

A Critical Needs Analysis of Practicum Courses at Farhangian University: Mentors and Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

Practicum is a significant component of teacher education which links theory to practice and prepares student teachers for their job. The purpose of the courses, as defined within the Curriculum of Teacher Education at Farhangian University, is to prepare student teachers for their teaching career by observing and analyzing the real situation at schools and relating it to their theoretical findings. The present study was an attempt to conduct a critical needs analysis in which teachers and learners voiced their concerns, problems and needs in practicum courses. It mostly focused on student teachers' voice since they are the most powerless in this educational setting. It intended to look for distinctive features of the practicum courses (four courses) presented at Farhangian University. To this end, the study investigated the achievement of the course objectives, stated in the curriculum for the practicum, and the fulfillment of students' needs from the stakeholders' perspective. Findings revealed major problems with these courses including (a) lack of training in action research, lesson study, critical thinking, and reflection skills for all members of practicum, (b) insufficiency of flexibility in teaching methods, resources and materials used by cooperating teachers at schools to act as a role model for student teachers, (c) lack of cooperation between schools and university, and (d) lack of proper supervision by teacher educators, to name a few. The findings of the study would raise TEFL curriculum developers, teacher educators, and cooperating teachers' awareness of student teachers' needs in practicum courses.

Key words: Practicum, Undergraduate TEFL students, Cooperating teachers, Teacher educators

1. Introduction

Research into teacher education has been a growing field of interest over the last decades. Teacher education can be broadly interpreted as the development of ways of teaching and the acquisition of attitudes that facilitate success in

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teaching career (Townsend & Bates, 2007). For years, teacher education has been a part of the regular undergraduate program, and nowadays due to the expanded global role of English, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is one of the majors which needs to receive special attention in teacher education.

Educating competent language teachers is considered as one of the most important goals of TEFL. In order to achieve this goal, programs for Teacher Education Centers need to be designed based on the competencies the student teachers need to be equipped with. Widdowson (1983) cites Palmer's crucial statement on the importance of relating language teaching to the particular needs of learners: "We cannot design a language course until we know something about the students for whom the course is intended, for a program of study depends on the aim or aims of the students." (p. 14)

Among the courses that may help fulfill the objectives of TEFL teacher education and students' needs, practicum courses help student teachers learn teaching within the context where they are to teach in the future. These courses, as the hallmark of teacher education curriculum, provide ideal settings in which student teachers are supported by both teacher educators and cooperating teachers, namely, mentors at schools in order to develop teaching competencies.

Moreover, all three members of the teaching practice (student teachers, teacher educators and cooperating teachers) benefit from the practicum courses in different ways. Mentors (both teacher educators and cooperating teachers) benefit from their mentoring experience by receiving new ideas from pre-service teachers, improving the understanding and broadening their views of teaching, and deriving satisfaction from their roles as mentors (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Hanson & Moir, 2008; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2002). Student teachers, also, learn from mentors, discover new ideas and knowledge and shape their beliefs and practices of teaching (Stanulis & Russell, 2000).

The importance of practicum has been emphasized by many researchers, and research supports the professional development programs which increase teachers' academic and pedagogical knowledge, and help them apply them in practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Malderez and Bodoczky (1999), for example, explain the significance of regarding more classroom practices, i.e. practicum, as the central part of teacher education programs. Hence, practicum offered in university programs is regarded as a significant component of higher education which links theory to practice and prepares student teachers for their work (Hughes, 1998; Klassen et al., 2014). Goker (2006) also shows the great impact of experiential activities, such as peer coaching or teaching practicum on self-efficacy of pre-service teachers. Similarly, Liaw (2009) explores the positive effects of classroom teaching and group-discussions on self-efficacy of Elementary English teachers in Taiwan.

Thus, linking theory to practice and preparing student teachers for their work and improving students' self-efficacy can be added to the aforementioned advantages of practicum courses.

Sharafi and Abdolmanafi Rokni (2014) focused on the process of the promotion of reflective thinking in undergraduate teacher education and student teachers' focus of attention throughout their practicum by conducting an action research in qualitative research paradigm. Data collection consisted of reflective interviews, assignment microteaching, questionnaires and observations. The study revealed that there was a developmental process in pre-service teachers' reflectivity in this course. Towards the end of the course, the students incorporated their theoretical background and considered contextual factors in reflecting on their experiences.

In order to make sure about the effectiveness and success of such fundamental courses, these courses must be designed and managed based on careful consideration of the stakeholders' language teaching profession needs and goals. To this end, in-depth examination of the theoretical aspect of the courses can have a significant influence on improvising these courses. Then, the theoretical aspect can be compared to the way they are implemented in practice and the way they satisfy stakeholders' language teaching profession needs.

