

Evaluation of an ELT Practicum Programme from The Perspectives of Supervisors, Student Teachers and Graduates

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the English Language Teacher Education practicum offered at a state university in Turkey to discover (1) the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and (2) the needs and problems experienced by student teachers. Data were collected through an adapted version of the Survey of Teacher Education Programs (STEP) (Williams-Pettway, 2005) given to student teachers and graduates, focus group interviews with student teachers, and interviews with supervisors. The results indicate that diversity and technology components of the teacher education programme received lower ratings from both groups. Strengths associated with the practicum experience included having the chance to teach in classrooms, discussions and peer feedback, observing various grade levels, good relationship with cooperating teachers, and guidance by university supervisors. The reported needs pointed to a desire for more observation, seeing different school contexts, more cooperation with cooperating teachers, and improvement in the assessment procedures, and technology use.

Key Words: Pre-service teacher education, practicum, programme evaluation, English language teacher education

Introduction

Practicum, as an important phase in the teacher education process, might have an effect on current belief systems (e.g., Gan, 2013; Yuan & Lee, 2014) and future decisions or feelings of student teachers (Mau, 1997; Merç, 2015; Yan & He, 2010) and it is also “the longest and most intensive exposure to the teaching profession” for teacher candidates (Cohen, Hoz, & Kaplan, 2013, p. 345). Despite the fact that practice teaching experience is an essential component of language teaching programmes, it has not attracted due attention with regard to the “specific experiences of learner teachers” in the field of English language teaching (Farrell, 2008, p. 226), its place in progression from training to the first year in the teaching profession (Grundnoff, 2011), and its constituents which are vital for its achievement (Richards, 1998); nor has it been carefully investigated in the literature (Mattsson, et al., 2011). Further, the extent of learning during the practicum requires a closer inspection.

For instance, Canh (2014) contends that “no deep learning took place during the practicum” in his study and points to the necessity of socioconstructivist approaches in order to reform the English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education practicum

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(p. 215). Similarly, by acknowledging that a practicum cannot capture all the realities of full-time teaching, Grudnoff (2011) claims that “practicum roles, relationships, and sites should be re-examined” in order for student teachers to have “opportunities to come to grips with the demands, scope and complexity of being a teacher” (p. 231). Insufficient focus on standards has also been a challenge that teacher education programmes face. For example, in a paper discussing the necessity for better professional standards for teacher educators in Turkey, Celik (2011) reflects on the status of teacher education programmes in the country by referring to a stark contrast between the number of students and teachers available, which has worked as a hindrance to improving teacher education programme standards for the sake of training more teachers in a rapid way. In addition to the spatial, perceptual, and contextual limitations on teacher education programme research, Lange (1990) states that factors such as “lethargy, tradition, bureaucracy, and fear of change” challenged teacher reformation (p. 268). Despite these hardships, and especially to eliminate them, the necessity of programme evaluation becomes self-evident. In other words, any programme that is not updated based on feedback from its stakeholders might indeed be running the risk of maintaining the status quo. While such a state is not always a negative one, evidence-based performance evaluation offers several benefits, no matter what the current state of affairs is.

Changes in practice and policy in teacher education in Turkey

The control of all higher education institutions in Turkey was centralized under the execution of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) in 1981, when the new Higher Education Law (No. 2547) went into effect (CoHE, 2014). The 2006-2007 academic year was the starting point for a new curriculum nationwide (YÖK, 2007). Different aspects of the previous curricula together with the current one have been placed under scrutiny. For instance, Şallı-Çopur (2008) claims that the previous curriculum was targeted for prospective teachers of English who would work at primary and secondary school contexts, despite the fact that graduates of the foreign language teacher education programme in her study also undertook jobs at pre-school and tertiary levels. While the latest curriculum is more inclusive and detailed than the previous one in many ways and it emphasizes teachers’ role as a facilitator, which was also the case in the 1997 curriculum (Kirkgoz, 2007), it lacks one important feature of the target language, namely “the internationality of English” (Bayyurt, 2012, p. 306).

Practicum programme research

Studies conducted in the Turkish context have had varying degrees of focus (i.e., the whole teacher education programme or only the practicum process) on the practicum and several aspects of it such as reflection on the teaching experiences (e.g., Akcan, 2010), feedback received (e.g., Akcan & Tatar, 2010; Altınmakas, 2012), assess-

ment (e.g., Merç, 2015), and difficulties.

