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## Turkish pre-service EFL teachers' reflections on practicum during pandemic: Planning, implementation and reflection

### İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının salgın sürecinde öğretmenlik uygulamasına yönelik yansımaları: Planlama, uygulama ve yansıtma

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#### ABSTRACT

Similar to various fields of scientific inquiry, teacher education has gone through dramatic changes during Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of the current study is to investigate its effects on pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' in-class practices via three different instruments. Participants were 15 pre-service EFL teachers at a state university in İstanbul. Data collection tools involved the participants' reflections both on their own and their peers' online teaching experiences in Teaching Philosophy (as in pre and post design), Self-Observation and Peer Evaluation. Phenomenological Analysis of data revealed that they were predominantly concerned with planning and implementation phases of their teaching. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the basics of online EFL teaching are fundamentally different from traditional EFL classes. In brief, pre-service EFL teacher education calls for further modifications in accordance with the changes in teaching medium initiated by Covid-19 pandemic.

#### ÖZ

Covid-19 pek çok alanda olduğu gibi, öğretmen yetiştiren programlarda da büyük değişiklikler yapılmasını gerekli kıldı. Bu araştırma, pandemi döneminde hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmenlerinin, Öğretmenlik Uygulaması dersi kapsamında ilk ve ortaöğretim okullarında sürdürdükleri sınıf içi uygulamaları üç ana başlık altında incelemektedir. Katılımcı grubunu İstanbul'da bir devlet üniversitesinde İngilizce Öğretmenliği programında eğitimine devam eden 15 öğrenci oluşturmaktadır. Katılımcıların öz-yansıtma, akran değerlendirme ve öğretim felsefesi (önce ve sonra) raporları fenomenolojik analiz yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Değerlendirme sonuçları hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmenlerinin ağırlıklı olarak planlama ve uygulama aşamalarında endişe yaşadığını göstermiştir. Ayrıca, çevrimiçi derslerin temellerinin geleneksel İngilizce sınıflarından tamamen farklı olduğu görülmüştür. Kısaca, Covid-19 pandemisi nedeniyle zorunlu olarak yaşanan değişiklikler, İngilizce

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öğretmeni yetiştiren programların uygulama ve içerik konusunda çeşitli dönüşümlere ve yeniliklere ihtiyaç duyduğunu ortaya konmuştur.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the breakout of pandemic at the beginning of 2020, almost every phase of life has undergone dramatic changes. Not surprisingly, education has been one of these areas that faced a big threat with an abrupt change in the medium of instruction; i.e., from face to face to online/distance education. Although the advancements in technology and the Internet had already been initiated long before the pandemic, the traditional way of teaching and learning has been accepted as the most salient and practical way that is established through hundreds of years of experience. Nonetheless, the pandemic left online/distance education as the only possible way to get access to education during the pandemic. This resulted in a quick adaptation to “new” circumstances without prior testing. Thus, from a scientific point of view this swift change calls for further scrutinization.

Education has several dimensions and teacher education is one of the most important ones. In Türkiye, teacher education in ELT (English Language Teaching) has undergone a transformation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When the Covid-19 pandemic forced governments to take strict measures, and schools were closed then students began to use their technological devices, such as laptops, tablets etc., to follow the classes online. Online classes were offered as an emergency solution as nobody imagined that this pandemic would take longer than a couple of months.

Most of the universities in Türkiye adopted the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) within the scope of the Bologna process which aims for a standardization among universities' grading systems in Europe. Within the Bologna process, courses offered in the EFL teacher education program have been aligned with the requirements of European higher education standards. In the case of practicum, pre-service teachers take 2 hours of theory and 6 hours of observing/teaching sessions. Along with theoretical subjects, school practicum was also carried out online at this stage. During practicum, pre-service teachers had to intertwine their pedagogical/content knowledge with their technological abilities. Therefore, this study aims to find out how pre-service teachers reacted to these changes in terms of their planning, implementation and use of technology in their practicum as their views need to be considered while designing the content of teacher education programmes.

Lesson planning is one of the basic tools that helps pre-service teachers in their micro/macro teachings. It

is a guide that identifies the purpose, timing and type of instructional activities. The materials, potential challenges and outcomes of the activities are also stated in the plan. Further, it signals the topics to be covered in the next lessons to reach the objectives. According to Süral (2019), lesson planning is necessary for teachers to feel self-confident and remain calm when unexpected situations occur. It is also essential for classroom management. That is, lesson planning is a tool that makes teaching meaningful and effective. Yet, how adept pre-service teachers are in putting theory into practice is controversial (Süral, 2019).