1.1. Practicum at Farhangian University

In Iran, Farhangian University specializes in teacher education in different fields including TEFL. For undergraduate TEFL students studying at this university, the practicum courses, that are the topic of this study, are presented in the fifth semester of the curriculum and are held for four semesters of about 16 weeks long. The students attend the classes at schools once a week for eight hours. Thus, totally the student teachers attend 512 hours in practicum courses which is almost 15% of the overall educational hours they spend during the educational years.

The practicum designed for this university involves student teachers in (a) action research by analyzing past practicum reports to identify the themes or issues they need to work on; (b) lesson study, i.e., students are placed into schools in teams of three or four, then partners act as critical friends, available to observe and assist in any collection of information, to observe the partners' teachings, participate in meetings with their partner and keep a journal that documents their investigations into their own teaching; and (c) independent and autonomous work: the cooperating teachers allow students to observe and provide feedback for the peers' teaching. The cooperating teacher oversees the work done by the students and is available if necessary.

Among the few studies about practicum courses at Farhangian University in Iran, Norouzi(2016) mentioned the objectives for the eight credits of practicum at Farhangian University as, (a) “to provide student-teachers with the opportunity to practice what they learn, to broaden their experiences, and to develop their professional competencies”, (b) “to provide student-teachers with the opportunity to participate in actual teaching and expect them to identify problems through investigating the learning context, and consequently, design, implement, and evaluate learning activities to solve the problems”, (c) “to do action research based on the experiences that student-teachers obtain from practicum I and II”, and (d) “to educate reflective teachers who attend in collaborative inquiry and undertake action research” (pp. 51-53).

On the other hand, student teachers at Farhangian University are found to have difficulty making meaningful connections between the theoretical coursework and its practical application within the TEFL program (Masoumpah, 2017), and there is a gap between planning and practice levels in teacher education (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). The students value the practical aspect of their education considerably higher than the theoretical aspect of their teacher education since they find the practice more related to their target, occupational needs (Moen & Standal, 2016). Therefore, because of the importance and benefits of practical courses for TEFL student teachers and the significance of careful consideration of the stakeholders’ needs, their background and goals, behavioral demands, and preferred learning / teaching strategies; there seems to be a desperate need for a critical analysis of the practicum courses to investigate whether the students’ language teaching profession needs are fulfilled or not.

In order to conduct such an analysis, it seems necessary to go beyond the descriptive approach toward a critical needs analysis (CNA) which recognizes that needs are subjective and political, and that power differentials exist across multiple sources (Benesch, 1996) and those at the bottom of institutions are entitled to more power than they have, therefore, areas where greater equality might be achieved should be explored. Based on this ideology, Eslami (2010) investigated the needs of Iranian EAP students from different disciplines and brought into focus the discrepancies between students and instructors’ perceptions of students’ language learning needs and problems in EAP instruction and delivery. The results showed that instructors may not always be the best judges of students’ needs and challenges and this showed desperate need to empower the powerless to challenge the system. The students’ and teachers’ perceptions provided evidence for conducting critical needs analysis (p.7).

Moreover, Jesso-Aguilar (1999, p.45) states that in doing needs analysis, it is necessary to critically examine the social context in which the actors live their lives, and the power differential involved. The use of qualitative research

methods, and more specifically, of ethnography, can help achieve this goal, by taking into account the social context of lives, and by allowing them to express their own voice and needs as opposed to the researcher's, or the people or institution's. Although Jesso-Aguilar's study is not ethnography, the use of qualitative techniques, multiple sources, and triangulation allowed for the inclusion of the learners' voice in expressing their needs.

1.2. The present study

The current study investigates the success and effectiveness of the practicum courses in meeting the students' language teaching profession needs as intended by the university and to explore the way these courses are implemented in practice in achieving the aforementioned objectives in the undergraduate TEFL program of Farhangian University. The students' and teachers' perceptions provides evidence for conducting critical needs analysis and challenging the system and the students are given more power and opportunity to voice their concerns during the study. Therefore, the following questions were posed in this study:

1. What are the mentors and student teachers' perceptions about the problematic areas in the practicum courses implemented for the undergraduate TEFL students at Farhangian University regarding student teachers' language teaching profession needs?
2. What are the mentors and student teachers' perceptions about the problematic areas in practicum courses implemented for the undergraduate TEFL students at Farhangian University regarding achievement of the objectives stated for the practicum courses?

Thus, a critical needs analysis (Benesch, 1996) was conducted, which assumes that learners, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy in top-down educational systems such as Iran, need to be given more power and their voices should be heard. Through a mixed method research approach, the student teachers were allowed to voice their concerns about the practicum courses. Moreover, the perceptions, experiences, and viewpoints of teacher educators and cooperating teachers were also investigated.

2. Method

2.2 Participants

A total of 249 student teachers, teacher educators, and cooperating teachers participated in this study. Out of this number, 144 student teachers, teacher educators and cooperating teachers filled out the questionnaire; 66 student teachers, cooperating teachers, and teacher educators participated in the interview; and 39 student teachers, teacher educators teaching practicum, and cooperating teachers participated in focus-group discussion. The cooperating teachers, invited to participate in the study, were chosen from different

campuses of Farhangian University from different parts of the country and especially from Ayatollah Kamalvand and Allame Tabatabaee in Lorestan, Rasoul-e-Akram and Fatemeh – Zahra in Khoozestan, Dr. Shariati in Mazandaran, and Fatemeh Zahra in Isfahan provinces.

