

Article

Boosting Preservice Teachers' Competence and Online Teaching Readiness through E-Practicum during the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has caused disruptions in education in Turkey, as it has in many parts of the world. Faculties of Education that require practice teaching (practicum) are affected as well; due to the shutdown, pre-service English language teachers (PTs) are deprived of the field experience and actual classroom teaching practices in authentic school settings. Practicum constitutes an important part of teacher education and during practicum, “cooperating” teachers (i.e. teachers at practicum schools) and university instructors as teaching practice supervisors play crucial roles in equipping PTs with necessary theoretical and practical skills. The present study took place in the English Language Education program of a competitive state university in Turkey. At the university, all theory-oriented courses moved to synchronous platforms without much difficulty with almost full attendance of the students. As for the practicum, Turkish Higher Education Council let the universities decide for themselves. As researchers working at two different universities, Bahçeşehir University and Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey, we designed an alternative practice to meet the needs of PTs and maintain the quality of the practicum: “e-practicum” under the supervision of the university supervisor who acted as the “e-mentor”. The aim was to increase PTs’ teaching competence and prepare them for online teaching. A virtual classroom consisting of twenty-five PTs was formed and six PTs performed microteaching to their peers who acted as students by using Zoom. After the e-practicum sessions, peers gave detailed feedback to the teacher PTs. The university supervisor provided e-mentoring right after each session. Then, each teacher PT reflected on e-practicum experience and e-mentoring. The findings revealed that PTs found the e-practicum useful because it helped them overcome online teaching fears.

Keywords

E-practicum, e-mentoring, English language teacher education, pre-service teachers

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1 Practice Teaching in Teacher Education

Practice teaching constitutes an important part of teacher education (Wilson, 2006) and is highly valued by pre-service teachers (PTs), cooperating/mentor teachers, and university supervisors (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Graves, 2010). The main objective of the practicum is to provide PTs with hands-on experience in teaching. This period offers the candidates the “experience to gain knowledge of how teachers go about the many and complex tasks involved in actual classroom practice” (McGee, Ferrier-Kerr, & Miller, 2001, p. 1). For many PTs, the practicum experience is the most challenging, difficult, and frustrating period of their teacher education program (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Huang & Waxman, 2009). Many lack confidence in overcoming challenging classroom problems and experience difficulties in adjusting to school life, including developing relationships with students and collaborating with school teachers, especially at the beginning of the practicum (Broadbent, 1998; Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2007; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, & Le Cornu, 2006; Hsu, 2005; Moore, 2003).

The practicum is an opportunity for PTs to link theory with practice in an authentic classroom setting. It is not enough to read about teaching or to observe others teach, something students have done for years. Knowledge about teaching means having productive knowledge, like playing an instrument (Eisner, 2002). PTs improve their teaching skills by engaging in teaching and by being guided through reflection and receiving feedback from their cooperating teachers and university supervisors (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000). Lee et al. (2012) also found out that the effectiveness of student teaching experiences affected teacher candidates in five categories: (a) pedagogical content knowledge, (b) planning and preparation for instruction, (c) classroom management, (d) promoting family involvement, and (e) professionalism. Such practical knowledge and wisdom cannot easily be transmitted from person to person. PTs need *techné* (knowing how) and by connecting the skills of teaching to *episteme* (knowing what) through reflection in practicum, they gradually start developing *phronesis* (practical wisdom).

During the practicum, PTs implement instructional strategies in authentic classroom settings and experience the complexity and challenges to a great extent. Field experiences for PTs often include weekly opportunities for observation as well as participation in daily classroom activities in school settings. Cooperating teachers act as mentors and university instructors act as teaching practice supervisors in this period. That is why the cooperation and partnership between K-12 schools and education faculties have been highlighted by various scholars (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Damar & Salı, 2013; Maphalala, 2013; Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2001).

As mentioned, an important role of the practicum is to provide a supported entry to the profession. When asked about the most important and influential components of their teacher education programs, recent graduates said that they recognized student teaching and early direct interactions with students as being most beneficial (Conderman, et al., 2013).