As one of the earliest examples, Ekmekçi's (1992) study with senior-year English language teacher trainees showed a need for improvement of several components of the English language teacher education programme offered at a state university. Among the problems mentioned by teacher trainees were the limited duration of practice teaching at allocated schools, overcrowded classrooms, lack of guidance given by cooperating teachers, and insufficient classroom aids. Similarly, in a study which aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the methodology and practice components of a pre-service teacher training programme, Seferoğlu (2006) found that pre-service teachers wanted to have more micro-teaching and practice teaching sessions and observe a larger number of teachers, student levels, and school settings. In Coskun and Daloglu's (2010) study which used Peacock's (2009) model in the Turkish context, when asked about their feedback on the components of an English language teacher education programme, student teachers focused more on the weaknesses of the programme than its strengths, with one of the weaknesses, as reported by student teachers, being related to the timing of and inadequate chances for practice. Merç's (2010) study showed that the student teachers' self-reported problems during the practicum were related to five main categories, which were (1) student teacher (2) student (3) cooperating teacher, (4) system/educational context, and (5) supervisor. The majority (38.5%) of the problems mentioned in Merç's (2010) study occurred during the initial phases of the practicum when compared to the middle phases (34.5%) and end of the practicum (27%). With a pre-service and in-service teacher focus on the EFL practicum process, a recent study by Genç (2016) revealed that the challenges and problematic areas for student teachers ranged from classroom management to a lack of communication with cooperating teachers, and also to inadequate decision-making skills to handle the pressing circumstances involved in teaching.

Specific components of the practicum have also been investigated in the literature. Akcan and Tatar (2010) investigated the approaches to and content of feedback given by university supervisors and cooperating teachers and found that the major difference between the two groups was related to the reflective nature of the feedback in that university supervisors were interested in giving opportunities for student teachers to "describe, question and reflect on their own teaching" (p. 158) with a view to making them more conscious of the pedagogy behind their actions, while feedback from cooperating teachers tended to centre on particular classroom events, with specific suggestions given for improvement, which failed to ease an "understanding of the reasoning skills behind a particular teaching behavior" on the part of student teachers (p. 159). Altınmakas (2012), in a study with a similar aim, found that feedback from university supervisors was more theory-oriented, "evaluative, nondirective, and constructive" than feedback from cooperating teachers which focused primarily on the immediate behaviour in a "pro-active, particularistic, and directive" way (p. 102). Student teach-

ers valued their cooperating teachers' feedback more since it was relevant for addressing their most urgent demands and they further reported that they benefited from the seminars where they had a chance to learn about different school settings, namely private and state schools (Altınmakas, 2012). In a study focusing on Turkish pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the assessment of their practicum performance, Merç (2015) found that all student teachers were confident about the soundness of their university supervisor's assessment despite some uneasiness they associated with being graded on a 40-minute teaching performance by their university supervisors and the discrepancy between the evaluation criteria in theory and how they are graded in practice by university supervisors with different judgments of performance. Student teachers in the study rated assessment by cooperating teachers lower than those by university supervisors and peer teachers and it was further suggested that although peers were important for receiving feedback, their assessment was not valued (Merç, 2015).

The above-mentioned studies (i.e., Akcan, 2010; Akcan & Tatar, 2010; Altınmakas, 2012; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Ekmekçi, 1992; Genç, 2016; Merç, 2010, 2015; Seferoğlu, 2006) show that various models, participant profiles, and foci have been used either to evaluate the effectiveness of practicum programmes on their own or as components of a bigger unit (i.e., the entire undergraduate programme). Challenges, difficulties, and problems that student teachers face during their practicum experience have shown similarities as well as differences, both of which are precious sources of insight for improvement. To this end, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of an English language teacher education practicum programme, with a focus on its strengths and weaknesses as experienced by student teachers in the programme, their university supervisors, and programme graduates, by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the practicum programme?
2. What are the needs and problems associated with the practicum experience?
3. What are the possible solutions?

Method

Research Context

As a part of a highly renowned higher education institution in the country, the foreign language teacher education department involved in the current study is one of the most preferred foreign language teacher education programmes in the country by candidates among those who score highest in the university entrance exam, as evidenced by student placement rankings within the three years (i.e., 2012, 2013, and 2014) previous to the current study (see Akçay, 2013 for placement ranking lists). The teacher education programme consists of eight semester-long courses, with the seventh semester marking the beginning of the practicum which consists of School

Experience in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) offered in the seventh semester, Practice Teaching in EFL and Seminar on Practice Teaching in EFL courses offered in the eighth semester, and all the requirements appertaining to them. Graduates of the programme may work as English language teachers at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level, providing that they meet the requirements of the specific type of the institution of their choice (e.g., public, private, tertiary, etc.).

Research Design

This study used a mixed method design whereby a better understanding of the research aims was targeted through the use of quantitative as well as qualitative methods. The evaluative inquiry intended to achieve in this study follows Owen's (2007) impact evaluation, a form of evaluation aimed "to assess the effects of a settled program" with a focus on programme outcomes (p. 47). Impact evaluation is concerned with issues including but not limited to whether the programme has been put into effect the way it was planned, whether the aims of the programme have been realized, whether the needs of programme beneficiaries have been met, and the unplanned outcomes of the programme (Owen, 2007).

