



Teaching English to Young Learners: Combining Theory and Practice through Practicum in Pre-service Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

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Recent years have witnessed an exponential growth in interest in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) across the world. Pivotal, there is some research focusing on in-class practices and teacher pedagogy on this issue, yet young learner teacher education has not been given much attention. Many teacher education programs in different countries prepare their pre-service teachers for young learners by offering TEYL courses without providing them with real classroom experiences. To this end, the researchers initiated a practicum project in which pre-service EFL teachers taught English to young learners besides taking the TEYL module at the university. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 21 participants, it was aimed to examine the effectiveness of a practicum-integrated TEYL teacher education program. The findings revealed that practicum provided teacher candidates with a range of benefits in terms of putting young learner knowledge into practice, developing teaching skills, designing age-appropriate lessons and materials, and gaining confidence with TEYL. Different from previous practicum-related studies, the current study showed that practicum helped pre-service teachers have clearer minds on their future careers and teaching contexts in that some participants would choose to work with older learners considering the distinctive characteristics of children. This study offers implications for pre-service teachers and teacher education programs for training young learner English teachers more effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) has attracted considerable attention in line with globalization and the role of English as a lingua franca across the world. Nowadays, a rising number of children are learning English at a younger age without being fully literate in their first language as a result of government regulations. Hence, the past several years have witnessed an increasing body of literature on TEYL focusing on various aspects such as pedagogy (Garton & Tekin, 2022), policy (Enever, 2016), use of technology (Cowie & Sakui, 2020), and theory for young learners (YLSs) (Garton & Copland, 2019; Pinter, 2017). Considering this, much attention is given to TEYL both in educational contexts and in academia.

The advancement in TEYL makes it vital to efficiently educate pre-service teachers and equip them with the necessary pedagogical and management skills. Although the abovementioned sources provide YL teachers with valuable insights, gaining experience in the real classroom environment is undoubtedly the most useful and effective way to do this. At this point, offering pre-service teachers a practicum would be a good solution for them to get a sense of the classroom environment. Considering the importance of practicum in pre-service teacher education (Collinson et al., 2009; Lawson et al., 2015; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2019), a practicum project was initiated, and it was aimed to explore the effects of practicum-integrated TEYL education in which pre-service teachers could gain experience and become more aware of working with YLs and their distinctive characteristics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Characteristics of Young Learners

YL is a broad term referring to all children until the age of 18, but researchers in the field of TESOL present different perspectives. Scott and Ytreberg (1990), for example, described YLs as children between five and ten years of age, while Rathus (2021) makes a distinction between early childhood (ages 3-6) and middle childhood (ages 6-10). Cameron has a more holistic viewpoint by viewing YLs as children between five and twelve years old. Pinter (2017), on the other hand, specifically focuses on the children who are studying English at schools from as early as three years old until the age of 13-14. In this study, however, since primary school children between seven and ten years old learn English in Turkey, children in this age group are recognized as YLs.

YLs' developmental peculiarities also characterize their learning, and TEYL turns into a multifaceted experience that includes distinctive factors. In actuality, it is both captivating and challenging. Brown (2007, p. 101) specifies that "specific skills and intuitions that differ from those appropriate for adult learning" are essential for the teachers of young learners. Relatedly, it is noteworthy to discuss the characteristics of young learners to present a better understanding of TEYL. Highlighting the importance of recognizing YLs' nature and identifying them as "learners with a well-established set of instincts and skills", Halliwell (1992, p. 3) describes young learners as children who are very good at interpreting meaning without necessarily understanding the individual words and are creative language learners with the ability to use limited language. Through their ready imagination, they take great pleasure in finding and creating fun in what they do, and they take great delight in talking. More than that, Halliwell (1992) emphasizes that children learn indirectly rather than directly, which pivotally points out the significance of the classroom environment and activities. Understandably, focusing on meaning rather than structure or form, being both creative and imaginative, and providing indirect learning rather than direct learning are remarkable features that create differences between adults and YLs. Cameron (2001) also notes that YLs lose interest quickly and have difficulties being motivated. Specifically, the attention span of children is shorter than that of adults, and their source of motivation is considerably different. Tekin and Garton (2020) link YLs' motivation, mostly intrinsic, to their relationship with teachers and enjoying the lesson. In a similar vein, Shin (2006) pays close attention to YLs' short attention span and extreme physical energy. Considering these distinctive features, it is possible to mention specific

challenges of TEYL that teachers of YLs should bear in mind during their teaching process.