2 Practicum in Teacher Education Programs in Turkey

The practicum period consists of two phases in teacher education programs in Turkey: PTs take the School Experience course in the Fall semester (October to January) and Teaching Practicum course in the Spring semester (February to June) of the senior year. In both courses, PTs are required to spend a full day at practicum schools assigned by their university supervisors. Practicum schools are K-12 schools in partnership with the teacher education programs. The practicum partnership involved elementary, secondary or high schools, which were either public schools under the supervision of Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) or private schools run by foundations. In Turkey, both school administrations are accredited by and follow the MoNE principles and regulations. At practicum schools, cooperating teachers are appointed to PTs to guide and assist them. For the last three years, only teachers with a mentorship training certificate are allowed to become a cooperating teacher.

In the ‘School Experience’ course, during their school visits, PTs observe classes of different grades and become familiar with the school system. On the basis of their observations, PTs write reports and submit them to their university supervisors for feedback. Apart from the observations, they write reflections on articles about professional development. Finally, they prepare and implement a fifteen-minute micro-teaching lesson in one of the classes they observe. During the micro-teaching, the PTs’ university supervisor and one of their peers observe them and provide feedback using a rubric.

In the ‘Teaching Practice’ course, PTs prepare lesson plans and hold macro-teaching sessions several times during the semester. While macro-teaching, they are observed by their university supervisor, cooperating teacher, and peers, and their lessons are evaluated via rubrics. By the end of the course, PTs submit a Teacher Portfolio to their university supervisors, including all the assignments, materials, lesson plans, and evaluation rubrics.

3 The Coronavirus Outbreak and Changes in Education in Turkey

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has caused disruptions in education in Turkey, as it has in many parts of the world. At the same time with primary and secondary schools, both private and public universities first announced a break and then shifted to synchronous online teaching until the end of the Spring semester. The pace of the shift varied from one university to the other, depending upon the infrastructure of the institution and the level of instructors’ digital literacy. The Higher Education Council asked the universities to take initiative and provide courses on both synchronous and asynchronous platforms. Instructors were told to enrich their courses with additional materials and be in close communication with students, especially those who had problems accessing the Internet.

In the first weeks of the shutdown, all theory-oriented courses in Turkish universities moved to the online platform without much difficulty with almost full attendance of the students. However, it took a while before the policy-makers could reach an agreement on practice-based courses, one of which is the practicum of the English language education programs. In the first week of April, it was officially announced that PTs would only be graded on their performance in the first weeks of the Spring semester. For the first five weeks of the semester, from February to mid-March, PTs had gone to the assigned practicum schools and only a few of them performed one macro-teaching session. Many, however, did not have the chance to engage in even one macro-teaching before teaching went online, which would mean that they could not be graded at all.

In summary, almost all PTs in the country did not have a chance of experiential, hands on teaching in an actual classroom and were deprived of receiving any feedback on their teaching performance.

4 E-Practicum and E-Mentoring

In keeping up with the perceived importance of the practicum, the authors, who come from two universities, Bahçeşehir University and Marmara University in Istanbul, Turkey, a private and state university respectively, had a number of discussions about what form the practicum should take during the period of online education. We wanted to act quickly to engage as many PTs as possible in the practicum period. As university instructors and researchers, we had to decide how to compensate for the “loss” of the practicum. We could upload articles for PTs to read and reflect on or videos taken from different actual classes, which they could watch and analyze. However, these were the tasks they had already done in other courses. Many PTs felt “incomplete” without being able to get sufficient feedback from the university supervisors.

Many reported that they felt unprepared and not ready to teach in the field for their future career. They felt disappointed at not being able to engage in macro-teaching to get feedback from their mentors. One of them said:

“The first thing I think of about not being able to go to practicum is sorrow. Practicum was going to be our first real teaching experience, but we lost this chance. I feel like this created a huge lack of experience.”

The lack of mentoring generated disappointment for the PTs. One PT commented as follows:

“I could have learned a lot from my mentor. She was not a young teacher who used new methods and techniques. But she was very good at classroom management. She was good at planning the lesson. She knew how to involve students into the lesson. She asked effective questions to urge student participation. She was good at it.”

Thus, we felt that it was absolutely necessary to offer an alternative to meet the needs of PTs and maintain the quality of the practicum. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the only option was “e-practicum”, under the supervision of the university supervisor who would act as the “e-mentor” on behalf of the cooperating teacher.