Participants

Student teachers. Senior students enrolled in the English Language Teaching practicum programme for the 2014-2105 academic year constituted the largest group from which data were collected. Student teachers in the programme may complete their practicum in private, state, or in both types of schools. Since some schools do not have all three levels (i.e., primary, middle, and high school), some students are assigned to both a private and a public school so that they can compensate for the level that is missing in one school but present in the other. Fifty-five student teachers (five male, 50 female) aged between 20 and 24 ($M = 22.27$, $SD = .93$) took the survey and six focus group interviews (181 minutes, 11 seconds) were also conducted with 18 student teachers.

University supervisors. Three full-time instructors supervised the practicum programme and each instructor had been working with a set of schools for several years. Therefore, they knew most of the school contexts, facilities, and teacher and student profiles of the schools well. All of the university supervisors held a Ph.D. and offered several departmental courses in addition to the practicum-related courses.

Programme graduates. Thirty-three programme graduates (seven male, 26 female) with ages ranging between 24 and 28 ($M = 25.61$, $SD = 1.116$) took an online survey. As for their teaching experience ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.219$), the majority (39.4%) of them had three years' teaching experience, which was followed by those (21.2%) with four years' teaching experience.

Instrumentation

Surveys. An adapted version of Williams-Pettway's (2005) Survey of Teacher Education Programs (STEP) was used in this study. Developed based on the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (as cited in Williams-Pettway, 2005) components, the survey consisted of five scales, namely (1) knowledge, skills and dispositions, (2) field experiences and clinical practice (student teaching internship), (3) diversity, (4) technology, and (5) quality of instruction. The scales consisted of 4-point Likert scale items and were followed by open-ended and multiple-choice items. Differences in the graduate survey, compared to that of the student teachers, were different demographic information questions and an increased number of open-ended questions.

Focus Group Interviews with Student Teachers. The focus group interviews centred on the overall organization of the programme, weekly seminars and peers, university supervisors and cooperating teachers (mentor teachers), teacher trainees, and suggestions for improvement of the practicum programme (see Appendix A).

Interviews with University Supervisors. The individual interviews consisted of questions about university supervisors, cooperating teachers, teacher trainees, programme and outcomes, specific focus questions, additional comments, and suggestions for the improvement of the programme (see Appendix B).

Data Collection Procedures

To allow for adequate experience, the focus group interviews were held in participants' second (i.e., spring) semester in the practicum programme. Although the interviews were expected to take around 20 minutes, most of the time they took longer. Completed in six sittings, all of the sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. As for the surveys, the student teachers were given the survey in class, during the final week of the spring semester, at a time when they had the maximum amount of practicum experience. An online version was forwarded later to the students who did not participate in the in-class implementation of the survey. Similarly, the programme graduates were asked to complete the online version of the survey. Following the data collection from the student teachers, the university supervisors were contacted for an interview and the interviews were made after the spring semester ended. Excluding one of the sessions during which the researcher only took notes, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview notes from the unrecorded session and transcriptions from one of the recorded sessions were sent to the interviewees for correction.

Data Analysis

In order to give a general picture of the student teacher and graduate answers to the survey, scale-level ratings were calculated in percentages to make the scales comparable to each other because some of the scales had different numbers of items.

Further, a mixed (2x5) ANOVA analysis was conducted. Data obtained from the focus group interviews, individual interviews and open-ended survey items were exported to separate files prior to analysis. An initial list of codes was created in line with the research questions in general and specific issues targeted while collecting data, which later required alterations (e.g., deletion, revision) along the coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Unaffected by the changing codes in the analysis was the decision-making process to ascertain whether a particular unit of meaning was positive, negative, or recommendatory in its evaluation of the several issues targeted in the study. The resulting categorization consisted of two basic units: (1) benefits, highlights, and strengths of the practicum programme and (2) the needs, problems, and suggestions. These layers of analysis mainly referred to the following subcategories:

- School experience courses and the practicum, which includes issues such as peer feedback received, teaching practice gained, the timing of the practicum, and assessment of performance
- Cooperating schools and students, which focuses on the grade levels and the school types included in the practicum programme
- Cooperating teachers (mentor teachers), which refers to the quality of relationship and the extent of collaboration maintained
- University supervisors, which explores the issues of involvement and communication

Data were analysed under different themes regarding the above-mentioned four different categories and recurrent themes were found for each group of participants. Sometimes, these themes were identical; however, group-specific themes were highly frequent. Therefore, in the reporting section of the analysis, themes that were common to student teacher and graduate data as well as themes that were reported only by one of the groups but with a high frequency of reference were taken into consideration. University supervisor comments as well as answers to additional questions asked of university supervisors and programme graduates will be discussed where relevant. For focus group and individual interview participants, pseudo-initials were used while participant numbers were used with responses to the open-ended survey items.

