

# Opinions of Pre-service English Teachers on Distance Practicum in the Covid-19 Period: An example from Turkey

*Sinem DOĞRUER<sup>a\*</sup> & Emre GÜVENDİR<sup>b</sup>*

Research Article  
Received: 29.09.2021  
Revised: 01.11.2022  
Accepted: 25.12.2022

<sup>a</sup> Assist. Prof. Dr., Trakya University, Edirne, TÜRKİYE, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5076-2087> \*sinemdogruer@trakya.edu.tr

<sup>b</sup> Assoc. Prof. Dr., Trakya University, Edirne, TÜRKİYE, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1226-9878>

## ABSTRACT

Within the context of distant practicum procedures implemented during the coronavirus (COVID-19) period, the aim of this study is to highlight the experiences and views of pre-service English teachers on e-practicum. The study also examines whether pre-service teachers' experiences contrasted with what they expected from the standard practicum procedures. The participants of the study included 20 fourth-year prospective English teachers studying at a Turkish university. Data were collected through standardized open-ended interview questions and content analysis was used to categorize the responses. The findings of this study in general show that teaching practicum is a significant part of teacher education programs as pre-service teachers believe that it particularly supports gaining teaching experience in a real school environment. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to teaching practicum being sustained as a part of distance education, which has caused certain drawbacks, especially in terms of lacking face-to-face teaching experience. Findings revealed that distant practicum during COVID-19 had more negative sides for the participants than positive ones. Participants expressed their demands for e-practicum regulations that address all aspects of the teaching profession and give them the opportunity to put theory into practice.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, foreign language teacher education, practicum, pre-service teachers

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## ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı, koronavirüs (COVID-19) döneminde uygulanan uzaktan öğretmenlik uygulaması süreci bağlamında, İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının çevrimiçi öğretmenlik uygulaması hakkında deneyimlerini ve görüşlerini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Çalışma aynı zamanda İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının deneyimlerinin daha önceki öğretmenlik uygulaması kapsamındaki beklentilerinden farklı olup olmadığını incelemektedir. Çalışmanın katılımcıları Türkiye'de bir üniversitede öğrenim gören 20 dördüncü sınıf İngilizce öğretmen adayından oluşmaktadır. Çalışmada veriler, standartlaştırılmış açık uçlu görüşme soruları yoluyla toplanmış ve verilen yanıtları sınıflamak için içerik analizi kullanılmıştır. Bu araştırmanın bulguları genel olarak, öğretmenlik uygulamasının özellikle öğretmen adaylarının gerçek bir okul ortamında öğretmenlik deneyimi kazanmayı desteklediğine inandıklarını, dolayısıyla öğretmen yetiştirme programlarının önemli bir parçası olduğunu gösterdiğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Ancak, COVID-19 salgınının ortaya çıkması, öğretmenlik uygulamasının özellikle yüz yüze öğretmenlik deneyiminin yapılamaması açısından bazı dezavantajlara neden olan uzaktan eğitimin bir parçası olarak sürdürülmesine yol açmıştır. Katılımcılar, pandemi döneminin uzaktan öğretmenlik uygulamasını olumsuz açıdan etkileyerek genel anlamda öğretmenlik deneyiminden beklentileriyle çeliştiğini ifade etmişlerdir. Bulgular aynı zamanda, COVID-19 döneminde uzaktan öğretmenlik uygulamasının katılımcılara göre olumlu yönlerinden ziyade olumsuz yönlerinin daha fazla olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Katılımcılar, öğretmenlik mesleğinin tüm yönlerini ele alan ve onlara teoriyi pratiğe çevirme fırsatı veren çevrimiçi uygulama düzenlemeleri isteklerini dile getirmişlerdir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** COVID-19, öğretmen adayları, öğretmenlik uygulaması, yabancı dil öğretmen eğitimi

To cite this article in APA Style:

Dündar, S. & Güvendir, E. (2023). Opinions of pre-service English Teachers on distance practicum in the Covid-19 Period: An example from Turkey. *Bartın University Journal of Faculty of Education*, 12(1), 85-96. <https://doi.org/10.14686/buefad.1002223>

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## INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) teacher education has evolved and expanded significantly in recent years as a relatively new profession (Farrell, 2018). For a long time, L2 teacher education was dominated by the positivist view, which postulated that what effective teachers needed was "discrete amounts of knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context" (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 399). However, L2 teacher education witnessed a paradigm shift and the socio-constructivist view started to replace the positivist view. Consequently, teacher learning started to be viewed "as constructing new knowledge and theory through participating in specific social contexts and engaging in particular types of activities and processes" (Richards 2008, p. 164). As Burns and Richards (2009) stated, rather than viewing teaching and learning as the transmission of knowledge, the socio-constructivist paradigm approaches it as constructing opportunities for the construction of information and understanding through social involvement.

