

## **Distance Teaching Practicum: Its Impact on Pre-Service EFL Teachers’ Preparedness for Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching practicum performs a crucial role in initial English language teacher preparation programs in that it offers pre-service English-as-a-foreign-language teachers a great chance to put the pedagogical content knowledge they have acquired through the coursework into practice by teaching real students. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, pre-service English-as-a-foreign-language teachers in the context of the present study, had to do more than half of their teaching practicums via distance education. This qualitative case study explores 25 pre-service English-as-a-foreign-language teachers' conceptions of the influence of distance teaching practicum on their preparedness for the first year of teaching. The data collected by emailed questionnaires were analysed adopting inductive content analysis. The results indicated they did not believe distance teaching practicum was effective in enhancing their professional learning and preparing them for the first year of teaching. In addition, they did not think teaching practicum conducted face-to-face could be replaced by distance teaching practicum.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, distance teaching practicum, preparedness for teaching, pre-service English-as-a-foreign-language teachers, teaching practicum

Teaching practicum (TP) could be conceived to be a platform where pre-service English-as-a-foreign-language teachers (PSEFLT) gain a first-hand experience of testing the effectiveness of disparate methods for English language teaching, about which theoretical information is provided by the university component of pre-service teacher education. Notwithstanding the importance of the theoretical knowledge imparted to pre-service teachers to help them prepare for the teaching profession, the mismatches that may occur between what is preached in the coursework and what is lived in the field might be the source of not only PSEFLT's, but also beginning EFL teachers' questioning its merit. Since learning to teach is viewed to be a context-dependent activity (Zeichner, 2010), the field is deemed to be of high significance by PSEFLT to experience what it means to be a teacher and to gain profound insights into teaching and learning from the viewpoints of teachers rather than students, which they have been doing to the date they commence to do their TPs.

Distance education (DE) that could be defined as the education provided via online learning environments and on which a plethora of research has been undertaken (Akimov & Malin, 2020; Bose, 2013; Lee, 2017; Nielsen, 1997; Ramos et al., 2011; Raygan & Moradkhani, 2020) differs from face-to-face education presented in a learning setting with the physical presence of the teacher and students. Not only does the mode of delivery change from face-to-face education to DE, but also the learning outcomes produced by them may change. Such a discussion on the disparities between the effects of face-to-face education and distance education on student learning can be extended to the probable discrepancies between the effects of face-to-face TP and distance teaching practicum (DTP) on PSEFLT's professional learning and preparedness for the teaching profession.

Until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, TP had been conducted by placing senior PSEFLT into practicum schools where they were required to teach students and observe their mentor teachers' instructional practices. As a result of the pandemic, they could not complete their TPs in their placement schools. In view of the fact that PSEFLT hold TP in high esteem and view it as an invaluable arena adding to their preparedness for teaching, this research aimed to unpack PSEFLT's conceptions of the effect of DTP on their preparedness for the first year of the teaching profession. The lack of research into the impact of DTP on PSEFLT's preparedness for teaching indicates the contribution to be made by this study to the literature. Additionally, the findings to be presented in this research could prompt teacher educators, mentor teachers and policy makers in TP to deeply ponder over what initiatives to launch with a view to running effective DTP so that PSEFLT can make the most of it.

## Literature Review

### Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Learning

Teacher professional learning could be defined as learning practices they go into in an attempt to enhance the quality of their teaching. What teachers want to learn professionally could change according to their year of teaching experience (Louws et al., 2017), and the development of pedagogical content knowledge is believed to be person- and context-bound (Driel & Berry, 2012). Associated with that, the factors contributing to pre-service teachers' professional learning are postulated to be manifold, and in addition, they are considered to be influenced by past and present experiences having been gained in various contexts (Leeferink et al., 2015). Considering "the person" as one of the main determiners in gaining pedagogical content knowledge, it could be alleged the experiences pre-service teachers had in their prior educational lives and the ones they undergo as fulfilling the requirements of the pre-service teacher education program presumptively have something to do with their professional

learning. Pre-service teachers assume an active role in the construction of their professional knowledge during their initial teacher education (Tang et al., 2012), and what they acquire through campus- and school-based learning could foster their abilities to work at schools (Tang et al., 2016). Pre-service teachers seek help for their professional learning starting from their first year in the program (Toom et al., 2017), which brings forward the crucial function to be served by teacher educators and the other parties featuring in pre-service teacher education.