Findings

The findings of the study first present the components of the teacher education programme that are in need of improvement and the components that constitute the strengths of the practicum programme. Strengths of the practicum programme include the participants' evaluations with respect to the four components of the practicum, namely the school experience courses and the practicum, cooperating schools and students, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors. Identical categories are further discussed in relation to the problems and needs associated with the practicum experi-

ence and ideas for solution.

Strengths and weaknesses

The *diversity* and *technology* components of the English language teacher education programme, with lower scores received from both student teachers and programme graduates, were found to be in need of improvement. The practicum experience components, namely *knowledge, skills, and dispositions, field experiences and student teaching internship, and quality of instruction* elicited higher scores and were therefore found to be the strengths of the practicum programme.

Student teachers' responses to the survey showed that *quality of instruction* had the highest rate ($M = 78.45$, $SD = 17.89$), followed by *knowledge, skills, and dispositions* ($M = 75.85$, $SD = 10.56$) and *field experiences and student teaching internship* ($M = 74.68$, $SD = 13.44$) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student Teacher Survey: Scale-level Analysis

Scales	<i>M</i>	%	<i>SD</i>	%
Scale 1: Knowledge, skills, and dispositions	54.61	75.85	7.60	10.56
Scale 2: Field experiences and student teaching internship	29.87	74.68	5.37	13.44
Scale 3: Diversity	23.80	59.50	5.63	14.07
Scale 4: Technology	14.30	71.54	3.65	18.27
Scale 5: Quality of Instruction	15.69	78.45	3.57	17.89

With a slight change in the order, in graduate student data *field experiences and student teaching internship* ($M = 78.10$, $SD = 9.60$) had the highest rating followed by *quality of instruction* ($M = 78.03$, $SD = 11.10$) and *knowledge, skills and dispositions* ($M = 75.75$, $SD = 12.37$) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Graduate Survey: Scale-level Analysis

Scales	<i>M</i>	%	<i>SD</i>	%
Scale 1: Knowledge, skills, and dispositions	54.54	75.75	8.91	12.37
Scale 2: Field experiences and student teaching internship	31.24	78.10	3.84	9.60
Scale 3: Diversity	23.06	57.66	5.45	13.62
Scale 4: Technology	13.20	66.00	4.23	21.18
Scale 5: Quality of Instruction	15.60	78.03	2.22	11.10

The *technology* scale in both groups, although higher in student teacher responses ($M = 71.54$, $SD = 18.27$) than in graduate responses ($M = 66.00$, $SD = 21.18$) was one of the lowest two scales, along with *diversity*. Lowest scores were calculated for *diversity* in both student teacher responses ($M = 59.50$, $SD = 14.07$) and graduate responses ($M = 57.66$, $SD = 13.62$).

A mixed (2x5) ANOVA analysis with participant status (student teacher, graduate) as the between-subjects factor and scale (5 types) as within-subjects variable showed no significant difference between groups, $F(1, 83) = .318$, $p = .574$, $\eta^2 = .004$, o. power = .86. This finding indicates that student teacher responses to the survey were not significantly different from the responses of graduates across all scales. There was no significant scale by group interaction either, $F(3.003, 249.214) = .318$, $p = .307$, $\eta^2 = .014$, o. power = .323, suggesting that group responses did not depend on the type of scale.

The only significant effect was the main effect of scale, $F(3.003, 249.214) = 36.061$, $p = .00$, $\eta^2 = .303$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied). Pairwise comparisons revealed that scores for scale 3 (diversity) and 4 (technology) were significantly different from all other scales (see Table 3).

Table 3. Pairwise Comparisons

Scale	Field Experiences and student teaching internship	Diversity	Technology	Quality of instruction
Knowledge, skills, and dispositions	1.00	.000*	.008*	1.00
Field experiences and student teaching internship		.000 *	.007*	1.00
Diversity			.000*	.000*
Technology				.006 *

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

**Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

In addition to the strengths with regard to the *knowledge, skills, and dispositions*, *field experiences and student teaching internship*, and *quality of instruction* components of the practicum experience, a comprehensive category of the benefits, highlights, and strengths of the practicum were grouped under the following four categories.

School experience courses and the practicum.

Seeing or having the chance to teach in classrooms. In this section of the discussion, student teachers' appreciation of the practicum experience in a general sense was prevalent. In other words, seeing and having the chance to teach in classrooms was a recurring topic:

Observing a real classroom environment helped me to shape my views towards teaching. (Student teacher #6, open-ended survey item #49)

One particular point worth attention here is related to the classrooms, schools, or student profiles. It seems that the student teachers' discussions of real comes with two levels: physical and socioeconomic. While the former refers to having a chance to leave the university campus and to enter the physical borders of schools or classrooms, the latter refers to a more advanced grasp of the real which feeds from the sociological and economic realities of the immediate environment. Further, it seems that experiencing the physical reality is a prerequisite for evaluating the socioeconomic reality. Therefore, some of the student teachers in the practicum programme, while appreciating their experiences in classrooms and schools, might have remained sceptical about their preparedness for the socioeconomically real settings.

