

A Real Practicum Training for Prospective English Language Teachers: Teaching Laboratory

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author HB designed the study, wrote the protocol and supervised the work. Authors HB and DG carried out all laboratories work and performed the statistical analysis. Author HB managed the analyses of the study. Author DG wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author HB managed the literature searches and edited the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe "Teaching Laboratory" model applied at a university in Turkey and presents the reflections of preservice English language teachers on the model. A case study design was employed to investigate teaching laboratory application, which took place between January and June 2015. 37 junior university students studying at English Language Teaching Department participated in the study. In the context of teaching laboratory, preservice English language teachers led a speaking club event and taught visiting student teachers studying in other departments at the same university. Later, they were asked to reflect on their experiences before, throughout and after their own performance in the form of diaries. A total of 111 diary entries written over the course of teaching laboratory applications were analysed for emerging themes and categories. It was found out that the first cycle of reflections focused on preservice teachers' previous gestalts and highlighted their concerns about their English language skills, teaching skills and the teaching laboratory prior to the application. The second cycle of reflections concentrated on awareness of essential aspects and indicated that preservice teachers gained an awareness of

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strengths and weaknesses of their English language skills, teaching skills and the teaching laboratory during the application. The third cycle of reflections emphasized creation of new gestalts and showed that the student teachers were more confident and willing to continue the “Teaching Laboratory” after their performance. Overall, in Teaching Laboratories, English language teaching students had a chance to experiment teaching in a real environment. Teaching laboratories can be an alternative to practicum trainings that aim at preparing teacher candidates for the challenges of real teaching environments.

Keywords: Teacher education; English language teaching; teaching practicum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational researchers highlight the need to better prepare preservice teachers for the challenges they will encounter when they start teaching [1-4.] According to Johnson [5], teacher education consists of three parts: The prospective teachers’ classroom where they study; the practicum school they go; the school where they work as a real professional teacher. However, in some cases, prospective teachers report that their undergraduate studies fail to prepare them for the challenges of the real teaching environments [6]. Language teacher educators [7-9] have also demanded more extensive and intensive practical experiences to be integrated into the teacher education program which will link theory with practice [10].

Given the strategic position of the country, Turkish educational policy also places great emphasis on language teacher education. Researchers have analysed language teacher education programs [11] and searched for alternative ways to develop more effective language teacher education programs [11-16]. Research indicates pre-service language teachers in Turkey face major challenges and experience the “Achilles’ heel”— the disconnect between practicum and coursework [17] as they attempt to get real in the classroom like most of their colleagues around the world [18-20,16]. Despite the critical role of practicum experiences in language teacher education programs, there is still much to be learned about how to integrate theory into practice before teacher candidates complete their academic studies and dive into the field. Our goal in the present study is to offer a more realistic practicum experience for pre-service language teachers, which is integrated into the teacher education curricula under the title of “teaching laboratory”, and to present teacher candidates’ reflections on the application. In this context, the role of practicum in English language teaching and English

language teacher education in Turkey are explained in the following section.

1.1 The Role of Practicum in English Language Teaching

Until recently, language teacher education curriculum focused on applied linguistics mainly including psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, language description, and language teaching and testing methodology [21-23]. However, general educational theory and practice have influenced both preservice and inservice language teacher education to a great extent, resulting in an emphasis on: Practical experiences such as classroom observations and teaching practice [7-9,24,25].

Several studies [26,27] underline the need to balance theory and practice for an effective foreign language teacher education program and point out that school experience and practice teaching are essential components of teacher training programmes. Daniel [28] notes that preservice teachers need to establish a triadic relationship among themselves, their mentors, and their university supervisors [29] and the knowledge they gained learned from books, instructors, and peers in university courses with the outputs of their observations in practicum settings [30,31].

Although different definitions of practicum exist in literature, in this study we draw upon Schön’s concept of practicum, which is based on providing an approximation to a real life environment. In Schön’s words [32]:

A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context which approximates a practice world, students learn by doing, although their doing usually falls short of real world work (p.37)

Teaching practicum is a "culminating experience" for teacher candidates [33] which links the teaching and non-teaching experiences and combines "the knowledge about teaching" with "the art of teaching" [10]. According to Schön [32], practicum aids pre-service teachers in developing "reflection artistry by engaging observations, analysis of context, self-awareness, and the analysis of experiencing classroom events, namely theory in practice skills" (p.13). He notes that practicum assists pre-service teachers in various aspects contributing to their developments as reflective practitioners in parallel with their intellectual and professional development. During practicum placements candidate teachers have a chance to observe mentors as models, inspect students' actions and interactions, and apply knowledge and skills they have gained during their undergraduate studies into practice. Smith and Snoek [34] report that preservice teachers from the Netherlands and from Israel consider the practicum as the most precious component of their teacher education. As noted in several other studies in literature also [35-38,4] practicum applications play an essential role in training language teachers, and contribute to their professional development.