In order to select a stratified sample from this population, the population was first divided into two strata of those who had passed at least two practicum courses and those who had not. Then, from the first strata, there was an equal chance (probability) that each student could be included in the sample. For mentors also a similar procedure was followed in which the strata included teachers who had taught practicum and those who had no experience of mentoring in practicum courses. The participants were convinced that measures would be taken to keep their responses confidential. From among those who filled the consent forms to participate in the study, 191 student teachers and mentors (teacher educators and cooperating teachers) were randomly selected as the main participants of the study.

Student teachers had an age range of 20–26 years. All participating students had successfully attended the theoretical courses included within the TEFL program and they were attending practicum I, II, III, or IV at secondary or high schools. Out of 12 cooperating teachers whose classes were being observed by student teachers, seven possessed Bachelor degrees, and 5 had a Master degree in TEFL. All cooperating teachers had mentoring experience from two to eleven years. Their ages ranged from 32 to 48 years. Teacher educators had PhD degrees or were PhD candidates, backed by about six to 27 years of teaching experience at schools and universities. Moreover, they had received training through a pedagogical course during their in-service years. The distribution of student teachers and mentors who filled the questionnaires, attended interviews and focus group discussions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of participants of the study

Province	Cooperating teachers				Teacher educators				Student teachers		
	Male	Female	Age	Degree	Male	Female	Teaching experience	Degree	Male	Female	Age
Isfahan		1	40	MA	1	1	6-8	PhD	15	25	21-26
Mazandaran	2	4	32-46	MA or BA	2	4	8-15	MA	23	27	20-26
Khouzestan	4	4	34-48	MA or BA	3	6	8-22	PhD	24	29	20-26

Lorestan	8	6	32- 46	MA or BA	6	6	10- 27	MA	27	21	21-26
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2.3 Instrumentation

Data collection instruments included two categories of qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative instruments were individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, observation, written documents and artifacts, and quantitative instrument was a questionnaire.

2.3.1 Qualitative instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with student teachers and mentors at the end of 12-weeks of practicum in campuses of the university and occurred mostly in schools where the students were placed, combined with observation of students' teaching. Interviewees were encouraged to speak freely regarding their experience with the course. Subsequently, several follow-up questions were asked to investigate additional information. The interviews were all audio-taped and transcribed.

Focus-group discussion on the pros and cons of the practicum compared to the practicum courses implemented previously in teacher education. The duration of the focus group discussion was about 80 minutes and it was audio-recorded. The questions, for both focus group discussion and interviews, included if the cooperating teachers found the practicum useful in the teaching practice, if it affected the role of the cooperating teacher, the extent to which cooperating teachers adhered to the guidelines provided in the curriculum, and the way the practicum could be improved.

Written documents and artifacts included reflective journals provided by student teachers and their mentor's feedbacks in English during two successive semesters of practicum. Student teachers recorded their thoughts, feelings, actions and reactions about practicum, and their mentors reflected and commented on the performances of each student teacher in their journal entries on a weekly basis. These documents, institutional policy and learning outcomes and students' profiles helped enhance understanding of the experience of participants during the mentoring process.

Observation included the observation of the students, teacher educators, and cooperating teachers in schools where the students were placed; the relationships between them and their mentors, the discourses used in and out of the class, and activities done during the courses. These were done every week for two semesters, after taking the deans' permission for observation and research within the campuses and schools.

2.3.2 Quantitative instruments

A questionnaire which was prepared based on the interviews, discussions, written documents and observations (Appendix A). The questionnaire, inspired by Guskey's (2000) model, included a section inquired about the *achievement of the objectives of the courses* (questions 1-19); the second section asked about the respondents' *satisfaction level and usefulness* (questions 20-36); and section 3 asked about the perceived impact of the courses on *teachers' self-perception, motivation, and knowledge-base* (questions 37-45). These sections of the questionnaire were prepared for the Likert type scale (from 1 to 5) with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. Demographic questions and several open-ended questions about the problems of the respondents in the courses and about what they expected from the courses followed these sections with the purpose of needs identification. The questionnaire was first validated with three colleagues who were interviewed to check item clarity and then the modified questionnaire was piloted to 22 student teachers. Cronach's alpha estimated for the three sections were .92, .92, and .86 respectively.