Challenges of TEYL

In today's world, the discussions regarding the critical period in second language learning and other political and economic factors, as Copland, Garton, and Burns (2014) pin down in their study, such as economic globalization, educational policies across the world, or parents' positive attitudes towards early language learning, lead English to be included in the primary school curriculum. This trend, however, brings some essential issues to discuss in detail because teachers of adults find themselves in primary school classrooms without any specialized training. Drawing attention to the related point, Read (1998, p. 8) describes her experience with YLs as chaos: "The more I asked the children to sit down, the more they moved about. The more I raised my voice, asking them to be quiet, the louder the noise level grew".

Accordingly, the challenges behind TEYL are multiple. As aforesaid, the characteristics of YLs play a vital role in TEYL. More than that, YLs do not have well-established literacy skills, which may be a handicap for second language learning (Cameron, 2001). They are still at the very beginning of their educational lives and learning their first language, not to mention their second language. Nunan (2010) pinpoints that cognitive development, motivation, attention, multilevel groups, and assessment are the primary challenges for TEYL. Keskin (2019) similarly categorizes them in five groups: institutional problems (teaching hours, classroom environment, and class size); instructional problems (curriculum, materials, teaching techniques, and first language use); learner-related problems peculiar to YLs' characteristics (attention, motivation, anxiety, and development); teacher-related challenges (proficiency, classroom management, and ineffective body language); and community-related problems (parents' roles in the learning process and different first languages). Kayhan (2022) also argues that classroom management is probably one of the most challenging aspects of teaching YLs, and it has the potential to cause anxiety among teachers. Relatedly, TEYL requires teachers to adapt their teaching techniques, review YLs' pedagogical characteristics or needs, and subsequently rearrange the classroom environment. In line with this, TEYL courses offered in ELT departments in Turkey should be analyzed to support teachers of YLs in coping with relevant challenges.

TEYL in Turkish Universities

TEYL is a compulsory course offered in the fifth and sixth semesters in all ELT departments in Turkey. According to the Council of Higher Education (CHE), it offers theoretical information in the fifth semester and includes language structures, skills, and sub-skills between young and adult learners, misconceptions about young learners, and learning styles and strategies of young learners. In the sixth semester, it is based on teaching four skills, raising language awareness, and planning a lesson (CHE, 2021). CHE provides a general frame for the programs, yet instructors can customize the content of their courses in parallel with the latest advancements in the field.

However, despite the radical change made by the Ministry of National Education (MONE) in 2012, which lowered students' age of learning English to the 2nd grade (7 year-olds) from the 4th grade (10 year-olds) (Güneş, 2020), neither any revisions or arrangements were made for TEYL courses nor any adaptation seminars or workshops were organized for the employed teachers. Instructors of TEYL, hence, try to update their courses according to the requirements of the new system in line with the arguments of Bayyurt (2012), who emphasizes that teachers working with young learners should be trained and well-equipped in accordance with the learners' young age.

Relatedly, the TEYL course offered in the context of the current study mainly aims to improve awareness about the characteristics of YLs and child development theories in line with both the CHE's primary concerns and the needs of primary school teachers. It is also aimed at blending the related theories and applications so that teacher candidates will be more aware of how to put the theory into practice and gain hands-on experience teaching YLs. Thus, along with theoretical information, pre-service teachers are offered microteaching, during which they teach a language point to their classmates (pretending to be

children) by drawing on what they learn about the theory. They individually teach the contents of the state primary school coursebooks, depending on their own choice, for 25 minutes. Following the presentation, they reflect on their performance and share it with their classmates. They also receive feedback from their classmates as well as from the module tutors. In this regard, it is regarded as an opportunity for the presenters to customize their teaching according to the feedback and for the rest of the class to learn from others' teaching.

