ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Vietnamese EFL Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Attainments (Achievements) and Difficulties from a Teaching Practicum

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ABSTRACT
This study explored how a teaching practicum prepared pre-service English teachers (PSETs) for their profession and what difficulties they encountered during their practicum. Forty-seven PSETs of the 2019 intake at a Vietnamese university provided information via a questionnaire, and eight participated in follow-up interviews. The PSETs' perceived gains in teaching competencies were examined with reference to Vietnam's English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF), issued in 2012 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The results indicated that the teaching practicum significantly aided the PSETs' attainments of most competency domains in the ETCF, particularly those that are associated with a greater appreciation of the values and responsibilities of being a teacher, enhanced knowledge of the curriculum and the English language, as well as the ability to reflect on and improve teaching practices. However, certain competency indicators across the competency domains, including practice with assessment, handling difficult pedagogical incidents, and organizing extracurricular activities to create a supportive and meaningful learning environment, were less clearly obtained than the others. Dealing with time constraints and workload, insufficient preparation for classroom practice, and safety precautions to deal with the post-COVID-19 pandemic were some of the major obstacles the PSETs encountered. The results have important implications for pre-service teacher education programs and the implementation of the ETCF for teacher development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching practicum is an essential part in the process of learning how to teach in a teacher education program (Crookes, 2003; Richards & Farrell, 2013). The practicum's goal is to provide the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to put their knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogical content to good use in a classroom setting, thereby enhancing their pedagogical competence (MOET, 2003). Given the central role of the teaching practicum in teacher education, many practicum studies have investigated pre-service teachers' thoughts and experiences during the teaching practicum and the contributions of the teaching practicum to their professional growth. Although practicum research has been widely conducted in various fields (e.g., Le, 2013; Phuong et al., 2023; Yuan & Lee, 2014), in the area of Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) practicum in Vietnam, little research has documented how a teaching practicum program prepares EFL pre-service teachers for their profession and what challenges they encounter during a teaching practicum period. This study seeks to address this gap. The study is one of the first attempts to document the pre-service English teachers' (PSETs) perceived attainments from a teaching

practicum with a particular reference to a competency framework exclusively designed for the Vietnamese teachers of English, namely the Vietnam's English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF). An additional attempt is to examine the difficulties the PSETs encountered during their practicum, particularly during the time when safety precautions due to the COVID-19 pandemic were still in place. The study seeks to address two research questions: *(1) How do Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers perceive their attainments from the teaching practicum?* and *(2) What difficulties do EFL pre-service teachers encounter during the teaching practicum?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Vietnam's English teacher competency framework

Competency frameworks for teachers of various disciplines are among many approaches to educational quality assurance (Phung, 2018). They have been adopted in countries across the world as a national effort to promote education quality (Turner, 2012). The recent introduction of the ETCF reflects this effort. The framework consists of five domains that aim to answer the question of what English language teachers in Vietnam should understand and be able to achieve in the twenty-first century (Phung, 2018). The five domains include 1) knowledge of language, language learning, and language content and curriculum, 2) knowledge of teaching, 3) knowledge of learners, 4) professional attitudes and values in language teaching, and 5) connection to practice and context of language teaching (MOET, 2012). Each domain consists of various competencies, and each competency is realized into various competency indicators.

This competency framework has been utilized as a resource for teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and researchers for the development and evaluation of teacher quality and teacher training programs (Phung, 2018; Vo et al., 2020). Given this vision, the current study adopted this framework as a point of reference for the development of a questionnaire survey to evaluate how a teaching practicum prepares PSETs for their profession from their perspective. It also served as an analytical framework for the study.