When novice teachers start teaching in a real classroom for the first time, it is generally assumed that all they need to do is apply all the knowledge they gathered during their teacher preparation programs and everything will be fine. However, it takes years to integrate theoretical background into real-life teaching situations. Veenman [39] in his study on the concerns of novice teachers, describes the transition from teacher preparation to first year teaching as a type of "reality shock" resulting from "the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of classroom life" (p. 143). Tarone and Allwright [40] also highlight the gaps in teacher education programs and real teaching environments when they note that the

differences between the academic course content in language teacher preparation programs and the real conditions that novice language teachers are faced with in the language classroom appear to set up a gap that cannot be bridged by beginning teacher learners. (p. 12)

Unfortunately, novice teachers are left to survive in the realities of the teaching environment,

which they encounter for the first time, on their own, and as a result some give up the profession early in their careers [41,42]. Efficient practicum experiences backed with a sound theoretical background prepare pre-service teachers for the reality of the classroom and provide a smooth transition from teacher preparation to first year teaching.

Practical experiences have long been a part of language teacher education programs. Richards and Crookes [25] studied language teacher education programs and found that a majority included a practicum experience such as observation of experienced teachers, supervised classroom teaching, individual conferences with supervisor teacher, unsupervised classroom teaching, observation of peers, seminars, watching videos of participant trainees' teaching (p.14). Microteaching is also a frequently used performance based teacher education system in the context of laboratory skill training [43]. In microteaching practice, the teacher candidate is responsible for teaching a small portion of a lesson to his classmates. However, including microteaching, practicum experiences are often too limited in terms of time and content [23]. As a result, when they start teaching in a real classroom, pre-service teachers often find themselves questioning what they have learnt during their academic studies and frequently they modify or even abandon what they have learnt in their academic courses in order to 'get through' the practicum [44-47]. There is a growing impression that practicum experiences in language teacher education programs are not sufficient to prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom [48,49].

"How can a teacher educator design a teacher education programme component in such a way that theory is really being integrated with experiences in practice" [50] (p.666) to prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom? Having underlined the dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to teacher education, Tigschelar and Korthagen [50] suggest if a teacher educator is willing to integrate practice and theory, "he or she will have to be able to work with the practical teaching experiences of students, and at the same time to take care of the integration of these with theoretical knowledge" (p.666). Based on insights into the conscious and unconscious sources of teacher behavior, the so-called realistic approach appears as an alternative to previous teacher training approaches.

Originally developed at Utrecht University in Netherlands, the realistic approach to teacher education consists of five basic premises. First, concrete practical problems and the concerns of prospective teachers in real contexts form the basis for realistic approach. Second, reflection by students teachers play an important role in this approach, as it helps to promote transition between action and reflection. Third, the personal interaction between the teacher educator and the student teachers is vital. Fourth, the realistic approach to teacher education follows a bottom-up process taking the individual student teacher into the centre. Through reflection on the gestalt level, which is based on practical experiences, teachers may develop a personal practical theory and then a formal theory, in which one's cognitive network is connected into the formal scientific theory. Fifth, a realistic programme integrates theory, practice and several academic disciplines [51].

The reflection process in the realistic approach is defined by the so-called ALACT model for reflection [52]. The model includes five phases of reflection namely, action, looking back, awareness of essential aspects, creating alternative methods of action, and trial. It is a spiral model where the fifth phase is also the first phase of the next cycle, which means that we are dealing with a spiral model. Realistic approach to teacher education has the potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice with a focus on ongoing process of professional development [53]

The theoretical framework of this study builds upon the realistic approach, which requires the educators to “work with realistic examples taken from the student teacher’s recent practice, and simultaneously attempt to deepen their experiences, link them to theory, and facilitate the use of theory in their teaching practice of tomorrow” [50] (p.666). As noted by Farrel [54] “it is vitally important for language teacher education programs to better prepare English language teachers for the various complications they will face when they enter a new setting with real colleagues, and real classrooms with real students” (p.219). We believe that backed up with a realistic approach teaching laboratories could provide a good alternative to teacher training programs which aim at combining theory and practice. In this context, we tested the use of teaching laboratories for training English language teachers in Turkey, an expanding circle country.