A set of actions can be taken to promote pre-service teachers' professional learning. For instance, it could be stimulated through peer assisted learning as was reported in the research conducted by Bone et al. (2019). Teaching abroad experience is also posited to broaden pre-service teachers' knowledge of teaching in a world continually increasing in complexity (Moorhouse & Harfitt, 2019). Additionally, Anwaruddin's (2016) study yielded integration of information and communication technologies into English language teachers' professional development activities ended in improvement in their pedagogical knowledge. Seeing the increased integration of technology into teaching and learning practices at all levels of education over the last two decades, avoiding it in pre-service teacher education would literally be swimming against the current.

Notwithstanding the fact that subject knowledge is appreciated to be effective in quality teaching (Richards et al., 2013), teaching experience gained by virtue of TP is on a par with pre-service teachers' knowledge of English language teaching. TP occupies, in effect, a vital place in pre-service teacher education (Gray et al., 2019; Grudnoff, 2011; Ulvik & Smith, 2011) as pre-service teachers practice teaching real students and develop their teaching competencies via employing pedagogical content knowledge they have accumulated from the start of and/or during their TPs (Choy et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2013; Gebhard, 2009). The indispensable contribution of teaching experience gained in TP to PSEFLT's learning was demonstrated in Chien's (2015) study from the points of view of PSEFLTs. As well as practicing teaching in TP, reflecting on teaching practices impacts on pre-service teachers' professional learning. For instance, in the study by Gan and Lee (2016), it was reported that pre-service English-as-a-second-language teachers' reflections on their teaching experiences in TP resulted in professional learning with regard to effective classroom practices. Undoubtedly, mentor teachers perform a fundamental role in how much pre-service teachers learn from their experiences of TP. Accordingly, the substantial role played by mentor teachers in pre-service teachers' learning to teach is accentuated in the literature (Adams, 2017; Barak & Wang, 2020). Irrespective of the fact each student teacher has diverse needs in the transition period between the final year of pre-service teacher education programs and the first year of teaching (Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009), they all need practice teaching and reflect on their teaching practices in conjunction with the feedback they receive from their mentor teachers and university supervisors.

### **Distance Teacher Education**

Distance teacher education could be conducted as a supplement to face-to-face teacher education or as a substitute for it as a consequence of the emergence of an unanticipated circumstance like a pandemic. Distance teacher education is contended to be an agent promoting the increase in the exchange of ideas between lecturers and pre-service foreign language teachers and developing students' skills of the use of technology for their learning (Forbes & Khoo, 2015), and it is viewed to be an agent enhancing pre-service teachers' professional learning and development (Turvey, 2012). Moreover, online technologies are considered to facilitate personalized teacher professional development in Yurkofsky et al.'s (2019) study. It was demonstrated in the study that DE promoted pre-service teachers'

reflective practice, and offered curricular and emotional support to them. The advantages of DE, according to Cowan (1995), were the freedom students had in placing more emphasis on the topic they wanted to learn and in the decisions they made in the learning process, and having the chance to study at their own pace. However, the author claimed that it embodied a number of disadvantages including the absence of effective communication, considering the one in face-to-face communication, the difficulty to be faced by students in taking equal advantage of the same DE, and lack of socialization among students and teachers.