2.2. Research on attainments and difficulties from a teaching practicum

2.2.1. Attainments

Several studies have indicated that teaching practicum contributes greatly to the process of learning how to teach as it provides a valuable opportunity for pre-service teachers to put their theoretical understanding of teaching into practice (Atkinson et al., 2008; Richard & Farrell, 2013), thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the learners and the teaching methods. Moreover, being placed in a teaching practicum to try daily tasks that a real teacher has to tackle, pre-service teachers learn and practice independent problem-solving skills, co-working with fellow teachers, and developing professional values and attitudes (Beck & Kosnick, 2000; Caires et al., 2012).

2.2.2. Difficulties

Much research has also reported that pre-service teachers encountered several difficulties during the teaching practicum. They were found to suffer from various sources of stress during the practicum period due to heavy workloads, insufficient allotted time, and students' disruptive behaviors (Murrey-Harvey et al., 2000; Kokkinos et al., 2016). Therefore, they experienced fears of academic insufficiency, pedagogical insufficiency, and classroom management issues (Ali et al., 2013; Barton et al., 2015; Keser Ozmantar, 2019). Another major difficulty concerns their insufficient preparation for the practicum. Studies have reported that lack of preparation caused *reality shock* as PSETs transitioned from theory to actual teaching (Farrell, 2003; Wagenaar, 2005). PSETs were less prepared to learn to teach because they were not sufficiently prepared to cope with the realities of classroom life (Johnson, 1996; Vo et al., 2020). In addition, many studies indicated that inadequate support from the mentor teachers resulted in inadequate communication and feedback (Le, 2013; Genç, 2016; Ozdemir & Yildirim, 2012). Consequently, the process of learning how to teach in a teaching practicum became an isolated action.

Recent research has drawn on the ETCF for evaluating aspects of teacher training programs. For example, a recent study by Phung (2018) utilizes the ETCF to evaluate the level of alignment between an English language teacher education program and the ETCF. By comparing the course syllabus with the competencies of the framework, the researcher found that there were mismatches and gaps between the curriculum and the ETCF. Vo et al. (2020) investigate teachers' and PSETs' perceptions of the effectiveness of an English teacher education program in developing pre-service teachers' ability to use technology in English teaching with a particular reference to the required technological competencies for English teachers in the ETCF. The results reveal that the program was not

effective in preparing PSETs for using technology in teaching. This review suggests that while much research has drawn on the ETCF as a reference point for evaluating several aspects of teacher education, little research has referred to this framework to examine the contribution of an English teacher education program to developing the competencies required for professional development among PSETs. The current study seeks to expand on this line of research.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Instructional context

The study was conducted at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, where the English language teacher education (ELTE) program is one of its major training programs. A teaching practicum is a compulsory part of a teacher education program and is conducted at the end of the program. All PSETs participate in an eight-week teaching practicum at local schools. Under the supervision of school teachers or mentor teachers, who also evaluate their teaching performances, PSETs are required to observe the mentor teachers' and peers' teaching performances, teach eight lessons for assessment, do the work of the form teacher, and prepare a final internship report. For the PSETs in the current study, their teaching practicum took place during the time when safety measures to deal with the post COVID-19 pandemic were still in place. Therefore, although the participants experienced all of the required activities of a teaching practicum, they were supposed to cope with certain unexpected challenges.

3.2. Participants

A whole cohort (n = 47) of PSETs who enrolled in the ELTE program participated in the study. Seven males (15%) and 40 females (85%) participated in the survey, all of whom were aged 22. The interviewees represented four host schools across the local province. Table 1 lists the interview participants who varied in terms of gender, host schools, and their self-rated academic achievements. This diversity enabled a thorough inclusion of opinions on both attainments and difficulties PSETs encountered during their teaching practicum.