As a result of this paradigm shift, L2 teacher education programs now not only provide comprehensive academic and pedagogical knowledge on L2 education, but also provide pre-service teachers opportunities to experience a real-school environment through applications such as teaching practicum (Mirici & Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017). Taken in more depth, teaching practicum includes "supervised teaching, experience with systematic observation, and gaining familiarity with a particular teaching context" (Gebhard 2009, p. 250). It is considered a noteworthy part of a prospective teacher's educational life since it forms an introductory phase to the teaching profession and helps them to develop teaching skills and broaden their knowledge base on productive teaching practices (Collinson, Kozina, Lin, Ling, Matheson, Newcombe, & Zogla, 2009). Prospective teachers have the opportunity to become acquainted with real school environments, specifically with students, teachers, mentors, school administrators, and the school as an institution, through practicum. Numerous studies on teaching practicums found that practicums had a positive effect on pre-service teachers, such as familiarizing them with the teaching profession and fostering self-confidence (Guo & Wang, 2009), improving general teaching skills (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004), and classroom management skills (Pham, Nguyen, Ho, Hoang, & Pham, 2020). Thus, the outcomes of practicum overlap with the assumptions of the sociocultural perspective, which stresses that "knowing, thinking, and understanding come from participating in the social practices of learning and teaching in specific classroom and school situations" (Johnson 2009, p.13). Nevertheless, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 prompted teacher education programs to re-conceptualize the practicum experience and search for alternative ways to ensure that prospective teachers are classroom ready (Sasaki et al., 2020). Different from other academic components which could be conducted through online and distance education, the practicum, being a practical activity in a classroom context, presented unique difficulties (Flores & Gago, 2020; Moyo, 2020). Following the outbreak of the pandemic, pre-service teachers had to stop their visits to educational institutions and had to track their mentors' activities online.

Some of the national, institutional, and pedagogical responses to the matter of practicum during the COVID-19 outbreak included using Virtual Reality (VR) technology in virtual classrooms (Sasaki et al., 2020), conducting microteaching tasks in virtual classrooms and receiving e-mentoring services (Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020), observing videos of classrooms and presenting online classes (Kim, 2020), conducting and following synchronous teaching activities (Flores & Gago, 2020), teaching to family members and friends, children in the nearby neighbourhood or local community, and composing TED-type mini lessons (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020), and even suspending the practicum and postponing it to future periods (Chan, 2020). When analyzed collectively, it is notable that all of these interventional approaches to the disadvantages imposed by the COVID-19 were structured around a distance and digitalized practicum model, which differed from the conventional practicum conducted in a real school context. Although a lot of attention has been paid to the COVID-19 and distance education recently, there is a small number of research that focuses on the positive and negative aspects of the distance practicum. Currently, the question that needs to be answered is whether or to what extent students benefited from the practicum applications they took part in during the pandemic. Therefore, even micro-level studies that focus on pre-service teachers' views in specific institutions are needed to address the pros and cons of distance practicum and students' suggestions for the improvement of digitalized practicum applications. Learning pre-service teachers' opinions about these practicum applications will provide researchers and educators with more viable ideas in the long run. Studies that address pre-service teachers' thoughts on the latest e-practicum practices will guide the authorities in case the COVID-19 process is prolonged or a similar situation is encountered in the future. Thus, it will be possible to identify the deficits in those practicum applications and search for alternative solutions to the issue of distance practicum when confronted with comparable circumstances.

## CONTEXT AND RESEARCH FOCUS

In Turkey, pre-service teachers are required to take the ‘School Experience Course’ in the first semester and subsequently the ‘Teaching Practice Course’ in the second semester of their fourth year at foreign language teacher education programs (Yüksek Öğretim Kurumu [YÖK], 2007). ‘School Experience Course’ is merely based on experiencing the real-school environment through observation, and it requires prospective teachers to carry out certain tasks each week, such as observing teachers and students, improving teaching skills through observation, and getting acquainted with the school and school management. On the other hand, ‘Teaching Practice Course’ requires conducting the teaching activity itself at schools. In undergraduate programs, this course is 112 hours in total, including 6 hours of practice each week (84 hours in total) and 2 hours of theory (28 hours in total). According to the directive jointly prepared by the Turkish Higher Education Council (HEC), National Teacher Training Committee and Ministry of National Education (MoNe) Teacher Training and Development General Directorate, student teachers are expected to attend practicum regularly for at least 12 weeks and to teach courses at least 4 times in different weeks under the supervision of their mentor teacher and university supervisor. The university supervisor and the mentor teacher are also expected to collaborate and provide assistance to pre-service teachers.