1.2 English Language Teacher Education in Turkey

With a landscape of 780,580 square kilometers both in Europe and Asia, English is the main language for international communication as the world’s lingua franca of science, technology and business in Turkey. Thus, English language teaching policy development plays a crucial role in the education policy of the country. Foreign language teacher education is a key component of foreign language policy developments. With an aim to bring uniformity and standardization to teacher education curricula, the pre-service English teacher education programme followed by Education Faculties all over Turkey was restructured as part of the recent educational reform [55,56]. The new curricula put into practice in the 1998–1999 academic year placed more emphasis on teaching methodology and teaching practice. With some minor modifications in different universities, although the English language teacher education curricula consists of several methodology courses such as Approaches to ELT, Methodology I, Methodology II or Teaching English to Young Learners [57] there are only two courses related to school experience teaching practice: School Experience and Teaching Practice. In their first year, teacher trainees take courses that focus on improving their language skills. In the following years, they are required to take various courses that help to equip them with pedagogic knowledge beside the linguistic competence. In their final year, they need to observe classes either in primary or secondary schools in the context of School Experience, and they plan and teach English language lessons at the same schools under the supervision of a teacher trainer and a mentor as a requirement of Teaching Practice. Overall, it is possible to conclude that following the formal training program with a focus on theory mostly, English language teachers are into the field.

To date, several studies questioned the effectiveness of language teacher education programs in Turkey. Altan [58] investigated 14 English teacher training programmes in Turkey before the recent reform which increased the number of teaching methodology courses and teaching practice hours, and concluded that except one, all English language teacher education programmes had only one practice teaching course. Enginarlar [59] explained, “The availability of only one course coupled with very limited hours of observation and teaching ... lead to a number of problems in the preparation of

students for the teaching profession” (p. 96). Seferoglu [16] in her study found that student teachers feel inadequate in teaching classes, observations are repetitive and redundant, teacher observations are limited and theories provided in courses are not always useful for student teachers in their real teaching experiences. Seferoğlu [57] in another study explored teacher candidates’ reflections on the methodology and practice components of a pre-service English teacher training programme in Turkey. Teacher candidates reported that they did not have enough opportunities for micro-teaching and practice. Karakaş [60], on the other hand, investigated the drawbacks and strengths of the language teacher education curriculum in Turkey and suggested that the program should be updated with the additional microteaching activities and reflective practice components. Cepik and Polat [61] notes that increasing practice hours of pre-service English language teachers will help them learn “how to behave in classroom, how to plan and organize skills, and how to enrich their classroom management strategies” (p.323), and eventually they ‘may learn to teach in towers, not in trenches’ (p.103) [62]. Based on aforementioned studies, it is possible to conclude that most of the teacher training programs in Turkey do not offer a sufficient practice training for teacher candidates where they could experiment with their teaching skills in a real environment. Practice training in Turkey consists of either microteachings carried out at universities that include the guidance of the teacher trainers but lack real students and real challenges of a teaching environment or practicum trainings performed outside the universities that involve real students and the challenges of a real teaching environment but lack a complete guidance of the teacher trainers. Thus, there is more work to be done to improve the practicum component in language education programs in Turkey.

Conforming to the perceived importance of the practicum, there has been ample discussion in the literature on how to integrate practicum into teacher training to prepare pre-service teachers for the real challenges of the classroom. The aim of this study was to investigate pre-service English language teachers’ reflections on a ‘teaching laboratory’ model, which was designed as an attempt to aid pre-service language teachers internalize their theoretical background and experiment with their teaching skills in a realistic practicum setting. We believe teaching laboratory model suggested in this study is

significant in literature on teacher training, since it offers a real environment for preservice teachers where they could experiment their teaching skills, it enables preservice teachers integrate theory and practice, and it supports preservice teachers’ practice under the guidance of the teacher trainers and the mentor within the borders of their university.

Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) What are pre-service English language teachers’ reflections on the ‘teaching laboratory’ model before the application?
- 2) What are pre-service English language teachers’ reflections on the ‘teaching laboratory’ model during the application?
- 3) What are pre-service English language teachers’ reflections on the ‘teaching laboratory’ model after the application?

2. METHODOLOGY

The participants and the research procedure including the design of the teaching laboratory are described thoroughly in this part.

