating from the physical and educational factors affecting the learning environment.

Practicum Experiences Related to Mentor Teachers

Another dimension that affects the practicum experience includes mentor teachers who guide and supervise prospective teachers of English. The findings have revealed 31 distinct aspects regarding the mentor teachers observed in practicum classes. The positive aspects are classroom/time management (e.g. having a good command of the class and using time effectively), being encouraging (e.g. motivating and encouraging students to do something), being mindful and friendly (e.g. approaching students in a caring manner), scaffolding (e.g. helping students particularly when they struggle in certain tasks), grabbing students' attention (e.g. providing interesting examples to foster attention), guidance for L2 use (e.g. giving students chances to use English), use of digital resources (e.g. using the smartboard for digital games and videos), giving clear explanations (e.g. making explanations that can easily be understood by students), constructive feedback (e.g. giving feedback for students' foreign language development), body language and voice (e.g. using body language and voice effectively, establishing eye contact), activating prior knowledge (e.g. reminding students of what they have previously learnt to build upon this knowledge), using interactive activities (e.g. carrying out more communicative activities like pairwork and groupwork), L2 use (e.g. using English as a vehicle for communication), being seen as a role model (e.g. demonstrating exemplary behaviours

for prospective teachers of English), iteration and noticing (e.g. repeating new knowledge multiple times, making students notice salient parts), and using realia (e.g. bringing real-life materials into the classroom). The following examples show how these positive experiences were expressed by the participants.

> I've never seen a class go crazy in [Mr. M]'s period of time because when students pay attention to talk to each other and make noises or get too noisy, [Mr. M] figures out some solutions. (Classroom/ time management, P20)

> The teacher acted like a facilitator to encourage students to think deeply and to justify their responses, enabling them to build on each other's ideas. (Encouraging, P6)

> When there's a negative situation, he prefers to warn them politely; and when they make mistakes, he never embarrassed them. (Mindful and friendly, P11)

In addition, the analysis has revealed a number of negative aspects highlighted in the written reflections. The reported negative experiences include teacher-authoritative instruction (e.g. the teacher dominating what goes in the classroom), poor classroom/time management (e.g. ineffective command of the class and poor time management), traditional methods (e.g. sticking to time-worn methods and techniques), using mother tongue (e.g. using Turkish as a vehicle for communication rather than English), demotivating students (e.g. discouraging students through unfavourable behaviours), lack of communicative activities (e.g. not using interactive activities such as information and opinion gap), unfavourable personal traits (e.g. possessing certain traits that may be offensive, being rude), being resistant to change (e.g. refusing to try out novel ideas and approaches), coursebook-driven instruction (e.g. strictly adhering to the given coursebook in teaching), no warm-ups (e.g. directly jumping into the main activities), scarcity of feedback (e.g. not providing feedback to student mistakes when needed), inadequate content knowledge (e.g. shortcomings in grammar and pronunciation), unclear

instructions (e.g. giving confusing instructions to students), being disorganised (e.g. being unprepared for classes), and not utilising diverse resources (e.g. not supporting learning with enough materials). The quotations given below exemplify some of the negative experiences encountered in the teaching practicum.

> Because of the teacher's attitude, the interactions are also guided by the teacher. There is interaction in the classroom as much as the teacher allows, but in general, it is an interaction directed at himself or activities. (Teacher-authoritative, P19)

> If the class doesn't stop talking, she looks them in the eye with great anger in her eyes and tells that those who continue to talk will be punished with extra homework or by informing their parents. (Classroom/time management, P4)

> I think my [mentor] teacher needs a change in the types of teaching talk he utilises. Because I know the level of the class, and I think the class should be able to learn lots with the help of their teacher. (Resistant to change, P16)

> The teacher generally uses the GTM [Grammar Translation Method] in all lessons. (Traditional method, P18)