E-practicum is a new concept in pre-service teacher education but the transformation of education means that practice-based courses might have an online component as well. With the increasing use of online education and computer technology, interaction between mentors and PTs need not be confined to any specific geographical location. E-mentoring offers new possibilities for teacher support and guidance from a distance that eliminates space and time constraints (Penny & Bolton, 2009; Quintana & Zambrano, 2014; Redmond, 2015; Spanorriga et al., 2018). E-mentoring includes any type of mentoring that incorporates information and communication technology (ICT) through synchronous or asynchronous courses. E-mentoring programs often use e-mails, bulletin boards, forums, chat features, or other text-based communication methods. Some use video conferencing platforms (e.g., FaceTime or Skype), while others offer proprietary software systems that combine many of these features.

According to Spanorriga et al. (2018), e-mentoring is expected to create an informal, participatory and interactive environment which offers continuous communication and interaction of individual mentees with their mentors, without space and time restrictions, to provide guidance, advice, support, protection, encouragement and assistance as well as peer support among teachers by sharing common interests, educational experiences, teaching material, knowledge, and resources.

An and Liscomb (2010) argued that the quality of communication increases with e-mentoring. The participants become more intentional in their communications and spend more time collaborating and reflecting rather than exchanging information with one another. E-mentoring also provides a record of correspondence providing both the mentor and mentee with the opportunity to keep track of their interactions and refer to them when needed (Headlam-Wells et al., 2005).

The present study attempted first to compensate for the lack of knowledge and skills PTs might have lost because of the COVID-19 outbreak. We also believed that e-practicum would foster PTs’ familiarity with digital integration. The studies conducted in Turkey in the times of the COVID-19 outbreak showed that most teachers struggled to integrate technology in online classes and they encountered problems in shifting their material to online platforms. In teacher education programs, PTs receive teaching through technology courses in which they are trained with the skills and knowledge to integrate digital devices into teaching in face-to-face courses. Yet, they do not practice integrating digital resources into teaching in virtual classrooms. Teachers’ lack of experience and expertise in using digital materials and platforms resulted in a struggle of digital integration. E-practicum would be of great help to PTs in familiarizing them with virtual instruction on a digital platform and gaining experience with such instruction. Thus, the aim of the present study is to explore the e-practicum and e-mentoring from the perspectives of the PTs.

5 Methodology

The study took place in the English Language Education program of a competitive state university,

Marmara University, in the Spring semester of 2019-2020 academic year. In this section, three major phases of the study, (i) preparation and construction phase before the e-practicum, (ii) the e-practicum itself, and (iii) the e-mentoring provided to teacher PTs afterwards, are explained in detail.

5.1 Before E-practicum

Prior to the e-practicum, one of the researchers of this study as the university supervisor sent a detailed e-mail to eighty senior PTs asking for volunteers. Twenty-five PTs volunteered. Since they missed the practicum, they expressed that they saw the e-practicum as a valuable opportunity. The university supervisor, henceforth the e-mentor, created a WhatsApp group with the volunteering PTs for communication. As a result of message exchange, a convenient time and date for everyone was set. Then, a virtual classroom consisting of twenty-five PTs was formed using Zoom, a web-based video conferencing tool. Six of the PTs, henceforth 'teacher PTs', two males and four females, all at the age of 21, volunteered and were assigned to micro-teach their peers for twenty minutes each. The teacher PTs prepared their English teaching lesson plans which target their students' age and proficiency level that they had in their practicum schools to which they were assigned in the Fall semester. The topics and content of the lessons were also based on the syllabus of those practicum schools. They shared their lesson plans with the researchers and received detailed feedback in return. The remaining PTs, henceforth 'student PTs', were asked to act like students in the virtual classroom. Student PTs were also asked to take notes about their peers' teaching skills and strategies to give feedback afterwards. The e-mentor would also attend the e-practicum micro-teaching sessions and take notes about the teaching methodology exactly the same way she would do in the real classroom, practicum setting. Therefore, a mini e-practicum group was constructed. Each of the PT was assigned a number (PT1, PT2, etc.) for reference purposes, and the teachers PTs were PT1 to PT6.