Regarding the Turkish context, a large body of research illustrated that the teaching practicum format applied in L2 teaching programs had a positive effect on pre-service students in terms of changing their perceptions of the teaching profession (Köksal & Genç, 2019), boosting their self-confidence and competence in teaching (Yıldız, Geçikli, & Yeşilyurt, 2016), learning to establish student-teacher interaction (İşcan, 2017), improving their classroom management skills (Atay, 2007), enhancing self-efficacy and identity development (Kırmızı & Tosuncuoğlu, 2019), and having opportunities for discussion and peer feedback (Celen & Akcan, 2017). However, with the spread of COVID-19, teaching practicum was conducted through online distance education practices. Almost all educational institutions in Turkey, including both k-12 and higher education, were exposed to closures after March 23, 2020, and had to resume education through distance learning. Up to that point, pre-service teachers had a chance to actively carry out practicum activities only for 6 weeks. According to a consensus made between MoNe and HEC (YÖK, 2020), teaching practicum was considered as completed regarding the actively involved time period and practicum activities conducted at schools. Furthermore, the consensus stated that the theoretical part of the ‘Teaching Practice Course’ should be sustained through distance education and pre-service teachers should complete their practicum files by doing tasks assigned by their university supervisors. Consequently, Turkish universities designed distance education tasks and activities for pre-service teachers to fulfil the rest of their practicum weeks (Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020).

In the institution where the current study was conducted, these practicum practices included tasks such as conducting research on classroom management and writing a review or article on teaching methods and questioning techniques. Students were also asked to prepare a sample exam and answer key for one of the lessons given on EBA TV, which refers to an online education platform directed by MoNe. Moreover, they were required to observe an English lesson on EBA TV and write a critical report about it. They were also asked to create lesson plans and self-evaluation reports for the courses taught during the first weeks of the semester. Other tasks included preparing a lesson plan and digital materials based on the experiences gained during the first 6 weeks at school and designing a sample lesson of 15–30 minutes to be used in a digital environment. Student teachers were expected to do these tasks and upload them to the university’s online system each week. Supervisors were also required to mentor student teachers by uploading the weekly course content to the online course system, teaching asynchronously, and giving feedback when necessary.

Within the context of these online practices conducted during the COVID-19 period at a Turkish university, the purpose of this study is to explore if pre-service English teachers’ e-practicum experiences diverged from their expectations for the practicum experience. Therefore, the study focuses on the positive and negative aspects of the distant practicum for the participants in this study and highlights their suggestions for improving the applications for distance practicums. The study specifically covers the following research questions:

1. What were the pre-service L2 teachers’ expectations from the teaching practicum before COVID-19?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the distance practicum applications during the COVID-19 outbreak compared to face-to-face education?
3. What are the suggestions of the pre-service L2 teachers regarding the distance practicum in the case of a similar process?

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study has a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research designs try to conceptualise human experience by analysing the descriptions, perceptions, feelings, or judgments of individuals (Patton, 2015). Hence, a qualitative phenomenological research design was used in this study to reveal the lived experiences of the participants in the distance practicum process. Standardized open-ended interview questions were used to collect data from pre-service L2 teachers at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. The study used 'qualitative content analysis' to get "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

### Participants

The participants of the study included 20 fourth-year pre-service teachers (13 females and 7 males) studying English Language Teaching at a Turkish university during the 2019-2020 academic year. All the participants volunteered to take part in the research. The study used convenience sampling to select the participants. In convenience sampling, "members of the target population are selected for the purpose of the study if they meet certain practical criteria such as geographical proximity, availability at a certain time, easy accessibility, or the willingness to volunteer" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 98). The average age of the participants was 22. The participants were guided by four different university supervisors and were expected to complete their teaching practicum at five different state schools, including all levels of education (i.e., primary, secondary, and high school) in Edirne, Turkey.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through standardized open-ended interview questions. Thus, the exact wording and sequence of questions were specified beforehand, and interviewees were directed to the same basic questions in the same order. Interview questions were expressed in an entirely open-ended design. Using a standardized open-ended interview strategy has several advantages, such as increased comparability of responses, reduced interviewer effects and bias, and easier organization and analysis of the data (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). In this respect, three key interview questions were asked of interviewees by the researchers by the time they completed their online 'Teaching Practice Course'. As all the participants' native language was Turkish, the interviews were conducted in Turkish to make them feel more confident and express their thoughts without hesitation. The questions were emailed to the participants, and they were requested to audio-record their responses. One of the researchers, who is fluent in both Turkish and English, then transcribed and translated the data into English. Following the translation procedure, another bilingual Turkish-English speaker also compared the original text and the translated versions. The number of words across all participants was 13,427, and the mean number of words produced by participants in the interviews was 671,35.