Table 1. Interview participants' profiles

No	PSETs*	Gender	Age	Host schools	Academic achievement
1	Cuc	F	22	A	Excellent
2	Khoa	M	22	A	Good
3	Linh	F	22	B	Good
4	Nhu	F	22	B	Fairly good
5	Mai	F	22	C	Fairly good
6	Rath	F	22	C	Average
7	Thu	F	22	D	Good
8	Kim	F	22	D	Fairly good

Note: F =Female; M = Male; *Pseudonyms

3.3. Research design and procedure

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach involving an online questionnaire with all 47 participants, followed by face-to-face, follow-up interviews with the eight PSETs who were willing to participate. Forty-seven PSETs completed the questionnaire within one week following the completion of the practicum period. Eight of them participated in the interviews the week after.

3.4. Data collection tools

3.4.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of three parts with a total of 42 close-ended items. Part A includes question items regarding the participants' demographic information, including gender, age, and self-rated academic achievements. Part B includes clusters on attainments (34 items) and difficulties (8 items). The PSETs were asked to provide their answers on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The question items of

attainments were developed with reference to the competency indicators within the five domains of ETCF (MOET, 2012), but with pertinent adaptations. The difficulty items were developed as a result of an analysis of the annual teaching practicum reports and the researchers' awareness of the local context of the teaching practicum.

3.4.2. Interviews

The interviews allowed for explanations of the noticeable attainments and difficulties identified in the questionnaire data as well as any additional issues arisen during the practicum. The interviews lasted 20-30 minutes each and were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure clarity of ideas. The interviews were recorded and later translated into English. Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was piloted on 23 students who had completed their teaching practicum in the previous year. The Cronbach alpha analysis indicated that the level of reliability was high ($\alpha = .847$). The result implied that the questionnaire could be used for official data collection afterwards. The questionnaire was then distributed to 47 PSETs at the end of their practicum with a response rate of 100% (n=47). The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was high ($\alpha = .899$) (Figure 1). The data were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS, version 20. The descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were reported.

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items
.899	.921	42

Figure 1. Reliability Statistics

The interview data were analyzed following the approach developed by Clarke et al. (2015), in which themes were generated through the reading and examination of data. Two researchers independently analyzed the data to enhance reliability and rigor before discussing the findings together. The process sought to provide transparency and access to PSETs' perceptions of their attainment and challenges from the teaching curriculum.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. PSETs' perceived attainments from the practicum

The questionnaire results indicated that the teaching practicum highly supported the PSETs' attainments of most competency domains, even though some appeared to be more clearly obtained than the others. As shown in Figure 2, the highest attainment is Domain 3 which concerns professional attitudes and values in language teaching ($M = 4.27$), followed by Domain 1 - Knowledge of the curriculum and the English language ($M = 4.17$), Domain 5 - Connection to practice and reflection for improvement ($M = 4.07$), Domain 4 - Knowledge of the learners ($M = 3.95$), and finally Domain 2- Knowledge of language teaching ($M = 3.94$).
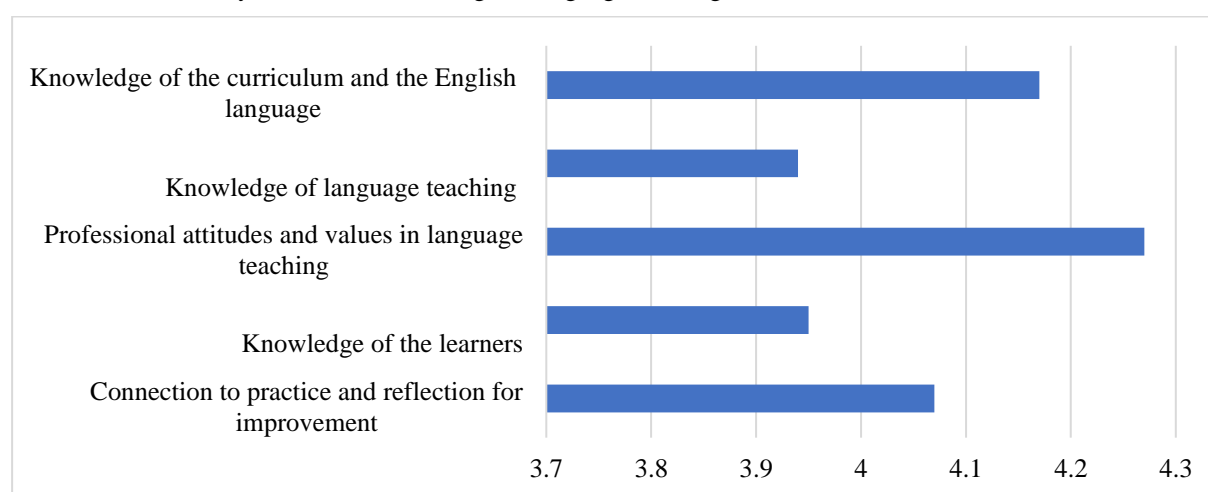