The way DE is conducted affects the satisfaction pre-service teachers derive from it. To exemplify, the research by Kim et al. (2011) revealed the quality of teaching positively influenced learning satisfaction with DE. The study by Offir et al. (2008) explored the differences in the learning outcomes produced by synchronous and asynchronous distance learning systems. Synchronous distance learning was depicted to be more effective than asynchronous, originating from the higher level of interaction between the teacher and students. The extant studies on DE also reported negative conceptions student teachers held about it due to the problems in regard to the inability to use technology, the need for training the staff to develop their technological skills, demotivation among students, and being devoid of social presence (Gillies, 2008). The research done by Adem (2009) yielded the reasons behind the high attrition rates amongst the participants of distance teacher education programs, which involved the insufficiency of the support and overburdening the participating teachers by the work required. What is reported in Adem's (2009) study indicates the necessity of offering firm and continuing support to distance pre-service teachers. The level of support to be provided to them largely depends upon their particular needs. To illustrate, the significance of virtual field experience for pre-service teachers who could not go to schools was emphasized besides the need for the development of their technological skills in Phillion et al.'s (2003) study.

Initiating and sustaining a strong interaction with pre-service teachers in distance education can be deemed to be a predictor of the effectiveness of DE. Therefore, the quality of DE could be improved through increasing both the quantity and quality of the interaction between students and teachers (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). Meaningful tasks as a part of online courses were favoured while the ones mandating memorization and group activities were not found useful by the study participants in the research by Boling et al. (2011). Even though designing meaningful tasks and maintaining interaction between the teacher educator and pre-service teachers and amidst pre-service teachers seem to be challenging in distance teacher education, Falloon's (2011) study suggested the promoting effect of virtual classrooms on the occurrence of quality dialogue. Furthermore, an array of improvements in DE such as providing prompt feedback and constant adaptation of the online system based on students' comments are required to foster student learning (Hall, 1996). In addition to pre-service teachers, university supervisors and mentor teachers could derive benefits from distance teacher education (Gruenhagen et al., 1999). They may have the chance to develop their skills in effectively and efficiently using digital technologies in pre-service teacher education and their repertoire of tactics to employ at challenging times in distance teacher education.

The literature encompasses studies demonstrating no significant difference in students' contentment receiving education in traditional classrooms and online classrooms (Skylar et al., 2005). Higher education students' social presence in online learning environments is contended to be affected positively by a comfortable online learning environment in which their feedback on the process of their distance learning is valued (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The pivotal role played by feedback in getting the most out of DE on the part of pre-service teachers was stressed in Uribe and Vaughan's (2017) study. Pre-service teachers instructed on the

significance of providing timely feedback in encouraging student learning need to receive immediate feedback from their teacher educators. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has urged all the parties involved in pre-service teacher education to ground pre-service teacher learning on digital technologies, about which they are likely to hold distinct views. For instance, the teacher educators participating in a recent study conducted by Moyo (2020) expounded divergent views on how teacher certification would be finalized in the absence of TP done in the field. In addition, they emphasized the significance of appreciating favourable outcomes of TP conducted face-to-face in a real classroom environment to sustain the achieved standards in pre-service teacher education.

Andragogy, developed by Knowles (1968), is the theory underpinning this study. The theory of andragogy lays the emphasis on adult learners' characteristics to explicate how they learn. Following is Table 1 displaying adult learner characteristics proposed by Knowles (1980, 1984).

Table 1: Adult learner characteristics

As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being (Knowles, 1980, p. 43).
An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning (Knowles, 1980, p. 43).
The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role (Knowles, 1980, p. 43).
There is a change in time perspective as people mature –from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem-centred than subject-centred in learning (Knowles, 1980, p. 43).
The most potent motivations are internal rather than external (Knowles, 1984, p. 12).
Adults need to know why they need to learn something (Knowles, 1984, p. 12).