Seminar discussions, peer experience and feedback. Receiving feedback in general was one of the opportunities appreciated by the student teachers and graduates. One of the graduates recounted the following experience of peer feedback:

Especially, the blog to which we uploaded our practice teaching classes and got feedback from our peers was used very efficiently and improved our understanding. (Graduate #22, open-ended survey item #52)

Seminar discussions and feedback were reported to be beneficial in other respects such as learning from peer experiences without personally having to undergo a certain classroom situation. Learning from peers also seems to serve as a tool for affirming solidarity and empathy with peers. Seeing a peer also experiencing a certain difficulty seems to provide relief and a further step for normalization after stressful experiences.

Cooperating schools and students. In their appreciation of good practicum schools, student teachers and graduates had a tendency to refer to their future work environments where they would not have the same conditions. This tendency caused the reported good qualities of schools to be accompanied by certain concerns which found a place for themselves in the problems, need, and suggestions section of the discussion. What remained as the strengths of practicum schools in common for both student teachers and graduates, although fewer in occurrence, were related to seeing various grade levels:

I observed different levels of English classrooms and that provided me a good idea for which level to work at in the future. (Graduate #16, open-ended survey item #49)

As the student teacher comment suggests, exposure to the learning environments of differing age groups seemed to be useful for student teachers to decide on which learner groups they would like to teach in the future, which might be considered as a practical gain.

Cooperating teachers. Student teachers' accounts of good relationships or cooperation with their cooperating teachers were in line with the supportive or effective cooperating teachers mentioned by the graduates. Forming good relationships with cooperating teachers was also related to receiving feedback and help:

Actually I'm very happy with my cooperating teacher in high school. After my unofficials, he/she asks me "OK what do you think?" "How was it?", "Did it go well?" and "What didn't go so well?" And I think it is a good kind of a reflection. At the beginning, he/she wants to get my opinion and then elicit my responses ... and then after the class, we always meet and talk about the students and the classroom atmosphere. And it is really good for

me. I really learn a lot from him/her. (GH, student teacher focus group interview)

Communicative and professional bonds formed with cooperating teachers, which manifest themselves in the establishment of cooperation and support, seemed to correlate with learning from these teachers during the practicum.

University supervisors. Involvement and guidance by university supervisors was a recurring strength discussed by some of the student teachers. One of the student teachers mentioned an initial joint school visit experience which was realized with the presence of a university supervisor:

Our supervisor definitely values us. And in (school name) at least, she came with us for the first time. She came, right? She came and met the school's headmasters and the teachers ... and it was very nice for me because I felt belongingness. Right? I felt importance (HI, student teacher focus group interview)

As can be seen in the student comment, the contribution of a university supervisor in the practicum process could prove to exceed a dialogue between two by reaching further to other responsible parties in the field and hence having an effect on how student teachers perceive their status as trainees.

Problems, needs, and suggestions

Several problems faced during the practicum experience, a related issue of the needs of the participants, and possible ways for addressing them had various features in common, with respect to the aforementioned four components of the practicum.

School experience courses and the practicum.

Earlier or more practicum or observation. Current practicum processes decided by CoHE such as the beginning of the experience (seventh semester) and taking other departmental courses simultaneously with the practicum courses were among the topics discussed. Although individual departments themselves have neither power nor initiative to address these concerns, the need for starting the practicum earlier, making more observations, and having more teaching practice had high numbers of reference counts in the data:

First of all, as I said before I think we need to see the real classroom setting earlier than the fourth year because it's too late, I think. Maybe in the second or third grade we can make some observation maybe not teaching but only observation and then in the third grade maybe we can focus on more teaching because six is not enough, I think (AB, student teacher focus group interview)

Several suggestions were made, including the idea of spreading the practicum experience throughout the whole programme and making observations early in the programme:

We might not teach at the first year but we could really do the observation part in the first two years or first three let's say and in the last year we could just do unofficial and official presentations (BC, student teacher focus group interview)

In addition to preparedness for teaching, an earlier practicum experience would indeed have an effect on student teachers' decisions of becoming a teacher, as suggested by one of the student teachers. Especially, if the decision is a positive one, the possible results of such a decision could have a lot of advantages for endorsing the profession with its many facets:

I've decided to be a teacher this year ... after practicum. But I think it's too late, right? If we had another practicum experience in the previous year, maybe I would have decided to become a teacher earlier or I'd have decided not to become a teacher. And we can choose our tendency. For example, do we want to be a primary school teacher or do we want to be a high school teacher or do we want to be an instructor at university? So, it's too late to decide on those things in the last year practicum experience. (CD, student teacher focus group interview)

A resulting desire to have a more practicum-focused process, without a concern for other courses, was another issue discussed by the student teachers:

We shouldn't have taken so many courses along with the practicum in the senior year so that we could attend more to the practicum school. (Student teacher #23, open-ended survey item #50)