3.5 Data analysis

First, the questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS software and conducting descriptive statistics and Chi-square to determine the significance of the findings. This provided the researcher with primary answers to both first and second research questions. Then, the data collected through interview and focus group discussion were transcribed and then coded by the researcher using the grounded-theory approach - *Constant Comparative Method* (Charmaz, 2006). A colleague, who was knowledgeable about practicum and mentoring, coded the data once more. The average of the inter-coder reliability was 0.78 which indicated that the reliability of the data analysis and coding was ensured. Then, in order to check the validity of data interpretation and coding, they were returned to the participants to confirm, correct or expand any information presented. Qualitative data provided the possibility to explore further problems and concerns of respondents' perceptions that were not covered by the questionnaire. Triangulation of data gathered from different sources was employed to maximize the reliability of data analysis.

3. Results

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that the students found the courses partially satisfactory regarding achievement of the objectives. Results of Chi square analysis in Table 2 indicates that the student teachers perceived that the objectives of the practicum courses were not significantly achieved ($M = 3.36, \chi^2 = 12.814, p > .05$).

Table 2. Perceived achievement of the objectives of the courses

Course

Chi-square ^a	12.81
df	31
Asymp. Sig.	.99

a. 32 cells (100.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1.3.

Analysis of the data for the first section of the questionnaire indicated that the student teachers had a significantly positive opinion towards giving reflective commentaries on their observations and empirical findings ($M=3.79$, $\chi^2 = 15.95$, $p \leq .05$). They also significantly believed they could analyze actual teaching practices and adapt them with theoretical findings ($M= 3.34$, $\chi^2 = 12.81$, $p \leq .05$). Moreover, they significantly believed that Practicum II provided them with the opportunity to participate in actual teaching ($M= 3.79$, $\chi^2 = 16.65$, $p \leq .05$) and expects them to identify problems through investigating the learning context ($M= 3.41$, $\chi^2 = 13.86$, $p \leq .05$) and that they were expected to design, implement, and evaluate learning activities to solve the problems ($M= 3.34$, $\chi^2 = 11.54$, $p \leq .05$) and to reflect on the pedagogical issues by exposing them to applied knowledge which was an integration of intuition, declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, conditional knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge ($M= 3.27$, $\chi^2 = 10.37$, $p \leq .05$). Student teachers significantly are expected to control classrooms independently ($M= 3.41$, $\chi^2 = 10.84$, $p \leq .05$) and study the learning context, and design instructional units ($M= 3.51$, $\chi^2 = 19.91$, $p \leq .05$). Student-teachers are provided with the opportunity to teach in classrooms without their mentors' help ($M= 3.53$, $\chi^2 = 24.56$, $p \leq .05$) and Practicum four provides them with the opportunity to design and implement instructional units based on the analyses of the curriculum and in collaboration with their mentors ($M= 3.04$, $\chi^2 = 11.77$, $p \leq .05$) and to report their findings from their own professional performance ($M= 3.23$, $\chi^2 = 10.61$, $p \leq .05$).

However, problematic areas with regard to course objectives appear in identifying the educational and pedagogical problems at the school and classroom level; explaining educational and pedagogical problems through scientific evidence; reexamining the experiences they gain from participating in teaching and providing commentaries on their findings; examining their own professional capacities to identify their weak points; making use of instructional planning and their supervisors' assistance in order to compensate for their weak points; writing reflective commentaries on their teaching practices, codifying and analyzing them. Besides, practicum IV did not provide student-teachers with the opportunity to assess influence of the instructional units on students' achievement and describe the experiences they obtain in lesson study. Results of Chi-square analysis indicated that the aforementioned objectives of the practicum courses were not significantly achieved by the participants ($p > .05$).

Regarding the student teachers' level of satisfaction with different aspects of practicum courses, results of Chi square analysis in Table 3 indicated that the student teachers had not perceived the courses to have significant impact on *students' level of satisfaction* ($\chi^2 = 16.65, p > .05$).

Table 3. Level of Satisfaction with the Aspects of Practicum Courses

	Course
Chi-square ^a	16.65
df	26
Asymp. Sig.	.92

a. 27 cells (100.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1.6.

Analysis of the data for the second section of the questionnaire indicated that the course was significantly well-planned and organized ($M = 3.44, \chi^2 = 9.44, p \leq .05$), motivating and interesting ($M = 3.74, \chi^2 = 18.98, p \leq .05$); encouraging for student teachers to participate in the activities ($M = 3.74, \chi^2 = 17.12, p \leq .05$) and to discuss and find solutions to real-life problems ($M = 3.25, \chi^2 = 10.84, p \leq .05$). The courses were useful for student teachers' teaching and professional development ($M = 3.69, \chi^2 = 16.88, p \leq .05$) and resources and materials used such as handouts were adequate ($M = 2.76, \chi^2 = 9.67, p \leq .05$).