The following interview question was addressed to the participants to highlight the first research question of the study:

1. What did you expect from the teaching practicum process before the COVID-19 outbreak?

In order to examine their views on the positive and negative aspects of the COVID-19 on their practicum experiences, the following interview question was directed to the participants:

2. What were the negative and positive aspects of the distance practicum applications during the COVID-19 outbreak?

In line with the third aim of the study, the researchers directed the following research question to the participants:

3. What are your suggestions for the improvement of distance practicum applications?

For data analysis, qualitative content analysis was used in order to examine the transcriptions. Conducting content analysis includes: 1) coding the data, 2) determining themes, 3) categorizing codes and themes, and 4) identifying and interpreting the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Transcribed data were examined in detail and codes were determined by two raters. The themes coded by the raters emerged from the examination and evaluation of the interview data. Following the coding procedure, inter-coder reliability was calculated. Inter-coder reliability is "the extent to which different judges tend to assign exactly the same rating to each other" (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000, p. 98). Cohen's Kappa value was used to measure inter-coder reliability in this study and it was found to be .93, which signifies a strongly acceptable value (Lombard et al., 2010). Cohen advised that the Kappa result be interpreted as follows: values 0 showing no agreement, 0.01–0.20 suggesting none to slight agreement, 0.21–0.40 signifying moderate agreement, 0.41–0.60 indicating strong agreement, and 0.81–1.00 indicating nearly perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012). The categories and codes figured out through rater agreement are presented in the

following tables (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). Direct quotations from the participants are presented to reflect the transferability of the categories and the codes.

### Research Ethics

This research study complies with research publishing ethics. The scientific and legal responsibility for manuscripts published in Bartın University Journal of Faculty of Education belongs to the authors.

## FINDINGS

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### Participants' Overall Expectations From Teaching Practicum Prior to The Covid-19 Pandemic

The first interview question aimed to identify the expectations of the participants from the teaching practicum experience before the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result of the content analysis, one main category and seven codes were formed (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Overall expectations of the participants from teaching practicum before COVID-19.

Categories (Themes)	Codes	COVID-19.	
		n	%
Expectations	1. Practice opportunities	11	55
	2. Real classroom atmosphere	10	50
	1. Gaining experience	8	40
	2. Interaction with students	7	35
	3. Making observations for professional development	6	30
	4. Supervision	5	25
	5. Classroom management	4	20

Results on Table 1 show that 55% (n = 11) of the participants expected that teaching practicum would give them practice opportunities and they would be able to put the knowledge base they had constructed during their university education into practice. As participant 20 stated, *"practicum is a very valuable process that presents opportunities for teaching practice. Theoretical knowledge is actually useful to some extent"*. Similarly, participant 2 expressed that, *"with the feedback we received from the experienced teachers, I expected to put the teaching techniques and methods into practice and complete my development as a prospective teacher"*. Participant 9 said that, *"I was expecting to gain experience in terms of teaching practice"*.

50% (n = 10) of the participants thought that teaching practicum would provide them with the experience of being in a real classroom atmosphere. As participant 17 reported, *"I think teaching is mastered in the classroom. No matter how much you learn in theory, teaching is improved in the classroom, and my general expectations were to be in the classroom with the students"*. Correspondingly, participant 14 stated that, *"before the pandemic, my expectation of the practicum was to apply what I had learned at the university in a real educational environment"*.

Gaining experience was another expectation that 40% (n = 8) of the participants had in relation to the teaching practicum. Participant 1 said that,

*I think taking an active part in the school contributes a lot in terms of gaining experience as it enables me to teach how to perform in a real educational setting. So, I expected to learn more from experienced school administrators and teachers.*

Participant 5 reported that *"My expectation was to gain experience by learning how to act as a teacher and work with students at schools"*.