It is well discussed in the literature that novice teachers can greatly benefit from the provision of direct support and guidance by experienced teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), which is also known as educative mentoring in initial teacher education (Trevethan, 2017). In this vein, one of the natural expectations of prospective teachers is to learn from mentor teachers (Cakmak & Gunduz, 2018; Vo et al., 2018). The positive aspects the participants have highlighted largely include areas where they have managed to learn something from their respective mentor teacher, whereas negative ones coincide with practices perceived to be inefficient or futile. It should, however, be noted that learning done by prospective teachers could be twofold. First, prospective teachers of English can criticise teaching practices applied by their mentor teachers (Genc & Buyukkarci, 2013) during practicum observations, which will help them acquire the ability to apply

Table 3: Themes and frequencies related to the mentor teachers

Emerging themes	Number of segments coded	
	f	%
Positive experiences		
Classroom/time management	83	9.5
Encouraging	50	5.7
Mindful and friendly	47	5.4
Scaffolding	38	4.4
Grabbing students' attention	32	3.7
Guidance for L2 use	28	3.2
Use of digital resources	27	3.1
Giving clear explanations	25	2.9
Constructive feedback	21	2.4
Body language, eye contact, voice	20	2.3
Activating prior knowledge	20	2.3
Interactive activities	16	1.8
L2 use	14	1.6
Role model	11	1.3
Iteration and noticing	6	0.7
Using realia	4	0.5
Negative experiences		
Teacher-authoritative	78	9.5
Classroom/time management	57	8.9
Traditional method	53	6.1
Using mother tongue	51	5.8
Demotivating students	34	3.9
Lack of communicative activities	33	3.8
Unfavourable personal traits	28	3.2
Resistant to change	23	2.6
Coursebook-driven instruction	20	2.3
No warm-ups	16	1.8
Scarcity of feedback	12	1.4
Inadequate content knowledge	10	1.1
Unclear instructions	7	0.8
Disorganised	6	0.7
Not utilising diverse resources	3	0.3

theoretical knowledge to teaching practices (Nguyen, 2014). Second, they could focus on exemplary actions carried out by the teachers (Lu et al., 2022) and try to carry these positive aspects into their own teaching (Wang et al., 2022).

Overall, the participants' approach to their assigned mentor teachers was somewhat neutral (see Figure 1). In the analysis of the reflective observation reports, some of the themes that stood out are good classroom and time management, being encouraging, and displaying a mindful and friendly attitude towards students. Most of these positive aspects that emerged in the findings confirm what prospective teachers typically seek in ideal mentor teachers (Ng et al., 2010), notably including positive personal attributes such as being encouraging, mindful, and friendly (Virtic et al., 2023). The findings also indicate that the participants have at times appreciated the mentor teachers' control of the classroom and instructional practices like scaffolding or guiding students for L2 English use. These positive aspects align well with the mentoring roles of acting as trainer-informant and a role model, both of which include demonstrating good instructional examples to prospective teachers (Aydin & Ok, 2020). The scope and content of these various positive experiences imply that the ELT practicum offers valuable opportunities to develop prospective teachers' competencies (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Lawson et al., 2015; Tavil & Gungor, 2017) and teacher identity (Hong et al., 2017; Trent, 2013).

As for the negative aspects, a prevailing sentiment has been discovered regarding the perceived shortcomings of mentor teachers as in-class facilitators. Specifically, it has been noted that the mentor teachers tended to exhibit a traditional way of teaching and dominant behaviour in the classroom, which has been perceived to be amongst the factors demeaning the effectiveness of teaching and classroom management. These findings demonstrate the complex nature of the teaching practicum (Breen, 2001; Clarke & Collins, 2007), with some facilitating as well as impeding features resulting in positive and negative attitudes developed by prospective teachers (Atay, 2007). It is particularly important to understand what underlies prospective teachers' negative experiences because such dissonances may force them to adjust their pedagogical actions or perceptions (Loo et al., 2019). Moreover, a negative relationship established with the mentor teacher

carries the risk of impeding a prospective teacher's developing identity (Yuan & Lee, 2016).