2.1 Participants

As a qualitative design, the present research was a case study which is described as “the detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena” (p. 34) in the *Dictionary of Sociology* [63] A case study “allows for a detailed picture of the particular which often provides for more general principles to be drawn with respect to the phenomenon under examination” [64] and it contributes to our knowledge about teaching as also articulated by Shulman [65]. Thus, case study was considered to be the most suitable design to investigate teaching laboratory application in this research.

The participants were 37 junior university students studying English language teaching at a university in Turkey. Male and female students were distributed equally and they ranged in age from 19 to 23, with a median age of 21. The students received a theory-dominant training through their studies at the university, and none of them experienced teaching English in a real environment prior to the study. They participated in the research as part of a required course for their ongoing studies. All participants were informed about the outline of the research and they gave informed consent.

2.2 Procedure

This study was conducted in the context of the "Community Outreach" Course, a required course for English language teaching students. It gives students the opportunity to get involved in community service in different ways such as collecting books to be donated to the schools in need, readings books to the visually impaired old people. In line with the growing demand for speaking English fluently as a Lingua Franca in Turkey, in this study junior English language teaching students were required to be in charge of the English speaking club event as a community service.

2.2.1 Teaching laboratory

The speaking club event was designed as a teaching laboratory activity, where preservice English language teachers could experiment with their teaching skills. The design of the teaching laboratory model was based on the basic principles of Korthagen et al. [51] realistic approach to teacher education and ALACT model of reflection [66,52] and included five phases: action, looking back, awareness of essential aspects, creating alternative methods of action, and trial. In line with the premises of the realistic approach, the teaching laboratory application was built on personal experiences of students teachers in a realistic setting.

In the context of teaching laboratory, preservice English language teachers led the speaking club event and taught visiting student teachers studying in other departments at the same university. Each group led the speaking club event, which lasted one hour once in a term. There were 20-25 visiting students in each session. The visiting students had different proficiency levels of English, and they were studying at different departments. All sessions were guided and supervised by two instructors and two research assistants from English Language teaching department. The supervising instructors observed the speaking club event each week, and exchanged feedback with prospective English language teachers in the end of the sessions individually. The speaking club event was held every week and participation was voluntary for the visiting students. The main aim of the speaking club was to provide a stress-free environment for the visiting students, where they could practice speaking English with students from other departments and exchange ideas on various topics. As opposed to the typical English

speaking lessons at the university, there was no formal assessment and homework in the speaking club for the visiting students. At the same time, it provided a realistic atmosphere for preservice English language teachers where they could experiment with their teaching skills. Preservice English language teachers were assessed on their performance and their reflection process throughout the speaking club event.

Prior to the onset of the speaking club events, pre-service English language teachers run a needs analysis through open ended questions asked to the participants, and determined the main framework of the sessions under the supervision of two instructors specialised in English language teaching. The needs analysis indicated that the participants wanted to develop their speaking skills in a relaxed environment and achieve the basic requirements to speak English effectively and fluently in formal and informal contexts. The participants also underlined that they preferred fun activities. In line with the requirements of the participants, communicative language teaching approach, which underlines the significance of meaning rather than the forms in language learning, was deemed to be appropriate as the dominant approach for the lessons. Additionally, the students were encouraged to employ both structured output activities such as information gap and jigsaw activities, and communicative output activities such as role plays and discussions to create a communicative and entertaining environment in the classroom. Each week students worked in groups of 3-4 and designed communicative activities focusing on hot topics such as technology, fashion, politics, music, cinema, education as defined by the needs analysis. The students shared and discussed their lesson plans with the mentoring assistants before the session, and made the necessary adjustments. The general model of the teaching laboratory and the steps included is illustrated in Fig. 1.

With an aim to shed light on prospective English language teachers' reflections on the teaching laboratory model, they were asked to reflect on their teaching experiences before, throughout and after their own performance in the form of diaries. Bailey [67] describes a diary study as "a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries" (p. 215). Diaries and journal entries can reveal information about learning processes which are inaccessible to

researchers through direct observation [68] (p. 123). Thus, we preferred to employ diaries as a tool for accessing preservice teachers' reflections in this study. The following questions illustrated in Fig. 2 were employed to prompt reflection, based on the ALACT model [69] (p.14).