Assessment. One of the frequently mentioned themes regarding the practicum courses and components was a concern with assessment procedures, such as subjectivity and lack of care associated with the grading of performances. Differing criteria as well as highly holistic approaches used were among the major concerns related to the assessment during the practicum experience:

You know there are officials and unofficials and some of the students are going to state schools and some of the students are going to private schools and some of the mentors are really you know elaborative. And they grade everything and for example, you get sixty from one of the mentors and in a private school. But some of the students may get very high grades (DE, student teacher focus group interview)

The considerable effect of the course on student teachers' grade point averages being a reason to be kept in mind, one suggestion proposed was the use of a pass-fail system:

It should still have four credits and criteria for passing the course should be stricter but it should be pass/fail. (Student teacher #26, open-ended survey item #50)

Observations. As one of the very important components of the practicum process, observations were also discussed in many aspects. Student teachers also speculated on the application of small activities or tasks in the classroom rather than purely observing the classes:

Because there is a really harsh transition. You are observing then you are in front of the class (EF, student teacher focus group interview)

Related to the first semester observations, the use of an observational guideline was also discussed:

We should have a more structured observation plan for us. (Student teacher #33, open-ended survey item #50)

Technology. Focusing more on technology was one of the common aspects discussed by both student teachers and graduates. Technology-focused sessions, use of e-lessons, learning about new technologies as well as practical ideas about using technology in the classrooms found a place in the technology related discussions. One of the graduates shared the following suggestion:

Live e-lessons would be better. I think the internship programme should start to be technology oriented. (Graduate #5, open-ended survey item #49)

For this component of the practicum experience, it seems important to create opportunities for student teachers to have more or early field experience at their cooperating schools, which may be put on a continuum of observing and teaching classes. Moreover, there seems to be a need for better assessment alternatives which can also address student teachers' concerns regarding how they are graded. Similarly, increasing student teachers' knowledge of differing technology tools which they can also integrate into their teaching practices may be regarded as another area for improvement.

Cooperating schools and students.

Seeing different school contexts. Closely linked to the practicum programme philosophy and traditions retained in the department, cooperating schools included in the programme are mostly private K-12 schools. For instance, in the academic year when the data were collected, the majority of the student teachers (65.6%) were matched

with private schools while the rest were allocated to both private and state schools (26%) or to state schools only (8.3%). A desire to see different school contexts was highly recurrent. One of the reasons behind this was to see and be able to evaluate the conditions between the two school contexts, which would have an effect on future work setting choices:

I wish I could have experienced teaching at a state school. I believe it will also affect students' future decisions as to working at a state school or not. (Graduate #28, open-ended survey item #51)

Among the reasons behind seeing other school contexts was the prevalence of state schools all over the country compared to private schools:

But I had a chance to observe a state school and things are very different there. A more balanced experience could be more realistic given the Turkish context, where most students are in state schools. (Graduate #14, open-ended survey item #51)

In parallel with the private and state school contexts discussion, different variety of school contexts and student profiles were other topics that were raised by student teachers and graduates. Student teachers' reactions to the advanced level tasks undertaken by students, their feelings about teaching English to these students, and the discrepancy between their experiences at their schools and their imagined workplaces were in line with comments by graduates who referred to the student backgrounds and school facilities in their discussions of the realities of the schools in the country:

However, I always felt the need of being educated more on how to deal with students in poor conditions in terms of family, school and environment, who we are more probably to come across with while exercising our job. I think it would be better to prepare university students in education departments for the reality of Turkey and her education and social conditions. (Graduate #24, open-ended survey item #49)

When taken together, these findings indicate that learning contexts are different in private and state schools and the participants wanted to do their practicum in both types of schools. A university supervisor who agreed with the idea that the student teachers should see both private and state school contexts mentioned the inability to send student teachers to both types of schools. The limited number of teachers available at state schools can be considered as one of the factors that place limitations on sending more student teachers to these schools.

Cooperating teachers.

More cooperation with cooperating teachers. The majority of the problems that

fit in this category were related to the relationship and cooperation with cooperating teachers and student teachers assigned to them. Lack of cooperation with cooperating teachers was one of the recurring themes, which caused the student teachers to receive little constructive feedback and to question their perceived status as student teachers. Related to the idea of cooperation, willingness was mentioned by all of the participating university supervisors as a quality that cooperating teachers should possess. A university supervisor shared the following thoughts on the concept of willingness:

In addition to experience, how willingly is he/she doing this job? Does he/she have time to give to student teachers? Because the student teacher will model him/her. Therefore, willingness for collaboration with student teacher (FG, university supervisor individual interview)

In a discussion of the unwilling cooperating teachers, one of the university supervisors pointed to the lack of professional standards defined for cooperating teachers' involvement in the practicum experience and a further lack of incentives or rewards for undertaking the difficult job of being a cooperating teacher.