The negative themes emerged from the participants' reflections have uncovered that the mentor teachers sometimes exhibited deficiencies in fostering a communicative and interactive atmosphere amongst students. This encompasses what is often referred to as the traditional notion of teaching, which involves a model of one-way knowledge transmission from the teacher to students, with limited opportunities for interactive processes between them (Cheng et al., 2010). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the existence of counter-equivalents in these findings (e.g. traditional teaching as a negative experience and interactive activities as a positive experience) signifies that classroom instruction often involves a blend of teaching strategies (Chan & Elliott, 2004), with elements of both traditional teacher-centred and more interactive and collaborative approaches (Hall, 2011). The fact that the participants have favoured student-centred interactive approaches instead of teacher-centred ones also points to a persisting tension between university and practicum schools (He & Lin, 2013), which arguably results in a gap difficult to bridge between theory and practice (Cheng et al., 2010; Grudnoff, 2011).

Other important aspects interpreted negatively by the participants include the mentor teachers' expressing an undesirable attitude towards students (e.g. harshly criticising or failing to establish a positive relationship with students) and some ELT-specific features, such as the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. These findings support the idea that prospective teachers tend to dislike mentor teachers' harsh and controversial behaviours (Karagoz & Ruzgar, 2020; Virtic et al., 2023). Skills such as adaptability to change and building positive interpersonal relationships with students are deemed important elements in formal education (Cheng, 2013), about which prospective teachers need to learn through observation during a practicum course. Considering that the participants have critically appraised the mentor teachers based on several undesirable characteristics, the findings suggest that prospective teachers might have formed certain preconceptions about the features of a desired teacher beforehand (Christiansen et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2010). Regarding the ELT practicum, one of such features seems to be about the mother tongue use, which is Turkish, in the classroom. The participants have mostly regarded the use of Turkish in English classes as an inefficient teaching practice that limits the students' exposure, which is a finding especially important for foreign language contexts where English is not spoken as a first or second language (Lu et al., 2022; Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2018; Turhan & Kirkgoz, 2023).

Practicum Experiences Related to Students

Lastly, students in practicum schools have been found to make up an important part of the participants' practicum experience. In this respect, it has been revealed that a total of 19 aspects have been mentioned about the students who were in classrooms where the participants made reflective observations and practised teaching. The positive themes include being eager to learn (e.g. having a focused desire to learn about a subject), interactions in L2 (e.g. students interacting with one another using English), being active participants (e.g. students actively participating in an ongoing activity by giving answers and asking questions), display of learning (e.g. demonstrating that prior learning was successful through good explanations or questions), being excited and curious (e.g. enjoying doing something for the sake of it), being polite and respectful (e.g. behaving in a polite and respectful manner to their peers and the teacher), following directions (e.g. conforming to instructions given by the teacher; doing what is asked from them), collaboration (e.g. collaborating with their peers for completing a task; helping each other when needed), peer/self-correction (e.g. correcting their own or peers' errors without waiting for corrective feedback from the teacher), and interpersonal communication (e.g. establishing successful interpersonal communication using whatever linguistic resources available to them). Some examples provided below illustrate the participants' positive experiences.

The students have always been willing to create phrases and sentences no matter how some sentences were incorrect. (Eager to learn, P10)

We gave students enough time to think about and produce a dialogue. Student-to-student interaction allowed students to use and actively produce the target language, as well as providing more speaking time. (Interaction in L2, P7)

Students are interested and actively participate in the lesson; they form sentences easily according to the activities and try to talk in class. (Active participants, P18)

Besides positive experiences, there have also been some negative aspects stated about the students in practicum classes. These negative themes include being loud/chaotic (e.g. creating excessive background noise in classes), distracting behaviours (e.g. causing disruptions with inappropriate behaviours such as talking about irrelevant topics or making fun of a classmate), insufficient engagement (e.g. being unwilling to participate in an activity), limited peer interaction (e.g. not establishing enough interaction patterns between students), disrespectfulness (e.g. acting disrespectfully to their peers or the teacher), being conventional (e.g. rejecting novel techniques; being accustomed to a small set of activities), minimal L2 use (e.g. hardly using English for communication; preferring mother tongue over English), inadequate content knowledge (e.g. shortcomings in grammar and pronunciation), and lacking responsibility (e.g. not doing homework on time). The following quotations exemplify such negative experiences.

