

EFL Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on the Role of Teaching Practicum in Professional Competence Development

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Abstract

Teaching practicum is an important stage in a teacher preparation program and aims to foster pre-service teachers' necessary professional skills and competences as well as their ability to apply theoretical knowledge into practical teaching contexts. Research on the role of teaching practicum in developing professional teaching capacity through the perspective of pre-service teachers in Vietnam is still limited. Therefore, this quantitative study fills in this gap in the literature and offers better understanding about pre-service teachers' views on the role of teaching practicum in developing their teaching competence. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey with 38 senior students of English Teacher Education Program at a public university in Vietnam. The study showed that while these pre-service teachers highly valued the role of teaching practicum in their professional development, they anticipated facing several challenges in the practical teaching environment. Implications are provided to enhance the support for pre-service teachers and the effectiveness of teaching practicums.

Keywords: *teaching practicum, EFL pre-service teachers, teaching competence, professional development, Vietnam.*

1. Introduction

In teacher education, teaching practicum is an important period of practical experience and also called by various terms like clinical experience, teaching practice (Carrington et al., 2008), internships or work placement programs (Marais & Nel, 2018). Teaching practicum is an opportunity for aspiring pre-service teachers to understand the teacher's role in a realistic educational setting. This field experience provides challenging yet rewarding experience of working with students in real-life

classrooms and gaining professional competence. Educational researchers believe that these experiences are crucial to enhance teachers' professional competence (Aglazor, 2017).

Recent studies by international researchers on the teaching practicum of pedagogical students show that there is an increasing interest in this area of research. However, there is very little research related to pre-service teachers' perspectives of teaching practicum in Vietnam. This study will offer more understanding about English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers' perceptions and expectations of the role of teaching practicum in their professional development. The study suggests implications for different stakeholders (e.g. pre-service teachers, school mentors, and university-based teacher educators) to better support pre-service teachers' teaching practice and improve the effectiveness of their teaching practicum.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The role of teaching practicum

The role of teaching practice in preparing teachers and developing their competence is highlighted in the literature. As Beijaard et al. (2000, 2004) state, teaching practicum can help pre-service teachers have a deeper understanding of teaching methods and how to apply them appropriately to achieve desired teaching and learning goals. A study conducted by Coward et al. (2015) shows that a teaching practicum is a critical learning process that involves interactions with teachers, students, and school cultures. The nature of social interactions in a specific setting is that the one with more knowledge and experiences (e.g. teachers, mentors, and peers) tend to help others to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal (Richards, 2010). In practice,

during the teaching practicum, pre-service teachers receive useful support and guidance from their mentors or more capable peers in planning and conducting lessons.

Pennington & Richards (2016) classify language teachers' professional competences into foundational competencies and advanced competences. EFL pre-service teachers' professional competences are presented through teaching methodology, testing and assessment, and classroom management. A study conducted by Tran & Sanchez (2016) emphasize the important role of both formal and informal pre-training learning experiences in the formation of the language teacher professional competences.

2.2 Challenges of teaching practicum

During teaching practicum, pre-service teachers may face various pressures and tensions. Pillen and colleagues (2013) found that these tensions related to many causes such as the changing roles between being a student and being a teacher, the process of negotiation between being dependent on school mentors and being independent as a teacher, and other contextual factors. Regarding the tension of role switching, pre-service teachers' feeling of being treated like a student might conflict with their responsibility as a teacher during teaching practicum. Similarly, pre-service teachers sometimes prefer to be students' friends, but in some cases they need to be strict to control the class. Besides, feeling dependent on mentors conflicts with their expectations to try out their own teaching styles and making their own pedagogical decisions. Pre-service teachers need mentors' instructions and support, but they also built up their professional identity when managing teaching tasks independently.

In addition, pre-service teachers may face difficulties in teaching due to limited resources or other contextual conditions in the school they are assigned to. For example, Ulvik et al. (2018), found that facilities at high schools challenged EFL pre-service teachers' teaching practices. Ulvik et al. (2018) further stressed that to become a teacher, pre-service teachers had to learn how to practice and apply what they have learnt in the teacher training program effectively. Therefore, both practice and theory were necessary to cooperate and complement each other in the teacher education program.

2.3 Teaching practicum in Vietnam context

In Vietnam, teaching practicum is compulsory in the training teachers education program in higher education. It is a subject designed especially for the preparation of future teachers. Teachers need to achieve qualities and competencies proposed in professional standard of teachers (MOET, 2018) in order to implement their duties effectively at high school.