Similarly, participant 12 asserted that *"Practicum was a chance for me to apply teaching skills in a real educational environment. So, it would be beneficial to gain experience from qualified teachers by getting involved in the school and classroom activities effectively"*.

The fourth expectation that 35% (n = 7) of the participants had was to establish interaction with real students. As participant 15 put it, *"my aim was to communicate with the students. It was necessary for me to learn what kind of reactions we should give in different situations"*. Participant 16 also stated that, *"I wish I could be in communication with students more. Because in the real classroom environment, students are so different and I planned to do a lot of things with them"*. Similarly, participant 19 stated that *"during this period, I actually aimed to communicate with the students one-by-one and to observe their learning process"*.

A total of 30% (n = 6) of the participants stated they considered the teaching practicum as a chance to make observations for professional development. As participant 10 put it,

*First of all, my expectation from the practicum was to be able to observe the school environment, the teachers, the students, and the classroom environment closely. I wanted to observe the teachers, especially the experienced ones. I wanted to observe things such as how they plan their lessons, how they carry out the lesson, apply different methods and techniques, and communicate with their students.*

Similarly, participant 12 stated that "what I expected from the practicum before the pandemic was to be able to effectively observe school and classroom environments".

Supervision was another expectation that 25% (n = 5) of the participants had from the practicum before the spread of the pandemic. As participant 13 stated,

*before the pandemic, my expectation of the practicum, as I heard from previous graduates, was that we would have meetings with mentors and supervisors each week. During the practicum, our mentor and supervisor would guide us, we would share and talk about the problems we were experiencing. I had such high expectations.*

Likewise, participant 1 pointed out that, "apart from gaining experience, it was also in my expectations that both the administrators and the teachers would help and guide us during the practicum process".

The final expectation that 20% (n = 4) of the participants had was to improve themselves in terms of classroom management. These participants had several concerns regarding how to handle classroom management in real classroom settings, and they were expecting to test themselves. As participant 17 stated, "one of my major expectations from the practicum was to learn about the possible future problems in classroom management and also to learn how to deal with them". Participant 1 also said that, "one of my expectations from the practicum was to improve myself more in terms of classroom management".

### Positive And Negative Sides of The Distance Practicum

The second interview question asked the participants to refer to the strengths and weaknesses of the practicum application during COVID-19. Participants' responses were categorized into two sections as positive and negative aspects of the process, and a total of 7 codes were formed (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Evaluation of the teaching practicum process after COVID-19.

Categories (Themes)	Codes	n	%
Positive Aspects	1. Chance to observe online lessons	4	20
	2. Flexibility of time and place	4	20
	3. Experience in distance education	1	5
Negative Aspects	4. Theoretical focus and lack of practice	12	60
	5. Lack of having face-to-face interaction	10	50
	6. Lack of mentor/supervisor support	4	20
	7. Internet access	3	15

### Opportunities

Regarding the positive aspects of the practicum process during the pandemic, 4 pre-service teachers (20%) stressed that the distance practicum process provided them with the chance to observe online lessons. Hence, they had the chance to evaluate the limitations and advantages of these applications by monitoring the distance education process. As participant 4 stated, "I think the strength of this process is that we prepared a lesson plan when we were not teaching, watched EBA TV, and made comments about the online lessons". Likewise, participant 7 stressed that "the strength of the practicum is observing lessons on broadcasting platforms such as EBA TV".

A total of 20% (n = 4) of the participants found the online tasks that they had to do as a part of the distance practicum easy and considered this an advantage. In particular, the flexibility of time and place made it easier for the participants to complete the desired tasks. As participant 8 stated,

*First of all, let me start with the strength of the process because I think there is only one; that is, we were less stressed while preparing the practicum file. Normally, while preparing the file, it takes a lot of time because the*

*exams, the school, and the practicum are continuing at the same time. We do not need to attend a practicum right now; the practicum and other exams are all online. That's why we are more comfortable with that.*

Participant 2 also reported that, "I think the only positive aspect of the distance practicum is probably that I had a more informal practicum as I did the assignments online from wherever I wanted".

The other positive aspect that 5% (n = 1) of the participants addressed was having experience in the implementation of distance education. As participant 10 stated, "*with regard to the strengths of the process, we have witnessed how distance education can be progressed and we have gained distance education experience as students. We have experienced the things that could be done at home*".