In sum, lack of cooperation with cooperating teachers in this section seemed to have an effect on the feedback received by student teachers during the practicum experience, implying a need for more willing cooperating teachers with whom stronger bonds can be formed and maintained.

University supervisors. Student teacher responses for this component of the problems, needs, and suggestions category included the mechanical and emotional aspects of the practicum experience, such as solving school arrangement problems, maintaining communication with cooperating teachers, and support. Programme graduates mentioned a need for a stronger collaboration or communication with cooperating teachers and more support for or familiarity with student teachers. University supervisor discussions of the limitations of the practicum experience regarding their own part was related to the limited number of supervisors and the resulting high numbers of student teachers whom they supervised.

Improvement... of course employing more staff working in the field because if I had ten students, communication would be different. (FG, university supervisor individual interview)

A decrease in the number of student teachers per university supervisor would have a positive effect on the number of times the university supervisors observed student teachers' lessons at their cooperating schools, as another university supervisor suggested.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover the strengths and weaknesses of an English language teacher education practicum programme and explore the needs and problems associated with the practicum experience and their possible solutions. The findings point to room for improvement for *diversity* and *technology* components of the teacher education programme as well as improvement ideas for the practicum experience with respect to (1) the curriculum and policy-dependent procedures applied for the realization of this experience and (2) individual and (3) institutional factors that manifest themselves within the complete system of the practicum experience, which is a network of many individuals, institutions, and expectations.

For diversity, this finding was actually expected since inclusion, gender differences, multicultural awareness, acceptance, and appreciation, and many other related current educational trends are not emphasized adequately in the national education system. However, in today's rapidly changing world where the borders between countries are becoming more and more obscure, more focus on teaching skills is needed for diverse classrooms. Given that the language and culture-related considerations caused by "cultural globalization" have led to attempts for "a meaningful shift in policies and programmes, and methods and materials governing English language teaching and teacher education" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 7), chances for amelioration may still be relevant. Training and familiarization in this context might be instrumental, as was the case in Sifakis and Bayyurt's (2015) English as a lingua franca (ELF)-aware teacher education project, which showed that when convinced of the use of a particular integration, in-service teachers could indeed be willing to adopt new practices for their lessons. Considering that in-service teachers' beliefs and practices are open to change, starting this process even earlier in the pre-service phase can have a lot to offer.

As for technology, more integration ideas might be necessary, which was also found in the suggestions of some participants in their answers to the open-ended survey items. As in the pre-service level, problems related to technology use could also be encountered at the in-service level. For instance, Aydin's (2013) study showed that Turkish in-service EFL teachers' perceived software knowledge was "limited to using the Internet, email, word processing, and presentation software" (p. 229). However, what is observed in terms of instructional technology-related limitations at the in-service level could be prevented or reduced to a minimum with adequate training at the pre-service level. When compared to the training of in-service teachers, computer-assisted language learning teacher education at the pre-service level can be more controllable because these programmes can set learning goals irrespective of student background (Hubbard, 2008). Furthermore, a wide range of issues and practices can be discussed during the teacher education programme as a preparation for schools with rich technological resources as well as those with fewer opportunities so that student teachers learn to manage with what is available to them and find ways for maximizing

learning, regardless of the circumstances in their future workplaces.

Strengths of the university supervisors in this study were related to their involvement and guidance. Likewise, good relationship formed between cooperating teachers and student teachers showed its positive effects in receiving feedback and help. The importance of good relationships being obvious, attention should be paid for reducing the possibility of lack of cooperation. To this end, clarifying what is required of university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and student teachers themselves is one of the means of increasing the effectiveness of English language teacher education programmes (Alptekin & Tatar, 2011) and, more specifically, the practicum experience *per se*. This way, both irrelevant expectations from student teachers and miscommunication between these parties might be reduced to a minimum. School and university collaboration for cooperating teacher selection (Yan & He, 2010) as well as more attentive teacher allocations by school administrations (Akcan & Tatar, 2010) can work as solutions to lack of cooperation with cooperating teachers. In line with what one of the university supervisors suggested, cooperating teachers can be supported with incentives such as having a lower course load so that they can support the student teachers assigned to them in a more effective way. As an assessment-related development, the Ministry of National Education recently issued a directive which introduced an online component for the assessment of student teacher performance during the practice teaching experiences at schools (MEB, 2016). The directive requires cooperating teachers to use this component to enter and save their grades as well as those of the university supervisors' for student teachers on the system and further give these grading sheets to their home institutions and the partner universities. This new directive can be considered promising in that it attempts to control and bring together the certain components of the practicum, such as the description of cooperating school facilities and quotas for the intake of student teachers, availability of student teacher information on the system, and a management of student teachers and university supervisors who fail to fulfil the attendance limits and mentoring responsibilities expected of them respectively. In addition, a greater amount of "field practice prior to student-teaching" may facilitate the reconceptualization of the design and priorities of the practicum (Moore, 2003, p. 41) and would further prove useful for student teachers to experiment with their teaching skills in a timely manner before they embark on their full-time professional careers. Guidance and various activities for the first-semester observations could also be useful for student teachers to pay attention to certain events in the classroom which otherwise may go unnoticed. Different types of schools discussed in this study are essential for student teachers to see experienced teachers and teaching practices. However, authentic field experiences in contexts with bigger classes and fewer available resources (Gurvitch & Metzler, 2009) can also find a place in the programme, or at least awareness-raising examples and experiences can be shared with student teachers. As pointed out by one of the university supervisors, student teachers

can also be familiarized with several non-instructional duties of a teacher by inviting in-service teachers to campus for information sessions.