Although the TEYL course contents and way of delivering this course in the context of this research are somewhat similar to those of most universities in terms of the abovementioned features, there are some aspects of training pre-service teachers that are special to this research. First, teacher candidates taking part in this research were exclusively given the valuable opportunity to experience YL classes in real settings. Rather than merely being presenters in micro-teaching sessions, they became actual teachers in a state primary school and felt the atmosphere of the teaching environment, experienced the complexity of teaching, and as Durmuşoğlu Saltalı (2022 p. 2) put it, they became aware of "complex and multi-dimensional profession that requires many skills", since there are various components of teaching, including students, teaching materials, classroom management, time management constraints, and so on. Second, it was not a one-off experience but lasted an extended period so that they had the chance to observe the improvements and changes in themselves, their way of teaching, and their students' behaviors over time. Third, they had the autonomy to plan the classes on their own in terms of their style of instruction and teaching materials. Moreover, they were observed while teaching in a real-world classroom setting by their tutors, who provided constructive feedback, which is regarded as valuable to enhance teacher performance (Feeney, 2010; Ovando, 2005). In this respect, this research has brought some new aspects to pre-service teacher training in terms of combining theoretical and practical aspects of teacher education.

Previous Studies

According to Shin and Crandall (2014), over 50% of the nations around the world have made English a compulsory subject for up to 3rd graders in primary schools. In line with this exponential growth of TEYL, there is an increasing number of studies investigating teacher education programs with particular emphasis on practicality. Focusing on the efficiency of initial teacher education programs in Turkey, Çelik and Arikán (2012), for instance, found that a great majority of participants regarded these programs as insufficient for TEYL in an actual classroom. More specifically, although 40% of English teachers believed that undergraduate programs were sufficient in theory, they were insufficient in practice in that practice-based knowledge and skills were given in a limited way. Similarly, Zein (2016) examined pre-service education for primary school English teachers in Indonesia in his research and concluded that pre-service education was inadequate in terms of TEYL since it did not provide enough opportunities for teacher candidates to practice their skills. Moreover, participants stated that methodology courses did not offer practical perspectives as they were excessively theoretical. From a distinctive viewpoint, Güngör (2016) used an action research study that aimed to reduce the gap between theory and practice of teaching English to young learners and applied one-year reflective practices through the application of videos, feedback upon microteaching presentations, and diaries. The study revealed that reflective techniques and tools were beneficial to developing procedural knowledge for an effective TEYL. Furthermore, Çamlıbel-Acar (2016) investigated the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in TEYL and concluded that supporting theoretical courses with real classroom experiences was emphasized by nearly all of the participants. Based on these studies and others, Cesur (2022) carried out a systematic review consisting of 56 papers related to TEYL and concluded that teacher candidates do not receive much attention in terms of their training for real-life teaching, although TEYL is regarded as a trendy field in language education.

Based on the previous empirical and theoretical research, it could be argued that teaching in a real classroom environment could be much more useful for pre-service teachers to put their knowledge into

practice. Therefore, as Reynolds et al. (2022) highlight, teacher education programs should take responsibility and offer teaching practice opportunities that allow pre-service teachers to put theoretical information into practice, particularly with YLs. At this point, the inclusion of practicum could be regarded as a solution, as the benefits of practicum in teacher education programs are well documented in previous research (Collinson et al., 2009; Lawson et al., 2015; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2019). Moreover, practicum could enable pre-service teachers to see the previously mentioned challenges of teaching YLs and act accordingly. Focusing on this point, this study brought pre-service EFL teachers and primary school students together to underpin the significance and necessity of real teaching experiences in YL classrooms. It therefore addresses the following research questions:

1. What are pre-service EFL teachers' voices about the efficiency of education programs in terms of TEYL?
2. What are pre-service teachers' experiences about the integration of practicum with the TEYL modules?

METHOD

Research Context and Participants

The context of the study is two-fold, one being a public university and the other a public primary school in a small city in Turkey. The ELT department at the university is a young one; it was only founded around a decade ago. Similar to the other state and private universities in Turkey, the school offers pre-service teachers two modules specifically about teaching English to young learners. These modules focus on theoretical perspectives of working with YLs and practice, which is microteaching, with no actual teaching experience in YL classrooms.

As mentioned in the previous section, the TEYL module syllabus consists of theoretical information about several issues related to TEYL, including language structures, teaching and learning strategies, approaches towards children, planning lessons for YLs, child development theories, classroom management, and so on. Regarding the practical aspect, it offers teacher candidates micro-teaching sessions in which they can teach their peers who pretend to be YLs. Based on their performance, they do a self-evaluation and get constructive feedback from their peers and tutors.