The teaching practicum is usually conducted in the final school year of a teacher training program. In Vietnam, according to the Teacher Training Guidelines of Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2014) on practicum for pre-service teacher training, the teaching practicum provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to practice theories in teaching and learning in the real educational situation as well as to develop individual pedagogical theories. The main purpose of teaching practicum is to give pre-service teachers direct exposure to their future teaching profession.

The teaching practicum is often conducted in the last year of a teacher education program at the university. Pre-service teachers practice teaching at local primary schools, secondary schools or high schools. In the process of teaching practicum, pre-service teachers not only have the opportunity to learn from their school mentors, from other teachers in the school, but also from fellow students in the field. As a result, pre-service teachers are often divided into small groups of the same disciplines so that they can support and learn from each other during the teaching practice period. This enables pre-service teachers to cooperate in developing lesson plans, teaching and solving problems, sharing experiences, and building trust and mutual support. This operation helps pre-service teachers feel more confident and gain both personal and professional growth.

According to the Teacher Training Guidelines of MOET on teaching practicum for pre-service teacher training (MOET, 2014), the teaching practicum focuses on four main areas of pre-service teachers' responsibilities: (1) explore the realistic educational environment at schools, (2) practice teaching, (3) practice classroom management and homeroom work; (4) complete teaching records and write the reflective report.

(1) *Explore the realistic educational environment at schools:* In this task, pre-service teachers familiarize themselves with the activities and organizational structure of local schools, characteristics and current situations of education in the local area, and classroom conditions.

(2) *Practice teaching:* Pre-service teachers design overall teaching plans for each week and the whole practicum, observe teaching activities, make lesson plans, design teaching aids, and deliver lessons on their own under their mentors' supervision and assessment.

(3) *Practice homeroom work:* Under the instruction of mentors, groups of pre-service teachers (including 2 - 4 members) work as form teachers of a particular class. They develop and implement weekly and whole session classroom management plans, and observe mentors' homeroom work. Pre-service teachers' homeroom management practice is also assessed by their mentors. Besides, pre-teachers are

required to attend and facilitate extra-curricular activities for their students at the practicum placements.

(4) *Complete teaching records and write the reflective report:* After conducting all required activities in the teaching practicum, pre-service teachers have to complete teaching records and a reflective report as prescribed in the pedagogic apprenticeship record to document their overall achievement.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach to explore a group of EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the teaching practicum and anticipated challenges before they began their teaching practicum at high schools.

Research questions

1. To what extent are EFL pre-service teachers confident in their competences before the practicum?
2. What are the pre-service teachers' perspectives of possible challenges they may face in the practicum?

3. What are the pre-service teachers' perspectives of the role of the practicum in developing their professional competences?

Participants

The study employed a convenience sampling method (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) to recruit the participants who were final-year English majors in EFL Teacher Education Programs at a public university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, hereafter referred to as Mekong University (pseudonym).

The total number of participants were 38, including 24 students in the 3-year English Teacher Education Program and 14 students in the 4-year English Teacher Education Program. The former program prepares teachers of English for high school and secondary schools, while the later prepares teachers of English for primary schools. These two groups of students were involved because they were about to start their practicums at the same time, and basically their practicums would follow similar procedures and requirements. The researchers were also interested in exploring if there would be any differences between the two groups' perceptions of the studied issues. Details about the participants were described in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Details about the participants

N	Gender		Current academic achievement in the training program				
	Female	Male	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average	Below average
38	36	2	1	0	18	16	3

Data collection and data analysis

This research used a questionnaire to collect data. The participants were asked to show their answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was delivered in Vietnamese to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding of the content. The questionnaire consisted of two parts developed based on key aspects related to teaching practicum as suggested in the literature review. The first part asked about the participants' personal information including gender, age and educational background. The second part focused on pre-service teachers' perceptions of their confidence in teaching English, challenges they may face in the teaching practicum, and the role of teaching practicum in their professional development.

The data from the questionnaire responses were subjected to the Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for data analysis. Before beginning with the analyses, the scale test was run to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The results of the

scale test showed that the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire satisfied the statistical reliability ($\alpha = .914$). Therefore, the questionnaire was reliable for data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

In general, the results from data analysis showed that EFL pre-service teachers had a high level of confidence in English teaching practicum. They also perceived that there were quite few challenges in teaching English in a practical environment. Besides, they expressed that teaching practicum played an important role in their professional development. Details about the results are displayed in the following.

4.1. Pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching practicum

First of all, the descriptive statistics test was run to find out the average level of pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching and completing the practicum.