Right before the e-practicum micro-teaching sessions began, the e-mentor conducted a focus group interview with all the PTs in Zoom. In this informal interview, she asked how the PTs felt about not being able to go to practicum, if they felt anxious about the lack of practicum experience and supervision, and if e-practicum was possible or could be an alternative solution. PTs expressed that they felt upset and anxious about the lack of practicum experience and supervision. They also added that e-practicum could be a useful alternative in this case.

5.2 E-practicum

The e-practicum micro-teaching consisted of three forty-minute Zoom sessions. The sessions were held in a row with ten-minute breaks in between. During the sessions, four teacher PTs conducted reading lessons and two of them speaking lessons to teach English as a foreign language. Teacher PTs shared various teaching materials. They conducted warm-up activities by asking brainstorming questions to the whole class. They set up pair work activities. For instance, they asked student PTs to answer comprehension questions in pairs after reading a text. They provided wait time for student PTs to think and answer. They allowed student PTs to give their answers by using digital facilities. They made the e-practicum micro-teaching as interactive as possible. They did their best to give the virtual classroom the feel of a physical classroom.

In the first reading lessons, two teacher PTs used a restaurant menu as a reading text for a group of 7th graders with A2 proficiency level based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which was the profile of their students at the practicum state schools that they attended in the fall semester. Teacher PT1 used the screen-share feature to present different menus in English on the screen and asked the student PTs to comment on the genre, so as to make the class interactive. He then showed an accompanying vocabulary matching worksheet that included pictures and the names of different food items in English such as 'cheeseburger', 'grilled fish', and 'roast chicken' and asked the student PTs to

match every food item to a correct name. The student PTs participated in the lesson by answering the questions and doing the exercise. Student PTs typed their comments and answers in the chat box. PT1 then read aloud the answers and gave feedback. PT2 continued the English teaching reading lesson by presenting a menu from an imaginary restaurant and checked the student PTs' comprehension using true/false questions and fill-in-the-blanks activities. He also asked the student PTs to say which food items and drinks they saw in the menu also exist in the Turkish cuisine. In this way, an interactive and fun class discussion was facilitated. PT2 ended the lesson by asking what a seafood lover, a vegetarian, or a person who had only £5 might choose from the menu. While PT2 was teaching, the student PTs interactively took part in the lesson like they did in PT1's session. They did so by raising hands and PT2 unmuted them one by one, giving each student PT an opportunity to present their answers orally.

In the subsequent reading lesson, teacher PT3 and PT4 used a passage about the body clock for 11th-graders with B1 level of CEFR, in accordance with their students' profile at the practicum state schools that they attended. The teacher PTs prepared a PowerPoint presentation and shared it with the student PTs on screen. PT3 started the lesson with a warm-up activity and asked the class about their usual wake-up time. Then, she presented the next slide, which features a man with clocks all over his body, and asked the class to predict the topic of the reading text entitled "Can you feel the rhythm?". She then showed the reading text and gave the student PTs time to read. PT4 proceeded to the next part of the lesson by showing a matching activity in which the class had to match incomplete phrases with appropriate endings to form meaningful sentences according to the text. After this post-reading activity, the lesson was over. The student PTs actively participated in the lesson like they did in the first reading lesson.

For the speaking lesson, the final two teacher PTs used the topic of sightseeing in Istanbul and giving directions to target at 8th-graders with B1 level as suggested by CEFR. PT5 started the lesson with a trendy topic. She told the audience how she felt about the coronavirus lockdown, and asked the class how they felt and how they spent time in the lockdown. She also asked them if they missed wandering in the streets of Istanbul and what parts they missed the most. PT5 especially asked the student PTs to give answers orally because the objective of the lesson was speaking. She unmuted the ones who wanted to speak. The student PTs participated in the lesson by telling others woefully how much they missed the city. After this pre-speaking activity, PT5 screen shared a video commercial called "Flow through the City of Tales" of an airlines company in Turkey, which shows the tourist attractions of the city. She asked the class to take notes of the historical places and the transportation vehicles while watching it. She had a technical problem with the sound system for a few minutes during screen sharing but she sorted it out calmly. After replies were given orally, PT6 carried on with the lesson. She shared a map of the historical quarter of the city on the screen and demonstrated a sample role-play with PT5, with one asking for directions to a specific touristic place and the other giving the directions. After this sample demonstration, the student PTs were asked perform a similar role-play in pairs. PT6 gave them five minutes for preparation. When the student PTs were ready, they wrote their pair's names in the chat box and PT6 allowed each pair to speak by unmuting them. After the pair-work, the lesson ended.