Since the participants in this study are adult learners, according to andragogy, they are supposed to be self-directed and internally motivated learners, which could have its reflections in their perceptions with respect to DTP. Review of related literature has uncovered that DTP is an under-researched topic necessitating more research to enlighten its impact on PSEFLT's professional learning and their preparedness for beginning to teach following graduation; thus, this research targets unravelling what views PSEFLT's hold about the effect of the DTP they have completed on their preparedness for the first year of the teaching profession.

## Methodology

### Research Design and the Context

This study was designed as a qualitative case study because, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative research is “research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings” (p. 11), and this research aims at exploring PSEFLT's lived DTP experiences. Additionally, as is stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2010), gaining a deeper account of a subject's perceptions of a phenomenon necessitates the use of qualitative study, and in this research, delving into PSEFLT's DTP experiences was targeted. Furthermore, as is suggested by Punch (1998), the question of what kind of research, qualitative or quantitative, could enable us to learn more about what is investigated was posed prior to the start of this research. Taking into account the research question to which answers were sought in the present study, the answer to that question was found to be qualitative research. In addition to these, this research

does not intend to generalize the findings to other contexts, but to explore the study participants' perceptions of the DTP they have done.

In the context of this study, senior PSEFLT's have to take a 14-week TP course in the last year of initial English language teacher education programs. The course aims to endorse PSEFLT's preparing for the teaching profession by providing an opportunity to them for transferring the pedagogical content knowledge they have gained since the beginning of their academic education into their teaching in their practicum schools. PSEFLT's must teach at least 14 hours in their placement schools, assigned by Provincial Directorate of National Education. However, the PSEFLT's in this study could not complete their TPs in their placement schools on account of the coronavirus disease. They had been to their placement schools for just three weeks when their country started to be shaken by the deleterious effects of COVID-19 on every aspect of life. For this reason, they could not continue going to their placement schools in the remaining 11 weeks; instead, they were assigned the following tasks:

- Read the regulations regarding the teaching profession and add a copy of them to your file.
- Read the rules to be obeyed at schools and add a copy of them to your file.
- Provide information about the online systems having already been used by the practicing teachers to do school-related work and the distance education system introduced synchronously with the termination of the face-to-face education.
- Analyse the 2019-2023 strategic plan of the Ministry of National Education and add a synopsis of it to your file.

The participants completed the tasks and submitted their assignments to their university supervisors by uploading them to the distance education system used by the university they were enrolled in. The university supervisors were asked to email the assignments of the PSEFLT's they had supervised to their mentor teachers. The performance of the PSEFLT's on the TP course was assessed through grading their assignments, which had been done by assessing the lessons taught by them before the emergence of COVID-19. Subsequent to the completion of the DTP, a mailed questionnaire was administered to find answers to the research question.

### **Participants**

The questionnaire was e-mailed to 42 fourth-year PSEFLT's, the selection of whom was grounded on convenience sampling. Nonetheless, 25 PSEFLT's responded to it. The mean age of the participants was 23.2. Fifteen participants were female and the rest were male. All the participants had to complete their TP at a distance and were the first PSEFLT's doing DTP. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was obtained; in addition, it was notified that they could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. The name of the participants will not be mentioned throughout this research to protect their privacy. Each participant is numbered and when extracting statements from their responses, expressions like PSEFLT 2, PSEFLT 5 are used.

### **Data Collection Tool and Analysis**

A mailed questionnaire comprising two parts was developed by the researcher. The first part was used to disclose demographic information about the participants while the second part involved the three open-ended questions posed to uncover PSEFLT's' perceptions of the DTP. The questions were created after reading the literature on DE, and then were sent to three

English language teacher educators to ensure the precision of the questions and that they could offer answers to the research question. The questions in the questionnaire are:

- What are your opinions on the effect of the paperwork assigned to you in place of practicing teaching in real classes on your professional learning?
- Taking into account not having the opportunity for completing your TP in the field, how do you feel about your preparedness for teaching in your first year on the job?
- How do you think DTP could be offered in a way different from assigning paperwork so that it could help you prepare for your professional life better?