In addition to planning a lesson, being able to implement it in the classroom is of importance. The implementation in the classroom may undergo several modifications based on the changes in beliefs. Zheng (2009) stated that language teaching and learning beliefs of pre-service English language teachers are formed in three stages; first they bring their experiences about learning a language into the teacher education programme, then during the teacher education programme their beliefs are reformed. Their initial teaching practice is shaped by these reformed beliefs. Finally, through experience pre-service teachers can identify and assess their beliefs. This means, although pre-service teachers form beliefs, acquire skills about teaching and related theory, they do not have the opportunity to critically observe their effectiveness without implementing them in a classroom setting.

Emergency education (Kagawa, 2005) due to Covid-19 pandemic restricted pre-service teachers to implement their lesson plans only in an online/distance education setting. According to Eraslan (2021), although online education is not a new phenomenon in language teaching, urgent transition to online education brought certain limitations with it. Online language classes helped teachers adopt skills to use technology actively and promoted autonomous learning (Dahmash, 2020). On the other hand, doubts about the productivity of it emerged. Monotonous learning environment (Fuad, Ariyani, Suyanto & Shidiq, 2020) and internet accessibility were some examples of common challenges. Thus, pre-service teachers not only faced some difficulties due to lack of experience, but also had to modify their existing skills to be able to teach online.

The transition from face-to-face to distant education posed many challenges in accommodating the demands of online practicum in English Language Teaching since all pedagogical and content knowledge pre-service teachers

acquired were based on traditional classrooms. The trainees in this period had to transfer their skills to online education. In this way, the current study aims to demonstrate how flexible pre-service teachers were in adapting to the needs of emergency remote teaching throughout the practicum and the difficulties they faced within this process. Further, to the best of our knowledge, the current research is the first study which investigates the transition process from traditional to online classes in practicum in English Language Teaching. In line with the aims of the study, the following research question was addressed:

RQ: How did pre-service teachers react to changes in ELT teaching practice during pandemic in terms of lesson planning, implementation and use of technology?

## METHOD

The design of the study can be categorized as “Applied Research” within Patton’s (2002) qualitative research typology since the aim of such studies is “*to contribute knowledge that will help people to understand the nature of the problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more efficiently control their environment.*” (p. 217).

### Participants

The study comprised 15 participants in total. All participants were senior EFL students at a state university in İstanbul and they were recruited via convenient sampling. Their initials were used in the sections where excerpts from their reflections were presented. Participation was on a voluntary basis and ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee (No: E-2103110086).

### Data Collection Tools

As for the purposes of the current study, three instruments were employed. The first one was “Teaching Philosophy” (henceforth TP). In this task participants were asked to write their TP trying to answer the questions such as “*What are your goals for English teaching in particular? What will you focus on in your classes?*” (Appendix A). The aim was to have them reflect on key aspects of English Language Teaching and raise awareness of their priorities in ELT. This task was conducted twice. The first one was written at the beginning of the semester (Teaching Philosophy - Pre) and the second one was administered at the end of the semester (Teaching Philosophy - Post). The aim of this pre and post design was to tap their conceptual changes that might stem from their online in-class experiences. None of the participants had in-class, either online or face-to-face, teaching experience prior to their practicum although some of them stated that they tutored students privately.

The second instrument used in the study was called “Self-Observation” (henceforth SO). In this task participants were asked to evaluate their own teaching performances by referring to lesson planning, their feelings,

phases of the lesson, students’ reactions, and overall effectiveness. The aim was to help them analyze their strengths and weaknesses for the lessons that they conducted. They were presented with a guide (Appendix B) that would help them to focus on key aspects. Throughout the semester even though they had been involved in partial teaching tasks in their schools, the majority of the time was devoted to observation. Thus, this teaching experience was accepted as an invaluable source to gain deeper insight in ELT. SO was administered immediately after participants completed their whole online session teachings.

The third instrument was “Peer Evaluation”. In this task, participants were asked to evaluate each of their peers’ teaching that they observed in online classes. Similar to previous tasks, the aim was to make them aware of components of an effective ELT classroom (Appendix C).