However, regarding relevance of the content of the course to student teachers' classroom needs ($M = 3.16, \chi^2 = 6.19, p > .05$), up-to-date information about student teachers' field ($M = 3.37, \chi^2 = 5.95, p > .05$), variety of teaching and learning approaches used in the course ($M = 2.79, \chi^2 = 4.33, p > .05$), the atmosphere to share and discuss experiences ($M = 3.06, \chi^2 = 3.86, p > .05$), relating the theory to teaching practice ($M = 3.25, \chi^2 = 3.4, p > .05$), opportunities to implement what is learned during the course ($M = 3.18, \chi^2 = 2, p > .05$), collaboration with peers ($M = 3.30, \chi^2 = 8.05, p > .05$), modeling the new constructivist and communicative approaches by the trainers ($M = 2.95, \chi^2 = 1.54, p > .05$), encouraging to think critically about experiences in light of the new knowledge ($M = 3.00, \chi^2 = 2.00, p > .05$), creating materials by student teachers to be used in their own classes ($M = 2.72, \chi^2 = 6.42, p > .05$), collection of student teachers' evaluation about the course ($M = 3.16, \chi^2 = 5.26, p > .05$), they were not significantly sure if the courses fulfilled their language teaching profession needs.

Results of Chi-square analysis in Table 4 indicate that the student teachers had not perceived the courses to have significant impact on student *teachers' self-perception, motivation, and knowledge-base* ($M = 3.62, \chi^2 = 11.42, p > .05$).

Table 4. Perceived Impact of the Courses on Student Teachers' Self-Perception, Motivation, and Knowledge-Base

	Course
Chi-square ^a	11.42
df	19
Asymp. Sig.	.91

a. 20 cells (100.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 2.2.

Except forequipping student teachers with variety of instructional strategies to promote student engagement ($M=2.83$, $\chi^2 = 7.12$, $p > .05$), the results indicate that student teachers were significantly satisfied with the practicum courses. Their perceptions indicated they had more desire to learn about the field, and somewhat desire to try out new ideas; they agreed that they had a better self-concept and confidence in themselves as teachers. Student teachers saw themselves more knowledgeable especially about teacher-student roles, characteristics and needs of young learners and learning styles, the new curriculum goals, and evaluation and use of textbooks according to their classroom needs.

The first step in the analysis of the qualitative data was summarizing and coding interview and focused discussion data using grounded-theory approach - *Constant Comparative Method* (Charmaz, 2006). The process began by independent and careful summarizing the transcribed data in sentences and paragraphs. This resulted in a list of 541 cases of reference. The cases were reviewed, three themes of language teaching profession needs, challenges, and objectives emerged during the review, and the comments were categorized using the list of the themes, and organized into two major themes of educational and administrative.

4. Discussion

In the following sections, the quantitative and qualitative data are discussed in relation to research queries.

a) The problematic areas in practicum courses regarding student teachers' language teaching profession needs

Findings from different sources indicated that the students found the courses partially satisfactory and effective in fulfilling their language teaching profession needs. The needs were subsumed under two main categories of educational and administrative. From the participants' perspective, several educational needs are the most important. Some teacher educators admitted that student teachers commonly needed to improve their teaching competencies. This might happen provided that more opportunities were provided for the student teachers to teach.

The participants mentioned the need to promote flexibility in using different teaching approaches for different students and the ability to apply teaching principles in new situations. As Safari and Sahragard (2015, p.78) argue, “ELT educational system needs skillful teachers who adeptly know how to deal with the pedagogical challenges and dynamics of the language situation”. However, in the current study, both in questionnaires and in interviews, participants complained about their inability to use different practices in different situations.

Regarding building flexibility and responsiveness in trainees for using different teaching approaches in different situations, some student teachers thought, planning and thinking about the learning environment, gaining confidence in facilitating learning as well as formal teaching situations and watching and learning from experienced teachers can help the students’ being open and flexible and able to compare and discriminate critically. In theory, these were all supposed to be done within the practicum courses; however, in reality what happened was different. The practicum courses were just held as a break for the theoretical atmosphere of the classes and they mostly did not achieve their main goal which was to make reflective, critical, cooperative teachers. Thus, what happened in practicum courses in practice was completely different from what was supposed to be in the main curriculum in theory. Trainee’s flexibility should be promoted by being introduced different teaching approaches for different situations. Some students talked about the strategies they had learnt from the experienced teachers during their practicum courses at schools. Some of them had learnt classroom management and how to attract students’ attention as well. Some of them talked about the ways they had learned to adapt the lesson plan based on the learners’ level of proficiency. The extract below reveals one of the students’ observations of how the same lesson was taught in different ways in different classes:

- *Student # 4: The only course which was helpful for us was practicum in which we learnt how to confront different kinds of learners. We learnt from teachers even if they were weak. We observed them and learnt what to do and what not to do.*

Thus, even if such courses are not held appropriately, they may help fulfill some of students’ needs, and help student teachers learn teaching practices with observing teachers and students within the real context.