Table 4.1: The average level of pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching practicum

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Pre-service teachers' confidence	38	1.24	5.00	3.98	.678

From Table 4.1, it can be seen that the mean score of pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching English is 3.98 (M = 3.98). The result supported a conclusion that pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching English was high. This section of pre-

service teachers' confidence in teaching practicum in the questionnaire included 17 items which were grouped into four clusters of performance. They are as follows:

Table 4.2: Descriptive statistics of the clusters on pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching practicum

Clusters (items)	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Explore the realistic educational environment at schools (21, 22)	38	1.00	5.00	4.25	.836
Practice teaching English (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 19)	38	1.67	5.00	3.87	.693
Practice homeroom work (14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23)	38	1.00	5.00	3.97	.710
Complete the records and paper works (24, 25)	38	1.00	5.00	4.11	.807

In general, the pre-service teachers showed a high degree of confidence in completing most aspects of the coming practicum. The results from Table 4.2 show that EFL pre-service teachers felt more confident in exploring the realistic educational environment at schools (M=4.25) than in other tasks

in teaching practicum such as completing the records and paper works (M=4.11), practicing homeroom (M=3.97), and practicing teaching English (M=3.87).

Table 4.3: Pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching English

Pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching English	N	Rate of confidence					Mean	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
		%	%	%	%	%		
9 Design suitable lesson plans for each lesson.	38	3	8	13	53	23	3.87	.963
10 Use English effectively in class	38	0	5	24	58	13	3.79	.741
11 Achieve the requirements and goals of each lesson	38	3	0	26	58	13	3.79	.777
12 Use ICT tools in teaching effectively	38	3	0	21	42	34	4.05	.899
13 Design and organize effective learning activities for each lesson	38	3	3	18	60	16	3.84	.823
14 Interact and communicate effectively with students	38	3	0	26	55	16	3.82	.801
15 Learn and communicate effectively with school-based mentors	38	3	0	8	52	37	4.21	.811
16 Communicate and collaborate effectively with other pre-service teachers	38	2	0	13	53	32	4.11	.831
17 Self-assess and learn experience from each lesson to improve teaching	38	2	0	24	45	29	3.97	.885
18 Demonstrate effective classroom management	38	3	2	29	45	21	3.79	.905
19 Apply teaching methods flexibly and appropriately	38	2	3	24	58	13	3.76	.820
20 Solve pedagogical situations effectively	38	3	5	34	50	8	3.55	.828
21 Understand the regulations and adapt to high school environment	38	3	3	13	42	39	4.13	.935
22 Express behavior and moral standards of teachers	38	2	0	8	37	53	4.37	.852
23 Participate well in extracurricular activities and other tasks if assigned at high school	38	3	0	5	42	50	4.37	.819
24 Well complete the teaching practicum report	38	3	0	8	47	42	4.26	.828
25 Successfully complete the English teaching practicum	38	3	3	16	55	23	3.95	.868
Valid N (listwise)	38							

Note: Rate of confidence: 1 = strongly unconfident, 2 = unconfident, 3 = neutral, 4 = confident, 5 = strongly confident

The results from Table 4.3 show that item 22 "express behavior and moral standards of teachers" and item 23 "participate well in extracurricular activities and other tasks if assigned at high school" in the cluster of exploring the realistic educational environment at schools and practice homeroom work had the highest mean score (M=4.37). It means that EFL pre-service teachers had more confidence in expressing behavior and moral standards of teachers and participating in extracurricular activities and other tasks if assigned at high school. The results also show that item 20 "solve pedagogical situations effectively" in the

cluster of practicing homeroom work had the smallest mean score (M=3.55) among the items of EFL pre-service teachers' confidence in English teaching practicum.

4.2. Challenges in teaching practicum

Generally, pre-service teachers perceived when participating in the practicum, there would be certain difficulties. Besides, there were different perceptions about the challenges faced in the teaching practicum between pre-service students in the 3-year English Teacher Education Program and those in the 4-year English Teacher Education Program.