The data gathered from the questions were analysed inductively following the steps suggested by Creswell (2007). The data were read by two coders, one of whom is the researcher, before they began the coding process, thereby getting a rough idea of the participants' views about the DTP. The coders selected one of the questionnaires and thought about what was meant in the responses by the respondent, and wrote it in two or three words. Afterwards, the coding process started. Following that, each coder looked at his/her list of codes and tried to lessen the number of the codes to 25-30 to avoid redundancy. Before commencing to develop themes from the codes, the coders checked each other's codes and tried to come to an agreement on the discrepancies between the codes they had produced. Finally, themes were developed from the codes. Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted with an eye to ensuring trustworthiness in this research. The processes undergone in this study, from the employed research design to the data collection tool and analysis, were checked by a pre-service English language teacher educator. Moreover, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was done by sharing the findings and their interpretations with the participants to ensure they reflected what they had in their minds about the DTP.

### Findings

The first and second questions in the mailed questionnaire served to obtain data on what the participants thought about the influence of the DTP on their preparedness for the first year of the teaching profession. The data on the first question of what the PSEFLT's conceived of the effectiveness of the assigned paperwork instead of practicing teaching in the field led to the emergence of the theme below.

#### **Effective in Learning Professional Regulations, Useless in Learning to Teach**

All the participants held the conception that the paperwork they completed helped them learn about the regulations in relation to teaching profession, which, according to them, could be learned easily from the website of the Ministry of National Education even if they had not been assigned it. The statement of PSEFLT 21 epitomizes others' viewpoints on the effect of the paperwork they carried out on their professional learning.

*I believe that nothing can be compared to the real practice in a classroom with real students. Because, as a teacher candidate, I think observing a real classroom atmosphere and experiencing some teaching-related situations in their own contexts can give me enough confidence to deal with similar situations in my future teaching career.*

The participants indicated professional learning was learning about teaching for them, which could be achieved by teaching practice, and therefore, they believed their professional learning could be enhanced by putting the content and pedagogical knowledge into practice in real

teaching. The PSEFLT's highly valued the TP constituent of pre-service teacher education, which enabled them to work out the effectiveness of the teaching methods they had learned and on which they had done their microteaching. PSEFLT 10 stated in her survey:

*Teaching real students is beneficial for us because we really teach something in classes. We need to practice teaching to develop our teaching skills, but we couldn't do it this term because of the COVID-19.*

PSEFLT 2 explicated her perception of the negative impact of the paperwork on her professional learning:

*When I learned I had to submit a file on regulations instead of teaching, I was really disappointed and demotivated because I know that the best way of learning to teach is to teach.*

The second question in the questionnaire presented invaluable insights into PSEFLT's preparedness for the first year of teaching profession. The content analysis revealed that aside from one PSEFLT, all the others did not feel ready for the first of year of teaching as a consequence of the DTP they had completed. The participant who claimed she was prepared for the first year of teaching, despite the DTP, stated she had been tutoring for three years and that that teaching experience made her feel that she was ready to start to teach. The content analysis of the remaining 24 participants' responses led to the development of the following theme.

### **I Missed Irreplaceable Experiences, and Therefore, I Do Not Think I am Prepared to Start to Teach**

The respondents pointing out that they were not prepared for the first year of teaching asserted that they had been deprived of the valuable hands-on experience of teaching they would have gained if the pandemic had not hit the normal flow of the TP having been maintained for decades. PSEFLT 15 explained why he was not prepared for the first year of teaching in the following words:

*I feel uncomfortable about not doing my practicum in my placement school. I really don't feel ready for teaching in any context. I guess I did not learn how to teach.*

PSEFLT 7 stated:

*For the first year on the job, TP is needed. So, because I had to do DTP, I am lacking in self-confidence in my teaching skills.*

Linked with the significance attached to gaining experience of teaching, another point conveyed in the responses is that the participants believed the more opportunity they had had to teach English to real students, the more prepared they would have been for teaching English, which had been hindered because of the pandemic.