From the participants’ perspective, several educational needs are the most important. *The need to train teachers* was also shown as one the most important educational needs of a majority of the participants. Atai and Mazlum (2013) believe that teachers are at the forefront of program implementation and they need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge via in-service training programs. Besides, “qualifications too soon become outdated as a result of

changes in the field” (Richards & Ferrell, 2005, p.10), thus, teacher educators need ongoing training in different innovations related to their profession. As participants confessed, the way the courses were implemented in practice was not satisfactory because the cooperating teachers were not well-trained. Some of the students’ comments are the indication of the seriousness of the problems with these courses:

- *Student # 3: Teacher educators are not available most of the time or are not willing to answer our questions. Therefore, most of the students do not know how to teach or be a good teacher. There are not enough competent teachers available in order to practice teaching. These lower their motivation.*
- *Student # 25: Some teachers put a great deal of stress on the students, under such conditions, the student teachers’ progress would not be desirable. They do not treat student teachers as their colleague, but as students who do not know anything.*

Unfortunately, it seemed that there was no proper observation and supervision of teacher educators in this university and no proper training of cooperating teachers at schools regarding the precise implementation of the courses. The teachers had the authority to decide on their own method of teaching, examination, and assessment. Most cooperating teachers did not have enough knowledge and did not provide enough materials and did not allow the student teachers to teach and learn from their own practice. Some student teachers believed cooperating teachers’ behavior towards them was not appropriate and the students were afraid of them and could not discuss issues with them while some cooperating teachers seemed to regard student teachers as unwelcome intruders. The excerpt below from the responses shows the aforesaid problem:

- *Cooperating Teacher # 7: Some of them [student teachers] create tension with their inappropriate behavior. They are mean and try to show off and attract teachers and students’ attention towards themselves. This makes the situation difficult for teacher and their own classmates. Sometimes this results in deciding not to let them attend my classes.*

Teacher educators and cooperating teachers mostly had a positive opinion towards the courses in general, especially because the courses were motivating, and encouraged students to reflect on teachers and peers’ teaching. Although most mentors expressed the relevance of the courses in the students’ language teaching profession needs, some students believed practicum courses did not prepare them for teaching because of the implementation problems:

- *Focus Group, Student# 4: schools receiving the student teachers do not cooperate with them. This university needs to start schools which are associated with the university and close to it, with experienced teachers to educate language student teachers.*

The problems between schools and the university with regard to these courses did not provide an appropriate environment for the students to make use of this opportunity completely and besides some cooperating teachers were not willing or capable and experienced enough to help the student teachers. There were suggestions for establishing schools cooperated and associated with the university to observe and practice teaching and did not provide up-to-date information and varieties of teaching and learning approaches and opportunities to implement what the student teachers have learnt and collaborate with peers. Thus, the students' needs and expectations were not met and the program needed necessary revisions and modifications (Güllü, 2007).

b) The problematic areas in practicum courses regarding achievement of the objectives

As perceived from the interviews and observations, course objectives seemed to be partially achieved after implementing the courses. The main course objectives included:

a) Each student is required to engage in action research by analyzing past practicum reports to identify the themes or issues they need to work on. Then, during the practicum, each student is expected to engage in systematic self-inquiry as a way of addressing these issues or themes. However, in practice, what was observed, in most of the forms and documents specified for this purpose, was a series of observation reports containing no teachers' reflection on students' voice. In some cases, however, students reflected on what they had observed and learned. Examples of these reflections included what they felt they needed to learn for their future job as English teachers:

- *Student # 38: We first need to know what action research is and how to do it, so we should have courses of action research and lesson planning before we enter into the context of school... our mentors themselves have problems with these issues...*

Thus, what seems necessary is to add prerequisite courses in which students learn about these initiatives within the curriculum and then expect students to conduct them. Besides, students significantly believed they were not able to reexamine the experiences they gain from participating in teaching and provide commentaries on their findings or compensate their weak points.

b) Students, placed in schools in teams of three or four, are supposed to engage in lesson study. The groups are given a common timetable and divided

among different schools at the beginning of the term, but what happens most of the time in practice, was preparing reports and lesson plans and having the cooperating teacher sign them and putting the signed papers in their portfolios.

In some cases, however, students attended the same class as a team, taught a lesson individually in a session or two, and other students, who observed them, reflected about their friends' teaching on pieces of paper and kept them in their portfolios. They rarely talked to each other about their own experiences and their friends' teachings, thus, from their interactions at schools, little data could be gathered regarding the group's teaching experiences. But within their portfolios, they reported that they needed to have more opportunities to teach in different classes so that they could find their weaknesses and find ways to apply what they had learnt theoretically.

Some students mentioned, in their portfolios, the need to learn reflection and critical thinking to reflect on their own and others' teaching. They also needed to receive reflections on the weaknesses and strengths of their performance, whether in final exams or their teachings. The cooperating teachers mostly didn't allow students to work independently and autonomously, and feedback was provided by the peers. The cooperating teachers just oversaw the work done by the students and were available if necessary.

Some trainees thought they reflected on the experiences and values they had when they had practicum courses, but they received no feedback on their reflections from their peers or teachers. Besides, most of the students claimed that from the interactions with peers and teachers they had learned how to function in the socio-cultural context in which they would work later.