Figure 2. The perceived attainments across the five competency domains

Knowledge of the curriculum and the English language

The questionnaire results revealed that the domain of knowledge of the curriculum and the English language was regarded as having the second highest attainment among the five domains. Within this domain, the PSETs reported having gained a deeper understanding of the curriculum (Item 1; M=4.36), its accompanying textbooks (Item 4; M=4.28) and the objectives of the curriculum (Item 2; M=4.12). Similarly, they were confident to use aspects of the English language including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in their teaching practices (Item 5; M=4.23).

Table 2. Domain 1 - Knowledge of the curriculum and the language

Items	N	Mean	SD
1. I understand the English curriculum I am required to use	47	4.36	.640
2. I have a clear understanding of the objectives of the English curriculum.	47	4.13	.741
3. I can include cultural knowledge and literature in my teaching.	47	3.87	.824
4. I can use textbooks and teaching materials appropriate to the curriculum objectives when planning lessons.	47	4.28	.615
5. I can use knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar in my teaching effectively.	47	4.23	.666

The interview results helped clarify the significant attainments. Most interviewees reported that the field experiences during the practicum period helped them gain a deeper understanding of how the new curriculum and the accompanying textbooks could be implemented in the school context. Moreover, they shared that despite some initial limitations, they were eventually able to utilize knowledge of language regarding vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar effectively in teaching practices.

One area of lower performance in this domain relates to knowledge of literature and cultures. Although this knowledge was skillfully applied in PSET's teaching practices, time limitations minimized this area of achievement. As Khoa commented:

I could include and explain the cultural knowledge and literature in my teaching as I learned from university courses. For example, when teaching about Bhutan, I showed the picture and explained many features of this nation. However, I did it once because of the limited time for a lesson. (Khoa, male)

Knowledge of language teaching

Similar to Domain 1, the PSETs reported substantial gains in knowledge and abilities related to teaching English as a result of the practicum. Table 3 shows that the ability to use educational technology effectively in the classroom (Item 20; M = 4.32) and the capacity to design lesson plans for various classes (Item 6; M = 4.26) were the two skills with the highest attainments. Other slightly lower gains concerned the PSETs' ability to use a variety of teaching methods and implement them flexibly and appropriately (Item 9, M=4.15); to adapt learning materials (Item 15, M=4.15); to adjust the learning activities and carry them out effectively in the classroom (Item 8; M=4.13); and to use English effectively as a medium of instruction (Item 7; M=4.11). The lowest attainments within this domain, however, were found in their limited experience in organizing extra-curricular activities (Item 18; M=3.47), practicing with assessment (Item 12; M=3.49), creating self-study activities (Item 19; M=3.51), and handling difficult pedagogical situations (Item 17; M=3.60).