Right after the e-practicum micro-teaching sessions, the student PTs shared their reflections, detailed feedback, and comments about the teacher PTs' micro-teachings in the WhatsApp group that was created by the e-mentor at the very beginning of the study.

5.3 E-mentoring

The e-mentoring was provided by the e-mentor to the teacher PTs one day after the e-practicum micro-teaching sessions. The e-mentor organized three forty-minute Zoom sessions for this purpose. The sessions were held in a row with ten-minute breaks in between. The six teacher PTs attended all three sessions.

A framework for e-mentoring was established by the three authors of this study after having examined

the guided principles from the literature (An & Liscomb, 2010; Spanorriga et al., 2018). The aims were to (i) develop the skills and confidence of the teacher PTs, (ii) develop their professional identity by asking them to reflect on their own micro-teaching, and (iii) pinpoint the importance of mentor-mentee collaboration by asking them to reflect on the e-mentoring experience. The guidelines to reach the aims of the framework were as follows. First, e-mentoring had to take place in an informal and participatory ambiance. Second, to support and encourage the teacher PTs, the e-mentor would emphasize the noticeable, strong points of the micro-teachings. Then, the e-mentor would provide guidance and advice by sharing knowledge and experience pointing out aspects of the micro-teachings that needed improvement. Afterwards, the e-mentor would give the teacher PTs an opportunity to think through questions and to reflect on their own micro-teaching experience. Finally, the teacher PTs would share their insights about the e-mentoring.

The e-mentoring sessions took place in an interactive and collaborative atmosphere. The e-mentor gave detailed feedback to each PT individually. All the other teacher PTs were present in the sessions and they listened to the e-mentor's feedback to their peers.

The e-mentor used a sandwich technique so she first talked about the positive aspects of the teacher PTs' micro-teaching, which were mainly as follows: repeating the course content several times to ensure that the student PTs understood what they were supposed to do; paraphrasing themselves using simpler English words and sentence construction; showing appreciation to the student PTs by saying "good", "thank you" and the like; giving affective feedback in addition to cognitive feedback to signpost that they were really listening to what was said; showing genuine interest; giving personal examples to internalize the topic; and using an up-to-date topic to make the course content as authentic as possible. This did not happen in a planned, monological fashion. While the e-mentor was sharing her observations, the teacher PT in question interacted with the e-mentor, agreed or disagreed, asked clarification questions to more fully understand the e-mentor's comments.

The e-mentor further commented on aspects of the teacher PTs' micro-teaching that needed to be improved, such as matters pertaining to instructions like giving time limit; insufficiency of teacher wait time; and not identifying the purpose of the reading activity. While giving feedback, the e-mentor gave advice to the teacher PTs on how to improve these problematic areas by sharing her own experience. The e-mentor also guided the teacher PTs by transferring knowledge and information from the relevant literature in the field. Again, this did not occur in a monological manner; on the contrary, it was an interactive exchange of ideas. One after another, each teacher PT asked questions to clarify vague parts in the e-mentor's feedback and made comments.

Before ending the e-mentoring session, the e-mentor asked the six teacher PTs to write their thoughts and feelings about the e-mentoring to her through WhatsApp. They did so. That was the end of the e-mentoring sessions that were held to maximize PTs' learning and to facilitate one-on-one consultation.

6 Results

PTs' reflections, i.e., outcome of the e-practicum experiences, were categorized according to Miles and Huberman's (1994) conceptual categories. The results are presented below.

6.1 PTs' thoughts about e-practicum experience

All PTs (teacher PTs and student PTs) thought that they benefited immensely from the e-practicum. This was their main feedback. The benefits include the feasibility of the e-practicum, their ability to overcome technical problems with abundant online teaching experience, and the advantages of digital integration.