### **Challenges**

On the other hand, most pre-service teachers declared that distance practicum during pandemic had certain handicaps. More than half of the participants (60%, n = 12) stressed that practicum in the pandemic period was mainly based on theoretical tasks and lacked practical applications. As participant 6 put it,

*I think the pandemic process affected the practicum in a negative way. Since practicum is an applied course, we were negatively affected by its theorization. From my point of view, involving students in lessons and having fun while teaching is something totally different from writing articles about practicum.*

Similarly, participant 7 argued that,

*Unfortunately, my practicum experience during the pandemic did not make a great contribution to me. Actually, it was terrible. The reason is that we have been learning the theoretical part of the related courses for years. But as we all know, practice is very different from theory.*

Half of the participants (n = 10) stated that they saw the practicum experience as a process where face-to-face interaction with students and mentor teachers was provided and they had expectations in that regard. However, decontextualization of the practicum eliminated their chances to take part in these interactional environments which further caused disappointment for them. As participant 8 put it, "one of the disadvantages of this process is that we, as pre-service teachers, could not gain any experience as a teacher since we could not meet with students in a real classroom setting". Participant 2 also noted that, "the practicum experience was terrible and exhausting. Because as a pre-service teacher, we were far from real school environment and lost our chance to interact and experience face-to face interaction with both our instructors and students". Similarly, participant 13 expressed that,

*I think there was no advantageous situation; we were completely in the disadvantaged group. They asked us to observe lessons from EBA TV for the practicum, but there were no students there, there was no interaction, so it was a very artificial environment.*

A total of 20% (n = 4) of the student teachers asserted that they did not get enough mentor teacher and university supervisor support, which caused them to feel isolated during the distance practicum process. As participant 11 pointed out,

*We had some assignments, such as preparing a practicum dossier. However, when we asked our supervisor questions about the assignment, he never contacted us... Actually, many people did their assignments differently, so 8–9 people in my group completed their files very differently from each other. The only reason for this was that the questions we asked were not answered.*

Similarly, participant 8 reported that, "*our supervisor informed us about how we should prepare our practicum dossier in the final week of the semester... We had no contact with our mentors; they never sent us messages or responded to our questions.*"

Problems related to Internet connectivity were mentioned by 15% (n = 3) of the participants. These students stated that the practicum required Internet access, and some students had no or limited access to the Internet. As participant 20 put it,

Not everyone can get on the Internet the same way, and not all students have access to the Internet. Some of my friends returned to their villages, where they had no Internet access. Also, some students had a lot of problems while uploading their assignments, and some of them could not even submit them.

### Student Recommendations

The final interview question aimed to identify the suggestions of the participants regarding the distance practicum in the case of a similar process. In this respect, two categories and seven codes were formed (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Possible Solutions and Implications

Categories (Themes)	Codes	n	%
Modifications required	6. Format of online teaching	10	50
	7. Theoretical tasks	4	20
	8. Organization	1	5
Suggestions	9. Compensation education	5	25
	10. Providing online communication opportunities	2	10
	11. Resource support	2	10
	12. Student coaching	1	5

#### Modifications

The findings on Table 3 in relation to the first category show that the participants would have modified certain practicum procedures if they had been given a chance. Accordingly, 50% (n = 10) of the participants stressed that the format of the online teaching practicum should have been different. Namely, the participants demanded that the practicum should have been performed through online teaching platforms in which they could have gotten in contact with real students and classroom-related issues. As participant 4 put it,

*When we were informed that there would be distance education practicum applications, I thought that there would only be online lessons and lectures in the form of live conferences, but this was not the case. If it had been done through online lessons, I think it would have been much more useful in terms of motivation and socialization.*

Participant 14 also asserted that,

*If I had had the chance to make changes in the process, I would not have restricted the process to preparing lesson plans in the teaching part. I would have preferred a one-on-one online live class with our university supervisor and our mentor at the practicum school.*

In parallel with this view, participant 1 stated that, "with the help of our mentors, we could have taught our classes through an online platform".

Another point that 20 % (n = 4) of the participants would have changed was the theoretical tasks that they had to complete during the practicum. As participant 7 put it, "*I would have eliminated theoretical assignments, because we, as students, have been doing this for years*". Likewise, participant 1 said that, "*I would have definitely gotten rid of the assignment system. Because I don't think these assignments contributed to us in any way, as they were too theoretical*".

Overall organization of the practicum process was criticized by one of the students, who stated that the university and faculty administration were too slow in taking the necessary steps to put a more effective distant practicum model into practice. The participant also thought that the university supervisors should have been informed systematically by the administration about the responsibilities that they and their students had.