Scholars (e.g., Foroozandeh, Riazi, & Sadighi, 2008; Razi & Kargar, 2014) agree that teaching skills development is an essential part of an efficient program and the Curriculum for Teacher Education (2014) states that these courses should help the students make a link by using action research and lesson study. Besides, these courses hold the potential to help nearly every student teacher improve teaching skills, however, in actual practice, they help almost no one.

New understandings of teaching and teacher education acknowledge the effect of context on teacher education and this makes it clear that teaching and learning is very context-sensitive. Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000) believe that "all teaching and all learning is shaped by the context in which they occur" (p.524). Thus, the context provides students and teachers with different factors that may influence their performance. But they confessed they still cannot identify and explain the educational and pedagogical problems through scientific evidence and examine their own professional capacities to identify their weak points. Observing, investigating, documenting and interviewing the teachers within the context of these courses provided a good opportunity to

know about the actual teaching, however, they believed that these courses did not meet their language teaching profession needs. Thus, the researcher got permission to observe the process and the documents related to it. Some of the students' comments documented some challenges in this regard:

- *Student# 12: Practicum is 10 times more helpful than other courses provided that it is implemented based on what is stated in the curriculum, planned correctly and carefully, and both mentors are trained and specialized for this course...*
- *Student# 32: The only application of the student teachers is for those classes whose teachers are absent and to control those classes preventing them from disturbing other classes.*
- *Student # 41: We have to sit in the last row of the classes like students and we have no right to talk, discuss, ask questions, teach, or criticize their teaching.*

The student teachers mentioned that there is no action, no excitement, no variation in activities, and no lesson planning. They believed that cooperating teachers talked haphazardly about everything and they did not learn new methods of teaching... just the traditional Grammar Translation Method. While they thought they would go to classes and would teach and would be respected. But student teachers mentioned they found not to be considered as teachers, but as students who should stay calm in the classroom and just listen, no teamwork, no critical thinking, and no action at all. What was evident was that teachers, school principals, and staff were, in some cases, uncooperative with regard to student teachers or uninformed about the actual objectives of the courses.

The program was not also satisfactory with regard to the time the courses were offered and participants suggested that the practicum courses should start earlier in the curriculum. They started in the fifth semester of the curriculum and continued four semesters. More than half of the students thought they needed more practical courses:

- *Student # 14: ...we require more practical courses...at least two days a week..We are aware of the importance of the practicum courses. But teachers may not know. They should be trained...*

Students and teacher educators thought presenting the practicum courses more efficiently, training the mentors, and allocating more time would make the courses invaluable source for prospective teachers.

5. Conclusion

In order to investigate the practicum courses implemented at Farhangian University, this study conducted a Critical Needs Analysis in which students' and mentors voiced their concerns, needs and problems through interview,

focus-group discussion, observation, investigation of documents and student portfolios, and a questionnaire. However, as mentors may not always be the best judges of students' needs and challenges (Eslami, 2010), a desperate need was felt to empower the powerless, i.e. students, to challenge the system. Thus, the study focused mainly on students' responses, although mentors' were not ignored.

The findings revealed that the teachers' attitudes towards the courses were generally positive. The course had many positive effects for student teachers like getting familiar with classroom management techniques, the interaction patterns in the classroom and those between students and teachers as well as teachers and their colleagues, the ways to confront challenging situations and unanticipated behaviors, error correction and teaching strategies, and the ways to have appropriate appearance at school. Besides, more desire to try out new ideas and know about their field, better understanding of students and teacher roles, an increased awareness of the characteristics and language teaching profession needs of young learners, and better understanding of different learning styles are also among these advantages. Participants also believed the courses improved their knowledge about different methods of teaching and using computers, and their ability to motivate students and make them believe in themselves and their teachers.

However, TEFL programs seem to be partly efficient with regard to practical teaching (practicum) courses. The practicum courses should start earlier in the program and should be allocated more time and importance for experiential learning. In practice, what happens in the practicum courses follows the traditional methods of teacher observation which rarely help students make a link between theory and practice. Possibilities for change offered by existing structures were explored as identifying the educational and pedagogical problems at the school and classroom level; explaining educational and pedagogical problems through scientific evidence; reexamining the experiences student teachers gain from participating in teaching and providing commentaries on their findings; examining their own professional capacities to identify their weak points; and equipping student teachers with variety of instructional strategies to promote student engagement.

Besides, they did not provide student teachers with the opportunity to describe the experiences they obtain in schools through lesson study and action research. Moreover, the information they receive about their field is not up-to-date, the atmosphere is not appropriate to share and discuss experiences, and collaboration with peers and modeling the new constructivist and communicative approaches by the trainers are rare. Likewise, encouraging student teachers to think flexibly and critically about experiences in light of the new knowledge and creating materials to be used in their own classes was not

significantly fulfilled. The need for teacher training and proper observation and supervision of teacher educators were also felt.