Most PTs thought e-practicum was doable with real students as long as the practicum schools have

sufficient technical infrastructure. In particular, after having experienced e-practicum, they believed that the practicum could be done online as long as there was equal opportunity in education for everyone. PT18 mentioned that online education did not start at her nephew's school since the beginning of the coronavirus shutdown because the school lacked the facilities. On the other hand, PT3 said that her elder sister worked as a math teacher at a private foundation high school and they started online classes right away, as soon as the shutdown started.

The PTs realized that the technical problems were not something to be afraid of and that such problems could be overcome with the attitude and experience of the teacher. They saw it in the e-practicum:

“We witnessed in PT5's presentation that there could be some technical problems in online education, but we also witnessed that these could be handled when approached calmly. I think that these problems could be overcome with the calm attitude and experience of the teacher. I do believe that by and large e-practicum is feasible and with the teacher's approach and meticulousness it can be made more effective.” (PT15)

“Some technical problems can occur during e-practicum, that is a fact, we saw this in some of our friends' micro-teaching sessions, but from time to time we encounter technical problems in the real classroom setting, too. For example, in our normal, actual classrooms, while making a presentation to our classmates, the overhead projector shuts itself down! Our friends calmly straightened out the technical problems during e-practicum micro-teaching and they are totally and utterly inexperienced! It was their first e-practicum experience. As we gain more experience in online teaching, we can get better. I think like this. I do believe in this.” (PT7)

A large number of PTs emphasized the advantages of online teaching. They added that they would not have thought about the benefits of online teaching if they had not experienced e-practicum. The following quote illuminates the matter:

“In my opinion, adding a virtual background makes the lesson more attractive. This technical detail can be achieved in e-practicum. For instance, PT4 used a forest background and that attracted us because we can't really go outside and go to the woods in this time of the coronavirus outbreak. Virtual backgrounds can be interchangeably used based on the topic of the lesson. This can be really interesting for the students. This can be achieved in a virtual classroom. One more thing is the recording option. This is a technical advantage of a virtual classroom. Students can re-watch the recording of the class to repeat it. Most importantly, as PTs, we can re-watch our own e-practicum session and see what went well and what went wrong. Technical devices such as Zoom provide this, who gives what reaction and when can be seen individually. In normal education system, we don't have such a chance like watching our own teaching over and over again. This is an additional advantage of e-practicum.” (PT19)

However, a few PTs mentioned the disadvantages of the e-practicum and online education. One student PT put forward her ideas as follows:

“I never find online - distance education as effective as the real classroom context. It can be applied in circumstances such as the current one (pandemic) as an alternative project to be able to provide students with the opportunity to continue their formal education and to graduate on time. However, I do not believe that this process or the online education project should be kept applying as teaching, especially language teaching, requires interaction, communication and group/pair work a lot. Yet, distance education cannot supply this atmosphere as much as it should, and this puts the learning process in a difficult position. For instance, it is suggested that teachers should prepare and bring colorful, three-dimensional objects or create activities that the students move around the classroom in order to complete them. With online education (or practicum) it is almost impossible since the teachers cannot utilize even audio or video resources. This issue is actually valid for all school sections and grades.” (PT11)

To sum up, the PTs had overall positive attitudes toward e-practicum. They thought they gained a lot from the e-practicum experience and such an experience raised their awareness on the issues that they would not be considering otherwise. They realized that practicum was achievable in online education. The technical challenges could be overcome by the virtual skills and virtual experience of the teacher. Teachers could make use of the virtues of online tools to facilitate the learning process.

6.2 Teacher PTs' reflections on e-practicum and e-mentoring experience

The six teacher PTs were asked to reflect on their e-practicum micro-teaching and e-mentoring experience. The four major e-practicum areas on which the teacher PTs reflected were (i) the challenges of e-practicum and the unique experience that comes with them, (ii) learning how to overcome online technical problems, (iii) classroom management in a virtual classroom, and (iv) the necessity of such an experience for their future career. For e-mentoring, they reflected on the benefits of the experience.