#### Suggestions

In the context of the second category, the participants made a few suggestions that they believed could be implemented in the future. In this sense, 25% (n = 5) of the pre-service teachers suggested that compensation education should be done to fill the gaps created by the distance practicum. Participant 9 reported that,

*During this crisis period, I observed that the practicum was not compatible with its nature. But in my opinion, instead of graduating without getting anything or learning anything in this way since our practicum is left unfinished, it could be completed in some way, either by delaying the period, that is, delaying the practicum for another period, or by performing the practicum in private institutions when normalization begins instead of leaving it like this.*

Moreover, 10 % (n = 2) of the participants asserted that pre-service teachers should be provided with online communication opportunities that will maximize contact among pre-service teachers, university supervisor,

mentor teacher, and other students. As put forward by participant 19, *"I would like to do something like a meeting or an interview with my supervisor in a digital environment"*. Participant 8 also stated that *"talking to the students at least once a week would be nice, as we would get a chance to see who the real students are"*.

A total of 10% (n = 2) of the participants reported that pre-service teachers should be provided with the necessary resources in order to minimize the material-related drawbacks of distance practicum. Supporting this view, participant 8 said that, *"If I had a position at the higher levels of the state, I would somehow ensure that all students have computers and Internet access at their homes"*.

The final suggestion that one of the participants made was to integrate a student coaching model in which each pre-service teacher kept in touch with at least one student and monitored and guided her/his progress. As he put it,

*At least we could do something like coach a student in the classrooms we attended. So at least we could observe one student, communicate with her/him, exchange ideas on homework assignments. We could communicate with them or instruct them about the topics they have problems with. In short, a distance education model where a high level of interaction with students takes place would be useful.*

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

This study examined the experiences and opinions of prospective English teachers regarding the online practicum procedures conducted during the COVID-19 process. Participants, in general, think that the COVID-19 process affected their teaching practicum in negative ways that contrasted with their overall expectations of the practicum experience. The findings for the first purpose of the study reveal that prospective L2 teachers saw the practicum process as an experience of applying theoretical knowledge to practice and preparing themselves for the teaching profession with the in-class practices they conduct and the social and institutional relationships they establish. Hence, the participants' expectations of the teaching practicum were in line with the socio-constructivist view, which approaches teacher education as a process of building knowledge and skills through partaking in certain social environments and engaging in particular kinds of actions and practices (Richards, 2008). The expectations of the students from the practicum also coincided with the results of the studies conducted on the effects of the practicum on prospective teachers, which underscored that the practicum prepared the prospective teachers for the teaching profession by providing them with opportunities to put theory into practice and integrate them into a school context where they become familiar with all the stakeholders of education (Gebhard, 2009; Mirici & Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017).

The findings on the second research question of the study show that teaching practicum experience during the pandemic produced more negative results for the participants than positive ones. Considering the positive aspects of distance education, pre-service teachers indicated that they had the chance of observing online lessons on several broadcasting platforms, had a flexible program for doing the online assignments, and experienced how distance education was done. Participants, on the other hand, faced a number of significant challenges, including a lack of teaching practice, dealing with theory-oriented assignments, and missing opportunities to establish face-to-face interaction in an authentic classroom setting. These negative results both diverged in a completely different direction from the participants' previous expectations and showed that the positivist view centred on theoretical knowledge (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) once again largely involved in their education process. Therefore, within the margins of this study, the findings obtained show that the COVID-19 process caused a shift from a socio-constructivist view to a positivist one in L2 teacher education. This shift constitutes a problem since it took many years for L2 teacher education to evolve and internalize the view that teacher education includes not only realizing the skills and knowledge of language teaching regarding theory and pedagogy and their implementation in teaching but also noticing the concept of being a teacher by developing the identity of the teaching profession in a specific context in order to become effective teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2011). Therefore, educators need to shape their practices carefully by evaluating the educational philosophies and paradigm shifts that have taken place in particular fields, even in times of unprecedented crisis such as COVID-19.

In addition to these negative aspects, some of the participants complained about not getting enough support from their university supervisors and school mentors. Although the unresponsiveness of supervisors and mentors is an issue to be considered, other reasons behind these behaviors also need to be investigated by researchers. For example, a recent study by Duraku and Hoxha (2020) aimed to draw the attention of scholars to how the pandemic might have caused changes to teachers' and teacher trainers' emotional states and affect the quality of remote or online learning, teacher performance, and student knowledge and skills. Therefore, when a similar problem such as the unresponsiveness of supervisors is encountered, it is necessary to examine this problem in a multidimensional approach with all its elements.