It should be noted, however, that a greater frequency and variety of problems, needs, and suggestions reported and analysed for the data discussed in the findings section of this study does not mean that the programme has fewer strengths or benefits when compared to weaknesses or needs. Higher reference counts found for these aspects might as well have been caused by an emphasis on discovering the weaknesses of the programme and problems faced by the student teachers, which had a recurring role in the interview questions and open-ended survey items. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of several components were simultaneously targeted for documentation. Therefore, instead of arriving at either positive or negative conclusions with regard to several components discussed in the study, what made each one of these components desirable or improvable was considered as the main concern.

Conclusion

This evaluative inquiry focused on the strengths and weaknesses of an English language teacher education practicum as well as stakeholder needs and solutions to problems experienced during the experience. An analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in this study showed that student teachers and programme graduates were not different in their opinions of the specific components of the practicum experience and the teacher education programme as a whole. Student teachers' technology skills and their knowledge of diverse student backgrounds constitute the important areas which should be given importance in the teacher education programme. On the other hand, the *knowledge, skills, and dispositions, field experiences and student teaching internship, and quality of instruction* components, with higher ratings, were interpreted to be the strengths of the practicum. The applicability of starting the practicum experience earlier than what is required in the current pre-service English language teacher education programme curriculum and a related issue of more practicum experience can further be considered by responsible parties working within the micro-level and macro-level programmes, with a careful analysis of its several advantages and possible drawbacks. Ways for improving cooperation between student teachers and cooperating teachers and giving student teachers opportunities to see different school contexts in the practicum experience can further be taken into consideration for a more effective process.

On a final note, it should be explicitly stated here that one of the limitations on the results drawn from this study came from the existing small number of the university supervisors responsible for the practicum programme. The comparatively fewer number of programme graduates who returned the online survey is another limitation, which might have been caused by the researchers' preference for reaching graduates from the classes of the near past. The greater number of open-ended survey items giv-

en to this group might have also resulted in reluctance to participate. Larger numbers of participants from both of these groups might have indeed increased the possibility of discovering more diverse opinions. Reaching a greater number of participants is therefore suggested for further research.

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Appendix A

STUDENT TEACHER FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Overall Organization of the Programme

- Starting from your placement at your cooperating schools, what difficulties have you experienced in the programme?
 - Placement, initial encounters with the school, personnel, and students, observation, practice teaching
- How is the workload of Practice Teaching course?
 - Course requirements
- Do you think the practicum programme prepares you for actual teaching after you graduate?

2. Weekly Seminars & Peers

- Are you content with how the “Seminar on Practice Teaching in EFL” course is conducted? Do you find the discussions helpful?
- What do you think about your peers’ involvement in the process?
 - Their presence during your teaching, their feedback

3. University Supervisors & Cooperating Teachers

- Are you pleased with your relationship with your university supervisor and cooperating teachers?
 - Cooperation, guidance, and rapport

4. Teacher Trainee

- What are your current needs as teacher candidates at this stage of the practicum?

5. Closure: Do you have any suggestions for the improvement of the practicum programme? If you were to restart the programme, what changes would you like to see?

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Topics:

1. University Supervisors & Cooperating Teachers & Teacher Trainees

- What qualities do you think university supervisors should possess?
- What qualities do you think cooperating teachers should possess?
- What do you think about the teacher trainees' involvement and performance during the practicum process?

2. Programme & Outcomes

- What do you think are the strengths of the practicum programme offered at this department?
 - What components of the practicum programme do you think can be improved?
 - Observations, (Un)official Presentations, Weekly Seminars, Portfolios
 - What professional competencies are teacher trainees expected to possess by the time they finish the practicum programme?
 - What do you think are the challenges that the teacher trainees might experience in their first year in teaching? Can these be eliminated during the practicum programme?

3. Specific focus

- What do you think about the idea of teacher trainees starting observation and teaching in their practicum schools earlier than the senior year?
 - Feasibility, Advantages, Disadvantages
- What do you think about the role of private and state schools in the practicum programme?
 - School types preferred after graduation, Effectiveness, Success, Being a good role model

4. Are there any comments that you would like to add?

5. Do you have any suggestions for the improvement of the practicum programme?