The other context is a public primary school where teacher candidates had a practicum. They taught the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th graders (7–10-year-olds) once a week over the course of three months. The class size was around 25–30 learners, and it was a two-lesson-hour practice per week (80 minutes in total). They taught children a variety of structures and language points in line with the ones in their coursebooks provided by MONE, including animals, family members, classroom objects, numbers, feelings, and so on.

Around half of the pre-service teachers taking the TEYL module in the 3rd grade of the teacher education program volunteered to participate in the study. Of the 21 participants, 15 were female and six were male, all around 20–21 years old. They were all native speakers of Turkish and expected to graduate and become EFL teachers the following year. None had teaching experience with any age group of learners previously, so this was their first teaching experience.

Data Collection Method

This study employed focus group interviews as the main data collection method, which is based on the collective experience of participants' brainstorming, thinking together, and inspiring each other by creating synergy among participants (Dörnyei, 2007). Although this method has relatively recently been adopted in social research, it is commonly used for several reasons, including allowing participants to respond to other group members' views and have a personal view based on group interaction, which positively contributes to exploring the specific issue in depth and from various viewpoints simultaneously (Bryman, 2012). Since both shared understandings and beliefs and individual differences can be voiced

in this method, focus group interviews are regarded as an effective way of collecting detailed data (Ghazali, 2014).

The interviewer in focus groups in this study behaved as a moderator or facilitator (Bryman, 2012), who guided the session without being too intrusive. It was ensured that no participant dominated the floor so that everyone had a chance to express their views. After setting a number of ground rules (e.g., not speaking over each other), their views were asked about the TEYL module at the university, the implementation of practicum in TEYL and teaching experience, and the comparison of the module contents and their actual teaching. The questions were mostly open-ended, allowing participants to express their beliefs and experiences more freely.

The interviews were conducted during the fall term of the 2021–2022 academic year. Each focus group included five participants (six in one group) and lasted between 40 minutes and approximately one hour. They were all audio-recorded. Based on participants' choices, interviews were conducted in Turkish, transcribed, and translated into English by the researchers.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, as it is an effective way to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes found in a dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). The researchers particularly followed the five main steps of the "Framework" method, namely, familiarization, thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpreting (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). It provided great convenience in terms of processing raw data and turning it into meaningful elements. During this process, NVivo 12 was used, as it was beneficial in several aspects such as indexing, coding, and visual demonstration of the data.

Familiarization with the data started with listening to the audio recordings, transcribing, and translating. All interviews were transcribed and translated to achieve a fuller understanding of participants' accounts. However, literal or word-to-word translation was not chosen, as it would be challenging to achieve conceptual equivalence between different languages via this (Choi et al., 2012). Instead, non-literal translation was conducted to ensure that meaning is conveyed at a maximum level and that readability and coherence are achieved without the essential features being ignored.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the relevant institutional Ethics Committee. The informed consent of the participants was obtained prior to data collection. They were provided with sufficient information regarding their rights, such as their willingness to participate and withdraw from the study at any stage without causing any negative outcomes, and it was ensured that there was no conflict of interest. Participants were held in a familiar setting at the university to facilitate trust and create a warm atmosphere.

FINDINGS

Efficiency of TEYL Module

The findings revealed mixed results in terms of the efficiency of the module. According to participants' accounts, the module included several positive aspects in terms of balance between theory and practice, their own engagement during the classes, microteaching, and various teaching strategies used throughout the term. However, they also believed that it still lacked an important element for them to be better prepared for actual teaching in primary schools. Regarding the contents of the module, they had similar views in that both theoretical aspects and practice were taught and emphasized equally by the module tutor. When asked about the balance, a participant from the first focus group explained it as follows:

In my opinion, they [theory and practice] were balanced. There were some sessions about theory at the beginning. And then, we focused on how to use and apply these in teaching.

The module's focus on theoretical aspects at the beginning and then students' presentations were also supported by another participant who had positive attitudes towards this way of learning.

We worked on the child pedagogy for the first several weeks. We discussed how to behave towards them. We then did practice. It was a useful strategy to follow since we would have problems in teaching without theoretical knowledge.