They were not raising their hands to ask for permission to speak, they were shouting 'teacher, teacher!' all the time. There was always a commotion in the class. (Loud/chaos, P4)

According to my observations so far, students in these grades tend to do many different types of silly acts, literally anything to receive a little bit of attention. They make silly faces or annoy their friends intentionally by throwing stuff at them etc. (Distracting behaviour, P24)

The teacher was interacting with several people in the classroom. There were a lot of students who never attended the class, that is, did not interact at all. (Insufficient engagement, P23)

Table 4: Themes and frequencies related to the students in practicum classes

Emerging themes	Number of segments coded	
	f	%
Positive experiences		
Eager to learn	58	10.5
Interaction in L2	56	10.1
Active participants	52	9.4
Display of learning	52	9.4
Excited and curious	37	6.7
Polite and respectful	35	6.3
Following directions	29	5.3
Collaboration	14	2.5
Peer/self-correction	11	2
Interpersonal communication	11	2
Negative experiences		
Loud/chaos	38	6.9
Distracting behaviour	36	6.5
Insufficient engagement	30	5.4
Limited peer interaction	26	4.7
Disrespectfulness	23	4.2
Being conventional	19	3.4
Minimal L2 use	13	2.4
Inadequate content knowledge	8	1.4
Lacking responsibility	4	0.7

Throughout a teaching practicum course, it is expected of prospective teachers of English to engage in a range of observation and teaching activities (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020; Wright, 2010). As the current findings plausibly indicate, a significant aspect of the practicum experience is comprised of interacting with students and observing their behaviour and learning process in the classroom (Jones & Brownell, 2014). In the present study, the participants have mostly focused on positive aspects regarding the students in practicum classes (see Figure 1). Their attention was notably drawn to the students' enthusiastic attitude towards learning and active participation as well as their ability to communicate effectively in the target language English (if given the chance). It is crucial to mention here that these positive themes about the students could fill a gap

in the existing literature because there are very few studies that focus on the role of students and their interaction with prospective teachers during the practicum (Cohen et al., 2013; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2019). These observations by the participants bring to the fore that school students are another influential variable for the practicum experience of prospective teachers, in addition to mentor teachers, university supervisors, or the learning environment as a whole.

A controversy within the current findings is that although the participants have developed somewhat neutral attitudes towards the mentor teachers, showing a balance between positive and negative experiences, their approach to the students in practicum classes has been fairly positive. This finding could be related to prospective teachers' often naïve and optimistic expectations and is particularly important because teacher-student relationships are likely to affect one's commitment to the teaching profession (Hong, 2010). It is shown that although the participants have tended to negatively evaluate the mentor teachers' dominant stature and traditional methods, they have, on the other hand, appreciated the students' eagerness to learn and attempts to make interactions using the English language.

Despite the majority of the positive aspects, the participants have also stated some negative experiences related to the students in practicum classes, such as being loud and disruptive or lacking in engagement and peer interaction. It should, however, be noted that such positive or negative experiences often coincide with each other. To illustrate, a bad classroom management practice is likely to trigger students' loud and disruptive behaviour; or following a teacher-centred instructional approach might contribute to insufficient engagement and limited peer interaction, and so on. A language classroom consists of numerous interconnected elements (Hall, 2011), creating its negotiated social/pedagogical discourse with complex relationships formed amongst its agents (Trent, 2013). Therefore, just as English teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes, interests, and motivations (Lu et al., 2022); the pattern could as well be reversed, such as students' loudness and disruptiveness forcing mentor teachers to be authoritative and dominant.

As the research on students in practicum classes exemplifies, building a positive rapport with students is essential for prospective teachers (Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2019), boosting student engagement, motivation, and overall academic achievement (Pekrun et al., 2009). The fact that the participants have formed considerably more positive experiences than negative ones regarding the students in their practicum classes suggests a relatively optimistic outlook in this regard. On the whole, these findings related to students highlight an oft-neglected area of practicum research, since most studies tend to overlook school students' behaviours or achievements in the teaching practicum (Cohen et al., 2013), during which they interact with prospective teachers in many ways.