Table 3. Domain 2 - Knowledge of teaching

Items	N	Mean	SD
6. I can design suitable lesson plans for various classes.	47	4.26	.570
7. I can use English effectively in class.	47	4.11	.598
8. I can design and organize a variety of effective learning activities for each lesson.	47	4.13	.711
9. I can use different teaching methods flexibly and appropriately.	47	4.15	.625
10. I can use many new methods in teaching.	47	3.98	.847

11. I can manage the class well.	47	3.81	.770
12. I have the ability to select assessment forms, develop test and exam questions, and organize formative assessments of students' English ability.	47	3.49	.882
13. I know how to use assessment results to adjust content and teaching and learning methods.	47	3.89	.759
14. I have the ability to respond to different requests from students.	47	3.85	.722
15. I can tailor the content of the available materials to suit the lesson objectives.	47	4.15	.722
16. I am able to achieve the lesson objectives and measure the extent to which the goals have been achieved.	47	4.09	.717
17. I can deal with difficult pedagogical situations effectively.	47	3.60	.851
18. I can organize extracurricular activities to create a supportive, meaningful learning environment.	47	3.47	1.039
19. I have the ability to adapt available resources to create self-study activities for students.	47	3.51	.882
20. I know how to exploit and apply information and communication technology to support teaching and learning English.	47	4.32	.594

Most interviewees explained that their strong ability to integrate technology in their lessons was owing to the lessons learned from university courses. As Cuc explained:

We learned how to enhance my lessons with technology after I took the course named Using Technology in English language teaching. I was able to design effective e-lessons and games for teaching. I was also able to use online websites like Kahoot and Quizlet to engage students in class activities (Cuc, female).

Also, as the interviewees explained, they developed a greater awareness that since students in the same class varied substantially in terms of their proficiency, the lesson plans had to be modified for each class.

I taught both special classes and regular classes, so I couldn't teach the same lesson plan. I had to modify the exercise and activities to be more difficult to suit the good class and easier for the weaker class. (Linh, female)

Nevertheless, many PSETs reported that they gained limited experience in organizing extra-curricular activities and creating self-study activities for students. Safety measures to cope with the post-COVID-19 pandemic period and time limitations were cited as reasons, respectively, as explained by Linh and Mai.

I couldn't take part in many extracurricular activities, because my school minimized these activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Linh, female)

I couldn't create self-study activities for students because I didn't have enough time. (Mai, female)

Notably, limited practice with assessment is a major concern for most PSETs due to the absence of requirements for assessing PSETs' assessment skills. As Cuc reasoned,

As I learned from my mentor, assessment tasks such as designing tests or grading students are not required as criteria for assessing PSETs. My mentor teacher ignored them but paid greater attention to helping me with my teaching practices. (Cuc, female)

Professional attitudes and values in language teaching

Within this competency domain, as shown in Table 4, the most significant gain was achieved with the PSETs' greater appreciation of the teaching job (Item 21; M=4.57), followed by their ability to develop a professional working style (Item 27; M=4.32) and to inspire the learners (Item 22; M=4.32). The other high attainments were related to their ability to work collaboratively and cooperatively with their fellows and help students with these collaborative skills (Item 23; M=4.28), to make effective use of available resources for learning and teaching (Item 25; M=4.21), and to appreciate the value of sharing (Item 26; M=4.21).

Table 4. Domain 3 - Professional attitudes and values in language teaching

Items	N	Mean	SD
21. I develop a greater appreciation of the job.	47	4.57	.500
22. I understand and communicate the values of learning English to students.	47	4.32	.663
23. I am able to collaborate, work in groups effectively, and have the ability to guide students in practicing these skills.	47	4.28	.713
24. I have the ability to develop and implement self-study and self-improvement plans.	47	3.98	.821
25. I know how to exploit information sources, documents, and learning materials to improve my knowledge and develop skills.	47	4.21	.778
26. I share my teaching and classroom management experiences with my colleagues.	47	4.21	.832
27. I develop a sense of discipline and establish professionalism in teaching.	47	4.32	.663
28. I can understand and adapt to the high school regulations and working environment.	47	4.30	.689