As seen in the above extracts, the module first focused on the theory of YL education, which was followed by microteaching. In microteaching, while their classmates behaved like students (in fact, children), pre-service teachers did presentations by teaching various language points taken from YL English books, such as animals, family members, numbers, greetings, and so on. According to participants, microteaching provided several benefits in terms of practicing and honing their teaching skills to some extent.

After learning several strategies in theoretical part such as classroom management, encouraging unwilling students, motivating them, and overcoming various problems in the class, it was quite useful to apply these in our presentations and to see how well we did.

A similar explanation was given by two participants who built a conversation over each other's accounts and listed a number of benefits of microteaching.

Theory and practice may not always align with each other. If we only had learned theory without practicing it, we would not be sufficiently prepared for actual teaching. However, we can put what we learn into practice now.

Moreover, it teaches us to choose age-appropriate activities. For example, in the feedback provided by the tutor following my presentation, I was told not to focus on lengthy writing activities for children whose literacy level is so limited.

The extracts above show that participants benefited from microteaching as it offered them the chance to implement their knowledge. Each microteaching also included individual feedback, in which the tutor showed them their strengths and areas that should be improved. In line with the statements of the last participant above, other participants mentioned the benefits of detailed, customized tutor feedback. One participant explained it as "*There is a self-evaluation and tutor feedback after microteaching, which is the part I love most*". This account is quite in line with the one from another group, which is presented as "*We can fully benefit from microteaching with the help of tutor feedback*".

Although microteaching was found useful by participants in terms of gaining experience, a great majority of participants emphasized that it lacked some aspects of a natural educational context. They commonly stated that it was not entirely natural that presentations flowed smoothly, which is highly unlikely in real YL classes. They almost never encountered disciplinary problems during microteaching, but this is a very common issue with YLs. The students in microteaching (classmates pretending to be students) already knew the language points they were taught and were hence unable to behave like children all the time. From this viewpoint, participants felt the need for a natural environment in which they could put their knowledge into practice with real learners. In doing so, they would see what they would meet and behave accordingly.

Although the module is sufficient to some extent, it has some room to be improved. We need a natural environment to implement the information we learned. Our classmates are unable to pretend to be children during presentations, which prevents us from effectively practicing teaching skills.

An interesting argument was made by a participant who emphasized the complexity of a real classroom and the difficulty of including every aspect of teaching in the module.

We cannot learn everything in microteaching because it is artificial. Real classroom is a very complex environment with lots of things happening at the same time. We should encounter this environment to be more familiar with it. However, it seems very difficult in microteaching.

The unnatural environment of microteaching was elaborated on by a participant who shared her own experiences.

No matter how hard our classmates try, they cannot act like children. For example, someone did something mischievous and stopped when I warned them in my presentation. However, children's real reactions might be very different most of the time.

Interview extracts above show that participants were happy with the contents of the module and the balance between theory and practice, as well as microteaching. Although they emphasized the role of microteaching in the development of several teaching skills, such as time management, their accounts revealed one negative aspect of microteaching, which is a lack of naturality. It was commonly mentioned that microteaching was not a natural way of practicing their teaching skills due to their classmates' inability to behave like children. Therefore, they believed that the module was not sufficient to prepare them for actual teaching in YL classes.

Integration of Practicum with the TEYL Module

As previously mentioned, participants in this study voluntarily took part in a practicum project while taking the TEYL module at the university. The project aimed to enable pre-service EFL teachers to gain experience with YLs and to have a sense of real-life classroom context by drawing on the theoretical knowledge they learned in the TEYL module. Regarding their experiences with this project, all participants commonly argued that it was a very beneficial practice to sense the YL environment. They emphasized that practicum was much more advantageous than microteaching since it took place in a natural environment full of children. One participant explained the main advantage by making the following comparison between microteaching and practicum:

In microteaching, classmates could answer all my questions correct. They were much quieter than the children in school context. They did not push the presenters in terms of their behaviors. However, we noticed in the practicum that this was not the case in a real classroom.

Similarly, another participant highlighted that microteaching was only a one-off experience during the whole term, while they had a chance to regularly teach in practicum and improve themselves every week.

Unlike the microteaching which was done only once for each person during the whole term, we did teaching every week in practicum. We planned lessons and implemented our plan regularly. We did it as if we had been an actual English teacher.