### Data Analysis

All three instruments targeted participants’ views and reflections on their first online in-class teaching experience. Written data gathered from students were analyzed qualitatively. Each instrument was scrutinized separately and thematic coding was carried out based on recurrent concepts.

The data were analyzed in line with “Phenomenological Analysis” as discussed in Patton (2002). In particular, as Patton (2002) put it, such analysis aims to:

*“elucidate the essence of experience of a phenomenon for an individual or group. The analytical vocabulary of phenomenological analysis is initially alien, and potentially alienating, until the researcher becomes immersed in the holistic perspective, rigorous discipline, and paradigmatic parameters of phenomenology.”* (p. 487).

In a similar vein, the analyses involved immense exposure to target phenomena via several tasks. This resulted in three essential themes, which will be discussed in the results section.

### Findings

Through the analysis of the content, teaching philosophy statements before and after the practicum, peer evaluation reports from each group member, which were written following the observation and self-observation reports, were analyzed based on three themes: planning, implementation and reflection.

In terms of lesson planning, the common subjects pre-service teachers mentioned in their reports were selection of materials and topics, timing/pacing, preparing online activities, use of a variety of activities, potential difficulties while using technological tools, considering students’ needs, interests and skills, etc. Some examples to the statements of the trainees are as follows:

- **Self Observation - AI.** *I’ve encountered one main problem and that was the timing issue. I kept the warm-up and presentation part a bit longer than I planned it to be. The listening part could have been handled more ef-*

ficiently if I planned the time better, therefore I will take that into consideration for the actual lesson. (timing)

- **Teaching Philosophy (Post) - ÖA.** Another thing is to prepare a lesson plan with different kinds of activities. Some students learn English by writing, some learn by reading... All students may have different learning styles, hence I will use a variety of techniques in classes such as visual, linguistic, auditory and kinesthetic. (considering students' needs, interests and skills, use of variety of activities)
- **Self Observation - BU.** I think my lesson plan was useful at most. Since I prepared everything, materials to the lesson plan, I had full control over everything. I knew what I was doing. My lesson plan worked like a miracle and any of my anticipated problems happened. This was partially thanks to my previous lesson. I had seen that if I depended too much on technology, there would be more problems, so I prepared my materials according to that. (material selection, use of a variety of activities, use of technology)
- **Self Observation - BB.** I learnt that no matter how hard a teacher tries some students just don't want to participate and be involved in the classroom. I also learnt that being planned is very important before the lesson. And I also learnt that students in general love it when activities have some different and new features like breakout rooms. (considering students' needs and interests)

In the implementation part, peer evaluations and self-observations centered upon the strengths, weaknesses and use of technology in the teaching sessions of the practicum. Additionally, pre-service teachers reflected upon their lessons in terms of planning, teaching and influences on their teaching philosophy. The themes which were frequently mentioned in the statements were class environment, clarity of instructions, effective use of online tools, presentation of the subject, transition from one activity to the other, student-teacher/teacher-student interaction and keeping students motivated. Some examples to these themes are given in the following excerpts;

- **Teaching Philosophy (Post)- BA.** "I aim to create a classroom environment where students can learn English by doing and experiencing, in the light of active learning theory, by using the communicative approach whenever possible. This is our duty as teachers." (classroom atmosphere)
- **Peer Evaluation - SK.** "Her instructions could have been more clear and concise. The tools she used were very effective tools actually, however it seemed like she should have made herself familiarized with these tools" (clarity of instructions)
- **Peer Evaluation - ÖA.** "She used technology very effectively. Both in warm up activity and last activity, she used different tools, which livened up the lesson. And she used powerpoint slides and really colorful pictures." (effective use of online tools)

- **Peer Evaluation - SK.** "I can just say, she could prefer inductive teaching. By this way, students can think about their learning, they activate their schematas while learning" (presenting the subject)

- **Peer Evaluation - FK.** "Even though the warm-up activity was enjoyable, I couldn't get the connection with other activities. There should be a connection between activities. Also, the grammar structure shouldn't have been presented in an isolated way." (transition from one activity to the other)

Based on their presentations and feedback they received from peers, the reflections of pre-service teachers clustered around these topics: getting accustomed to the integration of technology in classes, being a role-model for students, teaching the subject matter in context, considering timing, material design, providing clear instructions, designing student-centered activities and in-service development. Some examples to students' reflections are given below:

- **Teaching Philosophy (Post) - SK.** Teachers should always improve themselves to reach their highest potential and meet expectations. (in-service development)