The interview results revealed a common reason for the significant gains across the competencies in this domain. The PSETs indicated that their practicum experiences enhanced a greater appreciation of the values and responsibilities of being a teacher. Moreover, a good relationship with the mentors and students strengthens their love for teaching. As Thu and Mai shared,

After the practicum, I appreciate this job more. Being a teacher is not as simple as I thought before. It not only involves preparing lesson plans and teaching, but it also involves doing the job of a homeroom teacher. (Thu, female)

I developed a love for teaching through the pedagogical courses in the program. The field experiences made me love my job more. The students were very cute, cared for me and expressed love for me. As they called me "teacher", I was very happy. (Mai, female)

Knowledge of the learners

Table 5 shows that the PSETs reported a significant gain in terms of their ability to adjust learning activities to suit various learning styles (Item 29; M=4.02), to enhance students' interest (Item 30; M=4.00), to tailor instructions according to learners' characteristics (Item 31; M=3.91), and to help learners develop their creativity and critical thinking (Item 32; M=3.85).

Table 5. Domain 4 - Knowledge of the learners

Items	N	Mean	SD
29. I understand the cognitive and emotional development of students and their learning attitudes to adjust teaching activities accordingly.	47	4.02	.707
30. I have the ability to apply my understanding of cultural values and learning experiences to arouse students' interest in learning.	47	4.00	.752
31. I am aware of my students' characteristics and can tailor instructions accordingly.	47	3.91	.880
32. I can help students develop creative and critical thinking skills.	47	3.85	1.000

The interview results reveal that most PSETs attributed these attainments in terms of knowledge of the learners to their awareness of learner needs and their individual differences to lessons learned from the courses in the teacher education program. As Nhung commented:

Thanks to the course, namely "The psychology of the language learners", I was aware of learners' characteristics and their individual differences. I know that students learn differently, so I need to adjust the activities and my instructions accordingly. (Nhung, female)

Connection to practice and reflection for improvement

The PSETs' ability to connect learning beyond the classroom and reflect on their own experiences came third across the five categories. The PSETs reported significantly high attainments in two competencies including their

ability to reflect on their teaching practices to enhance the effectiveness of teaching (Item 34; M=4.15) and their ability to connect their students' English learning outside the classroom context and lesson topics to enhance teaching effectiveness (Item 33; M = 4.00)

Table 6. Domain 5 - Connection to practice and reflection for improvement

Items	N	Mean	SD
33. I can connect my students' English learning to other students, classes, schools, and topics.	47	4.00	1.000
34. I can use my reflections to guide my learning and teaching and improve my teaching practices.	47	4.15	.751

In the interview, most PSETs commented that on confronting the processes of professional practice, they gained the opportunity to develop the skills of reflection, thus developing their pedagogical skills.

I learned a lot after making mistakes and receiving feedback from my mentor. I realize that I could do better in the next lessons. (Khoa, male)

Regarding their ability to connect English learning to the context beyond the classroom and the lesson topics, many PSETs commented that they were able to link the lesson contents to cultural areas or current issues to increase students' interests. However, they could not connect their students to their peers in other classes or schools because they could not allocate enough time to do so.

4.1.2. PSETs' perceived difficulties during the practicum

The results reveal certain variations in terms of difficulties the PSETs encountered during the practicum. As Table 7 shows, the highest mean score for a difficulty (M=4.38) belongs to Item 35 regarding time constraints and heavy workload. The second perceived difficulty concerns the difficulty of applying knowledge to teaching practice (Item 38; M=3.40). Other issues including lack of collaboration from students (Item 39; M=2.98), and lack of confidence in their teaching capacity and English competences had moderate mean scores, suggesting that these issues presented a moderate level of challenge for the PSETs.