The teacher PTs expressed that they saw e-practicum micro-teaching as a challenge before they taught and they were really anxious about this at the beginning. However, they added that they saw it as a great opportunity to help develop their teaching skills. The e-practicum experience was not as bad and scary as they had expected. They all agreed that it was a unique experience although it was almost their first teaching experience. They said that this experience helped them overcome their anxiety. PT6 said that she was "anxious at the beginning but then things happened spontaneously" and she would not know how to use the space in the classroom but she "kind of liked lecturing while sitting". They said that there was a fun atmosphere and they were able to feel as if they were in a real classroom. They all added that this might have stemmed from their peer PTs' cooperative behavior.

All of the teacher PTs mentioned the unprecedented technical problems that occurred during the e-practicum, such as not being able to broadcast the sound of the video recording, not being able to see the chat box when they shared their screen or not being able to unmute the students PTs on time. They said that this experience-based learning taught them how to overcome the online technical problems. They highlighted the importance of practice. PT5 reflected on her experience as follows:

"I was not able to start the video recording properly, it was not heard for a while. I could have sent its link to the class members before in my lesson. PT10 mentioned it in her feedback to me too. She is right. Normally nothing like this happened, in the share screen mode, you click on 'use the computer sound', that's it, it starts right away. In my micro-teaching, it just did not start! But by this was, I learned that I needed to take precautions, anything unexpected can happen during an online class. This was a great and a sample lesson for me, it was literally 'a lesson' to be learned for my future teaching life. I hope it serves as an example to all of us."

The teacher PTs also said that they found that classroom management could constitute a problem in online teaching. For them, a teacher, during online teaching, should know how to keep the students engaged, how to prevent daydreaming, and how to control students' attention span. The teacher PTs reported that their peers also raised this topic in their reflections and feedback. The teacher PTs found their peers' viewpoints about classroom management useful. PT2 pointed out:

"My friend PT8 wrote a fruitful feedback to me, for my micro-teaching. She said that we experienced the disadvantages of online education in our own classes too. She meant the classes we attended as students nowadays. She said that it was never like the classroom atmosphere we were accustomed to. She confessed that she sometimes felt sleepy! She added that in her opinion, in online education some extra effort was required to get the attention of the students, to make them focused on the lesson because they got distracted very easily even in actual classrooms. She saw this in her practicum school in the Fall semester. She wrote me that as she observed in the e-practicum, none of us, I mean none of the teacher PTs did anything to avoid this in our micro-teaching sessions. PT8's comments about my micro-teaching overlapped with

my own concerns about dealing with classroom management problems on online teaching. I have no clue about that!”

The teacher PTs said that they had been thinking how to overcome the classroom management problems since they read their peers’ reflections and feedback as WhatsApp messages. PT4 commented on the issue:

“I think the biggest missing part and the biggest problem of online education is not being able to see who is doing what, I mean not being able to see who is reading the text or who is taking notes, not being able listen and not being able to see... That’s why I hesitated for a while in my e-practicum micro-teaching. I mean I was hesitant and nervous while I was talking. I did not know what to do and I still don’t know. This is digital world after all!”

The teacher PTs further added that they understood the necessity of e-practicum experience for their future career. They said that this practice should definitely be part of either pre-service education or in-service training to equip them. PT1 expressed his views on the topic:

“It was a great experience, it was very enjoyable. We are now moving to Internet based, digital platforms. For example, a teacher in England or in the U.S.A. can give private tutoring through using digital, online systems. We should definitely practice this. We should be trained on this. Plus, teaching is not something that is carried out only at school. We should have contact with our students and their parents outside the school. If we have such training, we can reach our students when they are on holiday, in their winter break, or in 7-8 –day periods on their summer holiday. We can conduct online teaching and practice sessions to answer our students’ and their families’ questions or to help them out with their language problems.”

PT5 added:

“If we have such training, it will be our second chance, our plan B in times of disasters, earthquakes, or like this – disease and outbreak situations. We don’t know which digital platforms are available to us, we don’t know which methodologies to use in online teaching, we don’t know how to use them, and we don’t know when to use which methodology. I can’t say such teaching will be definitely useful for the students, I am not sure about that, it is so new. But I know one thing, I am sure about that, training about online teaching would definitely be our plan B and this type of training will be very beneficial for us, for our professional development.”