Table 4.4: Challenges in teaching practicum

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Challenges in teaching practicum	38	1.10	4.40	2.84	.851

From Table 4.4, it can be seen that the mean score of EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of possible challenges in teaching practicum was 2.84 (M=2.84, SD=.851). The results from the descriptive

statistics test supports the conclusion that there were few challenges that EFL pre-service teachers faced in the practicum. This section of challenges in teaching practicum included 10 items. They are as follows:

Table 4.5: Pre-service teachers' perceptions of challenges in teaching practicum

Challenges in teaching practicum	Qualification groups				Total	
	4-year		3-year		Mean	N
	Mean	N	Mean	N		
26 The pressure of time and workload to be completed	4.29	14	4.12	24	4.18	38
27 Lack of guidance and support from school-based mentors	2.43	14	2.17	24	2.26	38
28 Lack of guidance and support from University-based supervisors	2.64	14	2.25	24	2.39	38
29 Difficult to apply the acquired knowledge to practical teaching	3.36	14	2.67	24	2.92	38
30 Lack of students' cooperation	3.29	14	2.92	24	3.05	38
31 Not confident in their own teaching ability	2.71	14	2.87	24	2.82	38
32 Not confident in their English ability	2.79	14	2.92	24	2.87	38
33 Difficulty in costs related to teaching practicum	3.29	14	2.88	24	3.03	38
34 Failure to use ICT tools, teaching equipment and facilities effectively	2.43	14	2.54	24	2.50	38
35 Failure to meet the requirements of the teaching practicum	2.43	14	2.42	24	2.42	38

From Table 4.5, it can be seen that most pre-service teachers showed higher degrees with item 26, "the pressure of time and workload to be completed", (M=4.18) than other challenges in teaching in the practical environment. The results also reported that item 34, "failure to use ICT tools, teaching equipment and facilities effectively", had the smallest mean score (M=2.50) among the items of challenges in teaching practicum.

There were different perceptions of this issue between two groups of participants. The group of 4-year English Teacher Education students showed higher degree mean scores for item 29, "difficult to apply the acquired knowledge to practical teaching", (M=3.36) than the 3-year English Teacher Education students (M=2.67). There was a significant difference between the two groups' perceptions ($t=1.806, p=.007 < .05$). It showed that the 4-year English Teacher Education students anticipated more difficulty in applying the acquired knowledge to practical teaching, compared with their 3-year English Teacher Education peers.

Moreover, 4-year English Teacher Education students showed higher mean scores for item 30 "lack of students' cooperation" (M=3.29) than 3-year English Teacher Education students (M=2.92). However, there was no significant difference between the two groups' perceptions ($t=.890, p=.122 > .05$).

In addition, 4-year English Teacher Education students also presented higher mean scores for item 33 "difficulty in costs related to teaching practicum" (M=3.29) than 3-year English Teacher Education students (M=2.88). Nevertheless, there was no significant difference between the two groups' perceptions ($t=.984, p=.172 > .05$).

4.3 Pre-service teachers' perceptions of the role of teaching practicum in their professional development

In general, the descriptive statistics test was run to find out pre-service teachers' perceptions of the role of teaching practicum in their professional development as presented in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Pre-service teachers' perceptions of the role of teaching practicum

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
The role of teaching practicum	38	1.31	5.00	4.44	.779
Valid N (listwise)	38				

The results from Table 4.6 reported the mean score of the role of teaching practicum in pre-service teachers' professional development is 4.44 (M=4.44). Results showed that the participants generally held positive perceptions of the role of teaching practicum.

The participants were asked to select the level of importance they attributed to different roles of teaching practicum. There were 13 listed items of the role of teaching practicum in pre-service teachers' professional development.

Table 4.7: Pre-service teachers' perceptions of the role of teaching practicum in their professional development

The role of teaching practicum	Not important	Of little importance	Neutral	Important	Very important
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The role of teaching practicum	Not important	Of little importance	Neutral	Important	Very important
	%	%	%	%	%
36 Enhance teaching motivation	3	0	10	32	55
37 Increase English teaching confidence	2	0	8	24	66
38 Strengthen English teaching methods and skills	3	0	8	26	63
39 Strengthen the necessary soft skills (communication skills, problem solving, etc.)	3	0	8	26	63
40 Improve knowledge and skills in English	3	0	8	26	63
41 Increase my understanding of the educational environment at high schools	3	0	8	29	60
42 Enhance understanding of myself	2	0	8	32	58
43 Enhance my understanding of students' characteristics and psychology	3	0	10	32	55
44 Enhance the application of knowledge learned into practice	2	0	8	32	58
45 Increase my understanding of education policies at high schools	3	0	8	34	55
46 Strengthen my self-study and research capacity	3	0	16	26	55
47 Improve my professional qualities and ethics	0	0	5	26	69
48 Increase my future employment opportunities	3	0	8	29	60

As seen in Table 4.7, the role of item 46 “improve my professional qualities and ethics” of teaching practicum was perceived as either important (26%) or very important (69%) by participants. Other aspects such as “increase English teaching confidence”, “enhance understanding of myself”, “enhance the application of knowledge learned into practice” were also perceived as either very important or important by 90% of the participants.