Participants' responses to the third interview question produced several modification requests and suggestions that primarily addressed their solutions to the problems they encountered during the practicum. The majority of these modifications and suggestions were about creating more opportunities to put the theoretical knowledge they had into practice. Hence, they demanded major changes in the format of the online practicum and stated that the design of the practicum should have involved activities that would have helped them interact with students and teachers even on an online platform. They also criticized theory-based assignments as they emphasized that they were mostly in need of practice-based tasks that would be more fruitful for improving their teaching skills. As Johnson (2009, p.11) put it, the knowledge base of L2 teacher education programs should focus on three extensive parts: "(1) the content of L2 teacher education programs: What L2 teachers need to know; (2) the pedagogies that are taught in L2 teacher education programs: How L2 teachers should teach; and (3) the institutional forms of delivery through which both the content and pedagogies are learned: How L2 teachers learn to teach." The modification requests and suggestions of the participants show that while the practicum practice covered the first two parts of Johnson's proposal, it did not address the third component. Accordingly, some of the pre-service teachers even demanded compensation education as they thought that the practicum practice did not end the way they had anticipated as they could not experience face-to-face practicum. So, they still did not feel ready for the teaching profession at the end of their practicum. One of the interesting and valuable recommendations was online student coaching, which would enable them to monitor the progress of real students and provide guidance when needed. Supporting this view, several studies have shown that online coaching in education can be very useful and promote higher-order thinking (Stembom, Jansson, & Hulkko, 2016).

If conditions do not allow pre-service teachers to meet real students, even on online platforms, alternative useful practices that have been applied by other institutions can be used. For example, Sasaki et al. (2020) used a technology-based simulated classroom to support the practicum experience of pre-service teachers. Their study findings revealed increased levels of self-confidence and placement readiness for all study participants as a result of the simulation. In another study, Ersin et al. (2020) used a virtual classroom in which twenty-five pre-service English teachers acted as students and six pre-service teachers did microteaching to their peers. Following the e-practicum meetings, peers provided comprehensive feedback to the presenters, and the university supervisor delivered e-mentoring following the microteaching activities. Subsequently, each pre-service teacher reflected on their e-practicum experiences and e-mentoring procedures. Their study results revealed that pre-service teachers found the e-practicum valuable as it facilitated them to overcome their online teaching concerns. As the number of studies examining the effects of COVID-19 on practicum increases, institutions and planners should turn to the relevant literature, evaluate successful practices carried out by others, and create new regulations accordingly. In line with this argument, the current study also revealed that the faculty and school administration were not organized enough to sustain a successful practicum process during the pandemic. Although this sudden health crisis has led to confusion in every walk of life, it is necessary to make plans that are shaped around the main objectives of L2 teacher education and take other successful practices as a model.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study in general show that teaching practicum particularly promotes gaining teaching experience in a real school atmosphere. However, the unexpected emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to teaching practicum being sustained as a part of distance education, which has caused certain drawbacks, especially in terms of lacking face-to-face teaching experience. Thus, the present study highlighted pre-service teachers' expectations from teaching practicum and the challenges they have had in practicum during the pandemic. In accordance with the results of the study, the following suggestions for teacher education programs can be put forward:

1. Practicum should be carried out by creating a real classroom environment, even in an online setting,
2. Online practicum should involve practice-based activities rather than assigning pre-service teachers theoretical tasks,
3. Pre-service teachers should be provided with more communication and interaction opportunities with students and teachers on online platforms,
4. Faculties of education and schools should take necessary precautions in collaboration with each other and organize the process in terms of providing an effective teaching and learning environment for students,
5. Pre-service teachers should be regularly guided by mentors and supervisors,
6. Pre-service teachers having problems with technical equipment such as the Internet, computers, etc. should be supported by the institutions.

This study only included a small group of student teachers enrolled in a language teacher education program at a Turkish university. Further research with more participants and with different data collection instruments

regarding practicum during the pandemic will be useful for generalizing the results to larger contexts. Although there has been a lot of interest in COVID-19 and distance learning, very few studies focus on practicum. However, since the practicum experience has been situated in school-based contexts, more research is needed on how the teaching practicum is affected by distance education, what students' prerequisites are during this process, and how successful practicum procedures are carried out in different institutions.

#### **Statements of Publication Ethics**

Ethical compliance approval was obtained for this research in accordance with the decision of Trakya University Ethics Committee dated 07.07.2021 and numbered 6/12.

#### **Researchers' Contribution Rate**

The first author participated in the data collection, data analysis and writing (original draft) process of the research. The second author contributed to data analysis and writing- review and editing of this manuscript.

#### **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest.

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