Table 7. Practicum difficulties

Items	N	Mean	SD
35.Time constraints and heavy workload	47	4.38	.79
36. Lack of guidance and support from mentor teachers	47	2.04	1.24
37. Lack of guidance and support from university educators	47	2.51	1.19
38. Difficulty in applying knowledge to teaching practice	47	3.40	1.05
39. Lack of student cooperation	47	3.06	1.09
40. Lack of confidence in teaching capacity	47	2.94	1.07
41. Lack of confidence in English competences	47	2.98	1.05
42. Poor ability to use IT, teaching aids and equipment for teaching	47	2.06	1.10

Most PSETs disagreed with the statements that they were not able to utilize technology for teaching effectively (Item 42; M=2.06) and that they were not sufficiently supported by mentor teachers (Item 36; M=2.04) and teacher educators (Item 37; M=2.51) These results were also supported by the interview results, suggesting that the PSETs were highly capable of using technology to enhance teaching practices and that both teacher educators and school mentors provided the strongest support.

Three themes were identified in the interviews with the eight PSETs regarding the difficulties during their teaching practicum. The first two themes align with the questionnaire results. The final theme concerning the COVID-19 pandemic emerged from the interview data.

Time constraints and heavy workload

All PSETs reported that they suffered from time constraints and heavy workloads. The main reason was attributed to the large number of tasks they had to complete during the practicum such as preparing lesson plans, conducting teaching practices, doing the work of the form teacher, and writing the final report. As Nhung commented:

We had to complete too many tasks within a limited time such as preparing the lesson plans, teaching, observing other teachers' lessons, managing the headroom classes, and writing the practicum reports. I struggled a lot to complete them. (Nhung, female)

They also further explained that many of the tasks such as preparing for the first lesson and writing the report were highly demanding and took a lot of time to complete.

A lot of time and energy was invested in preparing lessons and writing the practicum report. If my memory serves me right, it took me 5 days to prepare the first teaching lesson and 3 weeks to report the practicum process. At the same time, there were a lot of other tasks that needed finishing. Two months is nearly impossible to complete all of them perfectly. (Cuc, female)

Insufficient preparation for classroom reality

Most PSETs pointed out that they struggled to teach mixed-ability classes at the host schools. They only had their classmates who acted as their students during teaching demonstrations for pedagogical courses at university. As Linh commented:

My classmates acted as my students when I did the teaching demonstration at the university. My teaching practices went smoothly as my classmates were excellent students, responding actively to every question. Students in a real classroom are not like that. Students differed a lot in terms of their English skills and attitudes. (Linh, female)

Safety precautions due to the COVID-19 pandemic

As the practicum started in the early days of school reopening, certain safety measures remained. Those measures such as wearing face masks and keeping a certain distance from students posed significant difficulties for the PSETs.

My voice is very soft, but I had to wear a face mask while teaching. I had to raise my voice because it was hard to speak aloud. I got really tired after the teaching period. (Mai, female)

I could not approach my students as I had to keep a certain distance. I could not monitor them closely. (Cuc, female)

Moreover, many interviewees had little experience with organizing extracurricular activities because of safety measures, as evidenced in the following comment:

The expectation was that I could organize extracurricular activities for students, but after the internship, I found that I couldn't because extracurricular activities were minimized. (Thu, female)

4.2. Discussion

The overall results of the questionnaire and interviews indicated that the PSETs cited a high level of attainments for most of the competencies necessary for their professional development. The results highlight a significant contribution of a teaching practicum to the professional growth among the PSETs, as also confirmed in many studies (e.g., Le, 2013; Atkinson, et.al., 2008; Richard & Farrell, 2013).