The teacher PTs found the e-mentoring beneficial and their reflections on it were quite positive. They thanked the e-mentor repeatedly for providing such an opportunity to improve their teaching skills. They found the e-mentoring confidence-building as the e-mentor highlighted the “good stuff” in their micro-teaching. They said that the e-mentor helped them see the problematic parts of their teaching and they even started thinking on ways to improve them. They said that the e-mentoring was collaborative because they brainstormed on some points together. They also said that the e-mentor provided theoretical and practical support, which was very helpful for their developing practice. PT3 expressed that the e-mentoring answered all the questions on her mind and motivated her. She felt at least a little bit more ready for teaching in general and for online teaching in particular.

To wrap up, the teacher PTs found the e-practicum helpful to compensate the lack of practicum and to overcome online teaching fears. To them, e-practicum was challenging but an irreplaceable opportunity. Although they encountered some unexpected technical problems, they overcame them. They held the strong belief that by practicing they would be better problem-solvers. They were neither anxious nor scared about online teaching any more. Their awareness about the classroom management in a virtual classroom was developed and they felt the need of being more skillful in this area. They saw the necessity of an e-practicum and e-mentoring for their future career. In short, the findings revealed that PTs found the e-practicum helpful to compensate the lack of practicum.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Due to the sudden COVID-19 breakdown, the face-to-face education shifted to online education. The theory-oriented courses were moved to online platforms like Skype or Zoom. However, the move took place gradually. The present study attempted to design a practice-oriented course, Teaching Practicum, offered at the English Language Education program of a state university in Turkey through online education. Specifically, this study was designed as an alternative for the Teaching Practicum course in the English language teaching undergraduate program conducted in physical classrooms during PTs' senior year in Turkey. This course was converted to an e-course by the researchers and the university supervisor acted as the "e-mentor". The aim was first to mitigate PTs' anxiety about their lack of sufficient practice opportunity and then to increase their teaching competence and prepare them for online teaching which they would most probably be involved in future. The e-practicum aimed to familiarize PTs with different aspects of distance education, like use of student engagement strategies and integration of technology into their teaching.

Findings of the study revealed that the PTs shared positive feelings about the online teaching experience. After their online sessions with their e-mentor and peers, they said that although they felt anxious at the beginning of e-practicum, they got used to this new experience quickly and found it unique. They enjoyed the e-classroom atmosphere and felt as if they were in the real classroom. Additionally, they felt the support of their peers and e-mentor, which helped them overcome their anxiety and felt more competent with effective classroom practices. Although they experienced some problems related to classroom management and infrastructure, suggestions from their peers and guidance from their e-mentor aided them to provide solutions to such problems during the online lessons.

Based on these findings, though limited in scope, we conclude that e-mentoring can be used as an effective alternative for teachers to connect with peers in order to ask and receive advice and support online (Redmond, 2015; Quintana & Zambrano, 2014). Likewise, e-mentoring created an informal, participatory, and interactive environment which helped the PTs share their feelings and experiences as well as exchange ideas both with their peers and e-mentor without time and space restrictions. They created a community of practice to develop common meaning, strong ties and enhance professional skills in a participatory and collaborative way (Spanorriga et al., 2018).

Although PTs stated that they preferred having their practicum/teaching experience in a physical classroom, they also highlighted the importance of the e-practicum and e-mentoring, defining the process as a unique experience. The finding which is about the uniqueness of e-practicum process is in line with Göker's (2006) study, which emphasizes the importance of student teaching experiences/teaching practica as mastery experiences, which potentially benefit teacher candidates' self-efficacy in teaching. Similarly, as stated by Korthagen et al. (2006), what PTs experience during their practicum affects their view of teaching. Therefore, teaching practicum has a crucial effect on the professional development of PTs.

As universities are moving to Internet-based, digital platforms, transforming the practicum course (or a part of it) to e-practicum under the guidance and support of e-mentors seems to be a valuable addition to teacher education programs. Reports shared during the COVID-19 outbreak revealed that teachers all over the world had problems with technology integration and student engagement in online classes. Although PTs take a number of technology-related courses in the four-year teacher education programs, the online education experience during the COVID-19 outbreak has shown that technology integration and material preparation for online courses should be part of any course in the existing program. The present study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature by providing a sample of planning-implementation stages of an e-practicum course, and help teacher education programs improve mentoring practices with the integration of technology.

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