*I think, as pre-service teachers, we have to practise more and more because we need to improve our teaching skills to teach better. Also, we need to be present at schools to get accustomed to the operation of schools. Because of these, we had to go to practicum schools but we couldn't (PSEFLT 14).*

The third question was added to the questionnaire to learn about the PSEFLT's suggestions concerning how DTP could be designed in a different way to better serve senior PSEFLT's in preparing them for the first year of teaching. The content analysis revealed that they had no recommendation as to offering DTP in a different way to improve its effectiveness in equipping PSEFLT's with the knowledge and competencies they would need to use in their professional lives. The reasons they stated for suggesting nothing about improving DTP developed the theme given below.

### **No DTP Could Replace Face-to-Face TP**

The participants asserted in their responses that they had no idea about how to improve the quality of DTP as they did not believe that TP could be conducted through DE. From their points of view, it should be done face-to-face; that is to say, they should be at schools teaching students, observing how schools operate and what responsibilities other than teaching the teacher has. The PSEFLT's stated that TP was the course they had waited till the last term of the program, yet they could not complete it by being physically present at their placement schools. Three of the respondents argued that they should be subjected to face-to-face TP after the end of the pandemic or at least as soon as it lost its detrimental effects before beginning to teach.

*I have no suggestion about how DTP could be made more effective because I do not think it can be effective at all. For TP, we should be at schools with real students. DE is not appropriate for TP. It is not a course like linguistics; because of that, I can develop my teaching only if I teach. Something should be done to give us the chance to do our practicum face-to-face before we start to work in the field (PSEFLT-11).*

### **Discussion**

The findings demonstrated that the TP the PSEFLT's had to complete via DE as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic did not help them enhance their professional learning aside from learning professional regulations. Due to the unprecedented impact exerted by the pandemic on educational life involving tertiary education, the participants had to complete the paperwork assigned to all the senior Education Faculty students in the context of the study, which did not result in professional learning for the study participants, who defined it as broadening pedagogical content knowledge and transferring it into practice. These findings are the indicators of the significance of this study inasmuch as the related literature does not entail a study reporting on PSEFLT's viewpoints on the contribution of DTP to their professional learning, and associated with that, to their preparedness for the first year of the teaching profession. Integrating technologies into teacher education contributes substantially to teachers' professional learning as was yielded in Anwaruddin's (2016) research, nonetheless, most parts of the TP done through DE were not perceived to be adequate to extend their professional learning. Such discontent with the DTP stemmed from what was expected of them to complete their TP, which pinpoints the importance of providing a chance for PSEFLT's to practice online teaching. By the same token, the PSEFLT's perceptions regarding the DTP they completed indicate the necessity for determining the content of DTP contemplatively and in cooperation with PSEFLT's. It was revealed in the findings that the content of the DTP disappointed the PSEFLT's and demotivated them to complete the program. In view of the importance of the high level of motivation novice teachers have in their success in the first year of teaching, the study participants who will begin to teach in the following school year might encounter motivation-related problems. Providing the respondents had had the chance to carry

on going to their placement schools and online learning tools had been incorporated into the process, their perceived unenhanced professional learning could have been empowered as was suggested by Forbes and Khoo (2015).