While the general attainments across the competency domains were rated very high, there were variances in the PSETs' responses to the attainments across the competency indicators within each competency domain. In other words, the results indicated that some competencies were perceived as more clearly obtained than others. The clearest attainments concern the PSETs' greater appreciation of the values and responsibilities of being a teacher, followed by their enhanced knowledge of the curriculum, its objectives, and the accompanying textbooks, and their reflective ability for teaching improvement. The interview results reveal that the PSETs attributed these significant attainments to the university preparation for their practicum. Particularly, they expressed appreciation of the knowledge gained from courses in the teacher education program for their contribution to their practicum success, mainly in terms of an appreciation of the teaching job, awareness of learners' needs and individual differences, and using technology in language teaching. The finding that university courses play an important role in preparing the PSETs for their practicum success was consistent with studies by Chaw and Kopp (2021) and Smith and Lev-Avi (2005),

highlighting the connection between the course work and practicum experiences. Another significant gain stemmed from the PSETs' recognition of the values of reflection and collegiality. According to Le (2013), these essential factors play an important role in professional development but were not found in his study.

The attainments which were less clearly obtained than the others include practicing with assessment, organizing extra-curricular activities, creating self-study activities, and handling difficult pedagogical situations. Most interviewed PSETs stated that they gained little experience in assessing learners and attributed this to the absence of assessment skills as required skills for PSETs to develop during the practicum. This deficiency has been pinpointed in a study by My (2012). Moreover, the time limitation was perceived as the main reason for lower attainment in terms of organizing extra-curricular activities and creating self-study activities for the students while the difficulty in handling difficult pedagogical incidents was attributed to a lack of preparation.

The PSETs indicated the three major difficulties they encountered during their field experiences, including time constraints and heavy workload, insufficient preparation for classroom realities, and safety precautions because of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, all interviewees commented that they felt pressured as they had to handle too many tasks within a limited duration of time. This result is consistent with several related studies (e.g., Murray-Harvey, 2000; Pham et. al., 2020; Wang & Odell, 2002), suggesting that PSETs need greater practical and emotional support and more sufficient preparation for the demands during the practicum period. Secondly, the university setting did not seem to reflect the classroom context in terms of teaching mixed-abilities classes. The results were congruent with Chaw and Kopp (2021), indicating that the PSETs seem to struggle with the gap between expectations and reality regardless of the amount of preparation before the practicum.

The results reveal both connection and disconnection between theory and practice. On the one hand, the PSETs commented that the university courses prepared them well for the practicum in terms of the knowledge of the learners, an appreciation of values and responsibilities for teaching, and technological skills. On the other hand, they were less prepared for teaching mixed-ability classes and handling pedagogical situations (Ali et al., 2013; Barton et al., 2015; Keser Ozmantar, 2019). The results, therefore, highlight the need for pedagogical courses to provide practical teaching experiences for PSETs before a teaching practicum. In addition, it is recommended that the PSETs should be offered more opportunities to practice with assessment by including assessment skills as one of the criteria for evaluating PSETs' practicum performances.

One interesting result concerns the PSETs' disagreement with the idea that they lacked support from school mentors and teacher educators while much of the previous research has identified this deficiency as a major challenge (Farrell, 2008; Pham et al., 2013; Vo et al., 2020). This result highlights the significant role that school mentors and teacher educators play in preparing the PSETs in this study for their teaching profession.

5. CONCLUSION

This study supports the idea that a teaching practicum helps PSETs get ready for their career. Yet, issues with time constraints and workload, and inadequate preparation for the reality of the classroom necessitate mitigating measures. The findings thus point to greater attention to preparing PSETs for classroom reality. PSET must have the ability to solve problems and be adaptable to changing teaching situations, hence teacher educators should provide opportunities for students to practice these abilities before entering field experiences. In addition, the provision of experiences with teaching real students should be a major emphasis of changes to pre-service EFL teacher education. Also, it should be made clear that assessment is a crucial educational skill a PSET must acquire throughout the practicum.

The study is, however, limited in that the attainments and difficulties were limited to the perceptions of the pre-service English teachers. Further research should include views of relevant stakeholders such as school-based teachers and teacher educators to provide more comprehensive views. Finally, it is suggested that a replication of this study should be conducted with other groups of PSETs of different years at the same university or neighboring ones. By doing this, more insightful data related to the issue of a teaching practicum can be addressed.

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