Additionally, the participants' responses to open-ended questions showed their positive perceptions of the importance of the practicum in developing their competence and attitude toward the teaching career. They stated that the teaching practicum was “the first step that determines whether you can teach in the classroom and have enough practical experience”, and it helped “promote good teaching competences”.

4.3 Discussion

This section discusses the key findings of the study in relation to the findings from previous related studies.

Firstly, EFL pre-service teachers felt more confident about their ability to understand the educational environment at schools in real-life teaching. In particular, they were more confident in their teaching manner and ethical standards, participation in extracurricular activities and other tasks if assigned at high school. The findings from this study were in line with those by Beijaard et al. (2000, 2004), who found that teaching practicum became the opportunity for pre-service teachers' willingness to change and apply new innovative ideas and methodologies. However, pre-service teachers in the current study showed little confidence in their ability to effectively solve pedagogical situations in the practice of homeroom work. This finding was concealed with the previous study by

Pillen and colleagues (2013), who found that the pre-service teacher's feeling of being treated as a student contradicts the responsibilities of a teacher in the practice of teaching. This result showed a confusion and lack of confidence of pre-service teachers in solving school problems when changing roles from being a student to a teacher.

The results also indicated that most pre-service teachers anticipated facing more pressure of time and workload than other challenges in the teaching practicum. Ulvik et al. (2018) stated that to become a teacher, pre-service teachers were required to practice learned theories from the training program while facing time pressure to complete all tasks in the practical teaching environment. Besides, the results also reported that using ICT tools, teaching equipment and facilities was not considered a big challenge for pre-service teachers. This finding was different from a previous study which stressed that facilities at high school environments challenged EFL pre-service teachers' professional development (Ulvik et al., 2018).

Regarding the perception of the role of teaching practicum in developing professional teaching competences, pre-service teachers in this study highly appreciated the importance of improving professional competence and ethics in the pedagogical environment. The majority of pre-service teachers considered other aspects such as increasing confidence when teaching English, improving self-knowledge, and increasing the application of learned knowledge in practice as extremely necessary or important. In addition, they also perceived that teaching practicum was the first stage in determining whether they could teach in an actual classroom and have enough practical experience, which helped promote good teaching competence. This finding is consistent with other studies in the literature (Beijaard et al., 2000, 2004;

Coward et al., 2015; Pennington and Richards, 2016) that emphasized the role of teaching practicum in strengthening pre-service teachers' teaching skills and enhancing their professional competences.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the teaching practicum before they began it at high schools. The study showed that EFL pre-service teachers highly felt confident in their ability to complete the teaching practicum. They were willing to explore the realistic educational environment at schools and practice homeroom work such as express behavior and moral standards of teachers and well participate in extracurricular activities and other tasks if assigned at high school. These findings showed that the pre-service teachers were quite well-prepared for their practicums in assigned schools in local areas. The pre-service teachers perceived that great relationships in teaching community including mentors and peers would have positive effects on pre-service teachers' professional identity development. Besides, in their perceptions, the interactions between pre-service teachers and high school students contributed to improve their love in teaching and teaching motivation although they sometimes dissatisfied with the low level of high school students. These pre-service teachers also predicted that they would face relatively few challenges in teaching English in a real-world setting. Additionally, there were some different perceptions about the difficulty to apply the acquired knowledge to practical teaching between students of the 3-year and 4-year English Teacher Education Programs. In addition, they also expressed that practical teaching would play an important role in their teaching competence and professional development.

Although the study objective was achieved, there remained unavoidable limitations in the study. Firstly, the study was conducted on a small sample of EFL pre-service teachers in a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to a wider population of EFL pre-service teachers in Vietnam. Secondly, the present study was based on a quantitative approach using a questionnaire as the main data collection instrument and only focused on the participants' perceptions before the practicum. Thus, the results were insufficient to provide a holistic view of pre-service teachers' perceptions and experiences of the teaching practicums.

Followings are some suggestions for further research. Firstly, further research should be conducted with a bigger sample size of EFL pre-service in different institutions. Simultaneously, a longer investigation of pre-service teachers' perception can be carried out during and after the teaching practicum. This will better explore the

effects of practicum on pre-service teachers' confidence and pedagogical competences, as well as actual challenges they face. Besides, a mixed-method approach on the impact of English teaching practicum in similar settings should be conducted to enable researchers to have a more in-depth understanding of the effect of teaching practicums on EFL pre-service teachers' competences and implications for different stakeholders.

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