Few studies have explored the problems that student teachers might face during their studies at this university; consequently, there has not been much effort to assist the students in need. These factors may have a direct relation to the students' target needs or they may be the obstacles that may hinder students from achieving from practicum courses, which can provide practical services that can meet the psychological, social, and educational needs of the students. The results could help train more competent teachers.

The findings of this study could help EFL teacher educators, and syllabus designers. EFL teachers may expand their knowledge and abilities in language teacher education and the challenges students face while implementing the practicum courses. EFL teachers may make use of instructional planning; encourage student teachers to write reflective commentaries on their teaching practices, codify and analyze them; relate the content of the course to student teachers' classroom needs with up-to-date information about student teachers' field; provide them with variety of teaching and learning approaches; share and discuss experiences; relate the theory to teaching practice; provide opportunities to implement what is learned; encourage them to collaborate with peer; model the new constructivist and communicative approaches; encourage them to think critically about experiences in light of the new knowledge and create materials to be used in their own classes; and collect student teachers' evaluation about the course. These findings, like those of Atai and Mazlum (2013), and Eslami (2010), stress the importance of examining the precise needs of students with the purpose of preparing them for the job qualifications that lie ahead of them.

Curriculum developers can improve levels of practicum courses with student teachers by incorporating prerequisite courses like 'reflection and critical thinking', 'action research' and 'lesson planning' into the teacher education curriculum. We hope that the findings could have the potential to provide a drive for further investigation in the area of language teacher education and diminishing the problems that novice teachers graduating from this university face. Hence, it is recommended that further follow-up studies be conducted over the mentioned problems in order to explore their influence and alternative solutions.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire for the Impact of the Practicum Courses

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1. Student teachers can identify the educational and pedagogical problems at the school and classroom level					
2. Student teachers can explain educational and pedagogical problems through scientific evidence.					
3. Student teachers can give reflective commentaries on their observations and empirical findings.					
4. Student teachers can analyze actual teaching practices and adapt them with theoretical findings.					
5. Practicum two provides student-teachers with the opportunity to participate in actual teaching					
6. Practicum two expects students to identify problems through investigating the learning context					
7. Student-teachers are expected to design, implement, and evaluate learning activities to solve the problems.					
8. Student-teachers are expected to reflect on the pedagogical issues by exposing them to applied knowledge which is an integration of intuition, declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, conditional knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge.					
9. Student-teachers are expected to reexamine the experiences they gain from participating in teaching and provide commentaries on their findings.					
10. Student-teachers are expected to control classrooms independently,					
11. Student-teachers are expected to study the learning context, and design instructional units.					
12. Student-teachers examine their own professional capacities to identify their weak points.					
13. Student-teachers make use of instructional planning and their supervisors' assistance in order to compensate for their weak points					
14. Student-teachers are provided with the opportunity to teach in classrooms without their mentors' help					
15. Student-teachers are expected to write reflective commentaries on their teaching practices, codify, analyze them.					
16. Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to design and implement instructional units					

based on the analyses of the curriculum and in collaboration with their mentors					
17. Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to assess the influence of the instructional units on students' achievement.					
18. Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to describe the experiences they obtain in lesson study					
19. Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to report their findings from their own professional performance.					
20.The course was well-planned and organized.					
21.The content of the course was relevant to student teachers' classroom needs.					
22.The course contained up-to-date information about student teachers' field.					
23.The course was motivating and interesting.					
24.During the course, student teachers were encouraged to participate in the activities.					
25.A variety of teaching and learning approaches were used in the course.					
26.The resources and materials used such as handouts were adequate.					
27.The atmosphere was friendly and comfortable to share and discuss student teachers' experiences.					
28.The course helped student teachers relate the theory to teaching practice.					
29.Student teachers were encouraged to discuss and to find solutions to real-life problems.					
30.Student teachers were given opportunities to implement what they learned during the course.					
31.Student teachers were encouraged to collaborate with peers.					
32.The new constructivist and communicative approaches were modeled by the trainers.					
33.Student teachers were encouraged to think critically about their experiences in light of the new knowledge.					
34.Student teachers created materials to be used in their own classes.					
35.At the end, student teachers' evaluation about the course was collected.					
36.The course was useful for Student teachers' teaching and					

professional development					
37.Student teachers have a better self-concept, satisfaction, and confidence in their ability as a student teacher now.					
38.Student teachers have more desire to try out new ideas.					
39.Student teachers have more desire to know more about their field.					
40.Student teachers feel better informed and knowledgeable about the new curriculum goals now.					
41.Student teachers have a better understanding of students and teacher roles in the class now.					
42.Student teachers have an increased awareness of the characteristics and needs of young learners					
43.Student teachers have a better understanding of different learning styles.					
44.Student teachers know better how to evaluate and use textbooks, according to their classroom needs.					
45.Student teachers are equipped with a variety of instructional strategies to promote student engagement.					