LIMITATIONS

The data collected in this study are limited to the participants' qualitative accounts of their experiences in the teaching practicum. These accounts tend to be rather subjective in nature and are also strictly limited to what the participants could notice in classes or care to mention in their reflective reports. Thus, the findings presented here should be seen from an emic perspective, not that of an outsider. Furthermore, the critical reflection process has some limitations as the participants were likely to struggle to engage in abstract thinking, personal theories, or original conclusions, inasmuch as they had not received prior training in reflective practice. It is, thus, possible that the participants might not have always been able to conduct comprehensive and advanced reflections on their experiences (see Hickson, 2011).

To minimise the subjectivity and limitations regarding the scope of reflective content, a data collection process lasting for ten weeks with 24 participants has been preferred. Subsequently, it is thought that some of the mentioned limitations of the current design are compensated for thanks to the relatively large data set. However, it might still be possible to see variations in prospective teachers' interpretations regarding their positive or negative practicum experiences, necessitating further research. For instance, although being authoritative

and teacher-centred has been negatively reflected upon in this study, it could be deemed as a positive aspect in other contexts. Another important limitation pertains to the major focus being placed on the practicum school: for the sake of feasibility and available means of data collection to the researchers, the role of university supervisors has been somewhat backgrounded, perhaps causing the findings to have shortcomings in presenting a 'complete picture' of the ELT practicum.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has intended to portray the scope and content of experiences that prospective teachers of English form during a teaching practicum course. In the context of ELT research regarding the experiences gained during practicum courses, this study offers several unique contributions. The findings have suggested a tripartite model depicting reflections based on the practicum school setting: (a) learning environment, (b) mentor teachers, and (c) students. By dissecting the practicum experience into these components, the study provides a nuanced perspective that enables a deeper understanding of the role practicum plays in teacher education. It has been shown that the participants have largely focused on these three dimensions whilst reflecting upon their practicum and have formed both positive and negative experiences within each dimension, presenting us an interconnected landscape of major factors shaping and guiding the ELT practicum. In detail, they have been mostly positive, somewhat neutral, and moderately negative towards students, mentor teachers, and the learning environment, respectively. It is, thus, enticing to conclude that the teaching practicum is not a uniform experience for prospective teachers of English. Rather, it consists of different components, all of which might yield diverse experiences that can be perceived either positively or negatively. Acknowledging that practicum experiences differ greatly, this research helps to build a more realistic image of the role practicum plays in teacher education.

Consequently, it is important not to consider the teaching practicum as a unidimensional process but as a compound of many interrelated experiences.

These diverse experiences have been shown to emerge from varying agents and variables involved in the practicum, each exerting an effect of its own on how prospective teachers reflectively shape their perceptions. This modular-but-interrelated view of the teaching practicum could potentially be useful in understanding difficulties and challenges faced by prospective teachers of English and help them develop a well-rounded understanding of the context in which they might work, students to whom they might teach, or the type of teacher they might want to become in the future. Through engaging in reflections during their practicum period, prospective teachers could better notice dissonances between their expectations and the reality of teaching contexts, which is likely to prepare them for the demands of their future teaching endeavours. Further, the findings may be used to create mentoring programs that specifically address the requirements and challenges realised in each dimension. By providing mentor teachers with the expertise they need, teacher education programs may guarantee that practicum experiences would be as helpful and productive as possible. Curriculum developers, additionally, can decide on adjustments by regularly evaluating the success of practicum experiences and identifying specific areas for improvement.

To confirm the findings, future research could investigate the effects of reflective practice on the teaching practicum experience in contexts where English is used as a second or foreign language. This area of inquiry is important because it could shed light on how ELT programmes can better support the development of effective and resilient teachers. Additionally, the role of university supervisors might also be considered a distinct variable when assessing the outcomes of the practicum. Lastly, an in-depth phenomenological approach could be useful in illustrating why prospective teachers label some of their experiences as positive or negative, focusing on the internal mechanisms shaping the nature of their practicum experience.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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