The PSEFLT's stated they were not prepared for the first year of teaching due to not being able to complete their TPs face-to-face in their placement schools. They delineated what they had been devoid of as a result of the DTP by addressing the lack of teaching experience, the opportunity to observe the classroom practices of their mentor teachers and to observe the operation of schools, among which losing the chance to practice teaching was the most annoying for them. The findings show that TP is highly valued by the study participants, and similarly, the participants in the studies undertaken by Gan and Lee, 2016; Chen, 2015; Choy et al., 2014 and Cohen et al., 2013 gave special prominence to it. The stress placed on TP makes sense because it is the arena where they display the teaching skills they have gained and developed to a certain extent, and get feedback on them (Uribe & Vaughan, 2017). In the DTP the participants conducted, there was no interaction between them and their mentor teachers, significant figures in initial teacher education (Adams, 2017; Barak & Wang, 2020), because no circumstance occurred to get in touch with them, which can make the picture of what the PSEFLT's lived clearer. Taking into account the need PSEFLT's appeal for starting from their first year in the program (Toom et al., 2017), the pivotal role of the quality of the interaction amongst the stakeholders of initial teacher education becomes evident.

In addition to the absence of the interaction between the PSEFLT's and their mentor teachers, the one between PSEFLT's and their university supervisors was not gratifying as could be understood from the respondents' responses, involving that they lacked self-confidence in their current teaching abilities. This indicates TP done in real classrooms caters for the increase in PSEFLT's level of self-confidence. In line with this, the participants could not offer any suggestion to improve the effectiveness of DTP for they had a strong belief in the conception that TP should be done by the physical presence of PSEFLT's in their placement schools. Though the respondents did not come up with an alternative for TP conducted face-to-face, Phillion et al. (2003) suggested virtual teaching practice for the pre-service teachers who could not go to placement schools. Given the fact that the research participants and the other parties in TP were unprepared for conducting it at a distance, it could be understood why the PSEFLT's could not make recommendations for reforming the way it was conducted in their context. However, the invaluable experience gained by the stakeholders through striving to complete the DTP will probably steer the future of it and how it can be carried out in the best way possible.

### **Implications for Initial English Language Teacher Education**

The education provided to PSEFLT's both on-campus and at schools needs to be comprehensive, of high quality and adaptable to a wide range of situations subsuming the mandatory DE that may result from a pandemic. The entire world has suffered from COVID-19 over the last seven months and this led the Faculties of Education to produce a solution to the problem of the impossibility of conducting TP face-to-face as a result of the closure of schools. The solution they worked out was having the last year pre-service teachers do their TPs at a distance. As could be comprehended from the perceptions of this study's participants, meticulous work needs to be done on designing DTP jointly with PSEFLT's. Anything, from the content to the assignments, should be tentative because the feedback that will be offered by PSEFLT's might necessitate something that has not been contemplated before. Since the opportunity for practicing teaching is what makes TP valuable, virtual teaching practice needs

to be an integral and indispensable part of DTP. PSEFLT's should be teaching students they are supposed to teach face-to-face in a virtual synchronous learning environment, and feedback on their teaching should be provided both by their mentor teachers and university supervisors. Online technologies should be used in the teaching of pedagogical and content courses, too to help PSEFLT's perceive DE as a part of their education.

### **Conclusions**

This qualitative case study explored PSEFLT's' perceptions concerning the DTP they have done and the influence it has wielded on their preparedness for teaching. The findings reported that the participants were not feeling ready for the first year of teaching as they could not practice teaching and complete their TPs in their placement schools thereof. The findings reiterate the vital role taken on by TP in the eyes of pre-service teachers. This study has the potential to make a notable contribution to the literature on TP by the findings as to the negative effect of the way TP was conducted at a distance in the context of this study.

Since this research was conducted with the participation of 25 participants studying at the same university, the researcher does not aim at generalizing the results to other contexts. Undoubtedly, further research is needed to gain more considerable insights into PSEFLT's' conceptions of both DTP and its influence on their preparedness for the first year on the job. Moreover, additional research should be conducted in the following years with the practicing teachers having engaged in DTP with a view to examining how it will have impacted on their teaching in their first year/s of teaching. Large-scale studies in which participants with DTP experience from different contexts take part are also needed for they could demonstrate if the divergence in participants' views on DTP resides in the differences in the way/s DTP is carried out.

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