The complementary role of practicum for the TEYL module was also underlined by the participants, who viewed it as a nice opportunity for them to put what they learned in the module into practice and hence comprehend the knowledge better. This was elaborated on by a participant as follows:

We already learned lots of information in the module, but it was the practicum that really helped us to comprehend those. In fact, both the module and practicum were integrated with each other efficiently. For example, we learned student types in the module such as the ones raising hands, being offended, behaving mischievously, etc. We encountered all these student types in practicum and learned how to behave towards them.

Preparing age-appropriate materials for children was another skill that some participants improved through practicum. They regularly prepared materials for YL English classes, and this helped them to be more confident with material design. A participant's account is provided below:

I personally did not have any clue about how to prepare materials for YLs until this module. I learned it in the module and improved this skill in the practicum. To be honest, I would have serious problems regarding teaching YLs after graduation unless we had practicum experience.

The above extract also indicates that the participant was aware of the importance of practicum for their future teaching experience. For her, it had a proactive role in terms of preventing possible problems in actual teaching after graduation. This aspect of practicum was also voiced by several other participants who felt more confident teaching YLs:

We now have experience in teaching YLs and therefore will be able to draw on our experience to overcome any difficulties that might occur in our future career. I am sure that we would not know what to do after becoming a real teacher if we did not have any experience.

When asked to elaborate on the benefits of practicum for their future experience, one participant explained it as follows:

I can now guess how children can behave in a particular situation. They can be bored, give up, easily get distracted by something, deal with something else, or explicitly say that they are bored. At that moment, it is necessary to attract their attention.

In addition to practicum's role in the professional development of pre-service teachers mentioned above, the results revealed that it had a major impact on some of them in terms of building positive attitudes towards working with YLs. Following spending time with children in practicum and hence establishing a good bond with them, two participants stated that they were happy teaching English to YLs and hence might consider it for their future career:

At the very beginning of the term, the tutor asked me whether I wanted to become a YL English teacher. Although I replied negatively at that time, I am now more positive about the idea of working with YLs after graduation.

A similar attitude was also expressed by another participant from a different group:

I was deeply affected, and I loved them after seeing that they were so pure-hearted and hugged me unconditionally.

Although the practicum was found useful by participants in terms of feeling the real classroom atmosphere, three participants stated that TEYL was not a career path they would choose for their future. Being more cognizant of the challenges of working with YLs by means of practicum, they would work with older learners. One participant expressed her experience as follows:

Practicum changed my mind. Previously, I was planning to work in primary schools, but now I do not think I will do it. Teaching children is not for me. It requires lots of energy and patience. It is challenging for me to deal with a class full of children.

Similar to the account above, another participant from a different group explained his future plans based on his experiences with YLs:

I am now more aware that working with children is not for me. I cannot imagine myself as a YL teacher. The practicum helped me to see it better. Although it was very useful for me to improve my teaching skills, I prefer working with older learners.

The data revealed that practicum, along with the TEYL module, had great benefits in terms of pre-

service EFL teachers' professional development. It offered teacher candidates a unique opportunity to put their knowledge into practice and see their strengths and areas that needed improvement. It also allowed them to get a sense of the real classroom context so that they would be aware of what would be expected of them in their future careers. Above all, participants felt more confident working with children through practicum. There were also some who planned their future careers based on their experiences in the practicum.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of the TEYL course through the lens of pre-service EFL teachers and initiated a practicum project in which teacher candidates taught English to children. It also aimed to find out the effects of practicum on pre-service teachers in terms of developing professional skills. The results show that pre-service teachers were mostly happy with the quality of the TEYL module in terms of contents, the balance between theory and practice, and the use of microteaching. From this viewpoint, the module was in line with the broad framework determined by the CHE (2021). However, findings indicate that the practical aspect lacked an important element of actual teaching in a natural environment. Thus, they believed that the module could be improved for them to better prepare for actual teaching in YL classes. In terms of this finding, this research is in line with previous studies (Cesur, 2022; Çamlıbel-Acar, 2016; Çelik & Arıkan, 2012; Zein, 2016). Zein (2016) found that a lack of practicality in teacher education was one of the most important problems for teacher candidates. Revealing similar findings on the practical aspect of teacher education, Çamlıbel-Acar (2016) concluded that TEYL courses should be supported by real classroom experiences and distinctively suggested various practices such as observation of YL classes in a real environment and teaching YLs in a classroom context. Alternatively, in order to integrate theory and practice in terms of TEYL, Güngör (2016) actively used micro-teaching sessions by video recording them and helping participants reflect on their teaching. Participants were able to develop themselves professionally by watching their own performances. However, this technique still lacks the features of teaching in a natural environment. One of these features could be regarded as classroom management, which is viewed as one of the most challenging issues (Read, 1998).