- **Teaching Philosophy (Post) - ŞU.** As teachers we should be open minded, consider individual differences, and create an effective social environment for our students. He/she should promote students to collaboratively work with each other instead of traditional education. They learn better, if they actively participate in what they are doing. Only then we could accept ourselves as successful teachers. (student-centered activities)

- **Self Observation - FK.** I would spend more time presenting the topic and wouldn't give the structure in an isolated way, and I would provide more examples before practicing. I have learnt that I should be more careful about instructions which should be clearer and should be repeated and written down. I should provide many more examples before introducing the form and I should do this with meaningful materials. I shouldn't give the form directly instead I should use examples for this. (teaching subject matter in context, material design, providing clear instructions).

Since the theoretical and practical lessons were held online, pre-service teachers mentioned that designing a lesson for online courses required different techniques compared to traditional lessons. Their statements demonstrated that the challenges they experienced in online classes had more serious consequences in distance education, because it got more difficult to get students' attention back compared to traditional instructional settings. Some excerpts from their reflections based on the use of technology are given below:

- **Self Reflection - BB.** I already knew that technology should be a part of an effective classroom but now I am certain that without the use of technology, a classroom can't reach its full potential for its students. I learned that technology allows us to reach specialized materials and supports us in terms of new ways of teaching. I learned that as a teacher I should always keep up with technological improvements and I should constantly

look for ways that I can improve myself so that I can be a better and more modern teacher.

- **Self Reflection - YS.** *The correct use of technology in classrooms can make learning more effective and fun. However, teachers must have the required qualifications to use the technology, they should be trained if it is necessary. Since technology has raised communication across nations, teachers can find different types of teaching ideas and techniques from other professionals and apply them in their own lectures.*
- **Teaching Philosophy (Post) - FK.** *Students mostly don't turn their cameras and microphones on and write on the chat part. This is demotivating both for the teacher and students. So, I can use some techniques to motivate students like doing a warm-up activity that they are into and be willing to talk about, keeping the lesson visual-oriented, starting the lesson with music till everybody gathers etc.*
- **Teaching Philosophy (Post) - SK.** *Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the setting was quite unique since the lessons were conducted in virtual settings. To be honest, I consider myself very lucky to be one of the student teachers who had the opportunity to meet these radical changes while studying, since we improve ourselves a lot on how to enhance the online classes, and now we are educated on this topic.*

The statements of the pre-service teachers revealed that certain themes were frequently mentioned. Aforementioned themes can be categorized as topics to consider in both modalities and issues that are unique to online classrooms. Common challenges in online classroom can be summarized as timing/pacing, potential difficulties while using technological tools, considering students' needs, interests and skills for planning, clarity of instructions, effective use of online tools, transition from one activity to the other, student-teacher interaction e.g. turning the mic/camera off during the lesson. In the following section the results of the study will be discussed elaborately.

## DISCUSSION

The study aimed to demonstrate how pre-service EFL teachers reacted to Covid-19 pandemic during practicum from the perspective of lesson planning, implementing and using the technology in ELT classes. The results showed that the main themes discussed by pre-service teachers were timing and pacing during the online lessons, and how they handled difficulties while using technological tools. Pre-service teachers also mentioned the importance of considering needs, interests and skills of students in lesson planning, the clarity of instructions while implementing the lesson plan. Furthermore, they expressed their use of online tools for effective teaching, and how they proceeded from one activity to the other. Besides, student-teacher interaction in such classes was commonly mentioned.

Another topic that this study addresses is that student-teachers should intertwine their pedagogical/content knowledge with technological abilities in order to keep up

with online classes. Among these subjects, timing and pacing of the lesson was affected in two ways; either the lessons took longer to finish than anticipated since login-time was extended for some of the students as they were not familiar with the login screen or the activities took shorter than planned due to the lack of student participation. This led pre-service teachers to be prepared for such cases. For instance, some of the student teachers stated that they should have extra activities at hand for the next time.

About the problems they faced in implementing the lesson plan in their classes, integrating technological tools was one of the common issues. Required membership/registration to some tools, disconnected or slowed-down internet, not being accustomed to the user interface of the tool can be listed among these issues. As a solution to such issues, in their self-observation reports, pre-service teachers reflected that they should have got familiarized with the specific tool they aimed to use or asked their students to register for the tool before the lesson.