The findings of the current study also revealed the great benefits of practicum for pre-service teachers. Participants highlighted that practicum allowed them to feel the real atmosphere of YL classes and apply their knowledge by considering the characteristics of YLs. They also experienced the challenges of working with YLs, assessed their own performance, and adjusted their way of teaching accordingly. At this point, this study concurs with previous research highlighting the integration of teaching practice and teacher education (Bayyurt, 2012; Collinson et al., 2009; Lawson et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2022; Yıldırım & Orsdemir, 2019). Reynolds et al. (2022) found that teaching experience was extremely useful for teacher candidates to evaluate themselves and take appropriate actions. Similarly, Lawson et al. (2015) argued that pre-service teachers had the chance to face unpredictable challenges of teaching, deal with these, and become aware of such situations for their future teaching. As Collinson et al. (2009, p. 9) argued, participants in this study regarded practicum as an essential part of effective and successful teacher education "to improve teachers' skills and to extend the body of knowledge on effective teaching practices". They became more equipped and confident, which is extremely important for effective teaching with the help of actual teaching experience (Bayyurt, 2012). Therefore, it could be argued that this study helped to create a more effective and successful YL teacher education.

As an emergent finding of the study, practicum helped pre-service teachers more consciously choose their career path for their future professional lives. In other words, practicum had an impact on their choice whether to work in primary schools, as they were more aware of the considerations and challenges of TEYL (Cameron, 2001; Garton & Tekin, 2022; Nunan, 2010; Pinter, 2017; Read, 1998; Shin, 2006; Tekin & Garton, 2020). In one sense, practicum enabled them to possess the skills Brown (2007) described as necessary, considering the characteristics of YLs, which are different from those of

older learners in terms of motivation, literacy skills, and ways of learning. Having experience working with YLs, some participants realized that TEYL was not for them, as they would be more confident with older learners, while others were more in favor of working with YLs. In one sense, practicum was a useful way for them to make informed decisions after graduation. Therefore, it could be argued that this research adds an innovative finding to the related literature, different from previous research focusing on the benefits of practicum for teacher candidates (Collinson et al., 2009; Lawson et al., 2015; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2019).

Initiating a practicum-implemented TEYL education, this paper contributes to YL teacher education, as it is an ignored issue in teacher education programs (Cesur, 2022). Based on the findings, it offers important implications. Considering the benefits of practicum introduced to pre-service EFL teachers at a state university in Turkey, it can be a good practice to implement it with other teacher candidates as a complementary part of TEYL teacher education programs so that they can be better prepared for actual teaching in YL classes. In line with what Bayyurt (2012) highlights, teacher candidates can be well-equipped and trained specifically to address YL education and hence become more confident working with children. It could also be a good practice to enhance YL teacher education and a complementary action to MONE's (2012) lowering learners' age to learn English (from ten to seven), since quality of education is much more important than learning a new language at an earlier age (Garton & Copland, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study focused on TEYL teacher education and investigated pre-service EFL teachers' perspectives and experiences on this issue with the implementation of practicum. Overall, the findings of the study suggest that practicum in YL teacher education provides pre-service teachers with a range of benefits, such as putting theoretical knowledge into practice in a natural environment, improving their teaching strategies, designing age-appropriate activities and materials, and feeling the YL atmosphere and hence making decisions for their future teaching career path. The findings therefore have the potential to provoke discussion about enhancing teacher education programs with reference to YL education.

This study is not without limitations, though. It is a small-scale study carried out in one teacher education context in one country, and therefore the results cannot be generalized to broader contexts. It is recommended that similar studies on practicum in YL teacher education be conducted in different settings so that our findings can be confirmed or disproved, and new perspectives can be obtained. Moreover, future research could utilize multiple data collection methods, including classroom observation, which could help identify how pre-service teachers apply the knowledge in YL classes.

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