As for considering the needs, skills and interests of the students in the lesson plans, the pre-service pointed out that individual differences and intelligence types of the learners should be taken into account especially in online lessons. A variety of activities, including visual aids, audio, realia, role-plays, authentic and up-to-date materials should be incorporated in the lesson.

Clarity of instruction was yet another important subject to consider since it affected students' motivation and participation in the activities. Whereas, it would have been simpler to handle students' confusion in face-to-face classes, in online classes it required more effort to get the students' attention back and remotivate them. In the self-observation reports, some of the pre-service teachers mentioned that they should have written sample instructions in the lesson plan where appropriate to guide them through the lesson.

In online lessons, due to physical distance, student-teacher interaction is limited or most lessons are teacher-oriented. Some student-teachers asked questions to students to make them active participants. Nevertheless, turning off the mics and webcams were commonly encountered problems that affected student-teacher/teacher-student interaction during the lesson. This experience resembles the result of verbal-only, non-visual communication, which lacks certain features that contribute to the communication process, such as body language, facial expressions, etc. To improve the class communication during online/distance education, webcams could be useful. In the Teaching Philosophy (Post), some student-teachers recommended choosing activities or topics that students would be willing to talk about and participate in the lesson.

Data gathered from student-teachers show that online/distance education is different from conventional classrooms. Human communication requires some basic needs such as visual, auidal, and even tactile expressions that complement the entire process. Being away from each other, students in a classroom cannot meet these needs via online/distance

education as much as they can in a face-to-face classroom. Online/distance education cannot simulate the face-to-face classroom environment, as this stands against the very nature of online/distance education and students are having difficulties in adapting to the new classroom setting, which is online.

## CONCLUSION

As the world is gradually getting increasingly dependent on internet technologies in every lifestyle, teacher education is not an exception in this regard. Student-teachers equipped with these qualifications will benefit from the positive reinforcement of such skills in their classes, both in preparation of the lesson and the implementation of it.

In conclusion, online/distance education needs a different mindset when preparing a lesson and making necessary customizations to the regular classroom settings. Therefore, pre-service EFL teachers participating in this study expressed similar ideas while giving their feedback. This is an expected outcome of a different learning environment. As it is stated by Gleeson, Lynch, McCormack (2021) in their study on ECTS and Bologna Process, Curriculum designers and policy makers should consider these needs and include relevant subjects in teacher education programmes in order to prepare them for recent and future technologies that could be used in a classroom environment. This study shows us that even though schools invest in technological tools and try to switch to online/distance education, this new concept needs a different approach rather than a traditional one. In order to gain more insight about the transition to online education further studies on this subject are needed with larger samples and different approaches.

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### Appendix A. Teaching philosophy

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In this task participants are asked to reflect on why they want to become EFL teachers and how they perceive distinct competencies of EFL. Following questions are some of the prompt questions:

1. What are your goals for English teaching in particular? What will you focus on in your classes? (E.g. Communicative competence? High scores on tests? Academic skills? Soft skills?)
  2. What is your broader personal morality, and what are your ideas about learning? (I.e., What is acceptable for a teacher to do? How much do teachers need to put into their work? What is your definition of effective learning?)
  3. What are your academic goals for teaching English? Where does your class fit in on the path that your students will take toward fluency in English?
  4. What kind of teacher do you want to be remembered as? Your students may remember you for their whole lives. How would you prefer to be seen as a teacher and what can you do to achieve that?
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### Appendix B. Self-evaluation

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This task asks participants to reflect on their macro teaching session by asking some prompt questions:

- How did you feel while teaching?
  - Comment on your lesson plan: How useful was it? Any changes you would make to make it better in your future lessons?
  - What were the most and least effective part(s) of the lesson? Why do you think so?
  - How did you give feedback on students' efforts?
  - What did you learn?
  - What were the strengths and weaknesses of your session?
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### Appendix C. Peer evaluation

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In this task participants are required to evaluate their peers' micro teaching by focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of it. A sample form as follows:

<b>Name of the presenter</b>	XXXXXXXX
<b>Date</b>	16.04.2021
<b>Topic</b>	First conditionals
<b>Age of the class</b>	14-15 years old/9 <sup>th</sup> graders
<b>Strengths</b>	
<b>Weaknesses</b>	
<b>Use of Technology (advantages/ disadvantages - easiness/difficulty)</b>	
<b>Notes</b>	

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