The data consisted of prospective English language teachers' diary entries, totalling 111 entries written over the course of speaking club sessions from February to June, 2015. The diary entries were written in English. In order to find out the reflections of the prospective English language teachers on the teaching laboratory

model, the diary entries were analysed for emerging themes [70] by the first and the second authors individually. Following the mutual confirmation of the themes, the authors re-read and coded the diary entries independently. Table 1 indicates the coding scheme for data reduction and explains the themes, categories and sub-categories found. An interrater reliability analysis, which refers to the relative consistency in ratings provided by the raters [71], was performed to determine consistency among raters using the Kappa statistic. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa = 0.98 ($p < .001$), 95% CI (0.504, 0.848), which showed an almost perfect agreement [72].

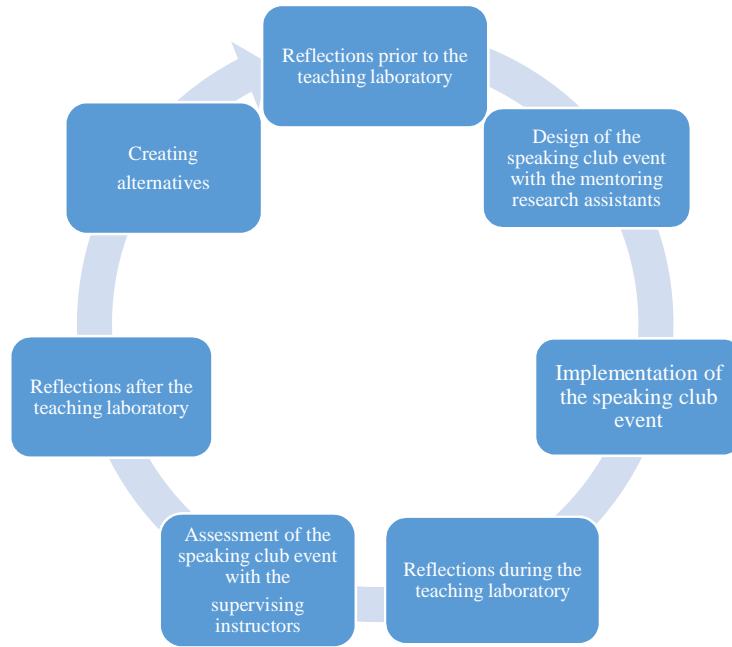


Fig. 1. Teaching laboratory model and the steps included

Prior to the laboratory experience:	During the laboratory experience:	After the laboratory experience:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What did I want to achieve? •What did I want to pay particular attention to? •What did I want to try out? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the concrete events during the laboratory experience? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What is the influence of the context (teaching laboratory)? •What does that mean for me? •What is the problem (or the positive discovery)? •What do I resolve to do next time?

Fig. 2. Prompting questions used for the diaries based on the ALACT model

Table 1. Coding scheme for data reduction

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Revisiting previous gestalts	Concerns	Concerns about teaching skills Concerns about English language skills Concerns about teaching laboratory
Awareness of essential aspects	Awareness of strengths and weaknesses	Awareness of strengths and weaknesses about English language skills Awareness of strengths and weaknesses about teaching skills Awareness of strengths and weaknesses of teaching laboratory
Creating new gestalts	Future implications	Future implications about English language skills Future implications about teaching skills Future implications about teaching laboratory

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first reports the findings of the study, and then presents a discussion based on the findings and the previous studies in literature.

3.1 Results

The main recurring themes that emerged from diary entries of prospective English language teachers concerned student teachers' reflections on the teaching laboratory model prior to, during and after the speaking club sessions.

3.1.1 Before the teaching laboratory application

To start with teachers' diary entries before the teaching laboratory application, most of the entries were concerned with the previous gestalts of the student teachers. The previous gestalts were grouped under 3 headings: Concerns about English language skills, concerns about teaching skills and concerns about the teaching laboratory. The first theme occurring upon an analysis of diary entries prior to the teaching laboratory model was concerns about English language skills and teaching skills. Most of the prospective teachers were worried about their speaking skills in English as in the following student entry: "How can I speak in front of other students who don't know English very well? If I cannot speak well, they will think that I don't know English, too. I remember some of my previous English teachers who were struggling to speak English fluently in the classroom, but failed

and looked ridiculous. I hope the visiting students do not make fun of me." Some of the teachers were also not confident about their teaching skills as explained by one of the teachers, "I am not sure whether I can be a good teacher or not. We've learned how to manage a classroom. I've memorized a long list of classroom management techniques and principles. I will try all."

Additionally, the student teachers had concerns about the general framework of the teaching laboratory model since it was their first experience. One of the prospective teachers explained his concerns about the speaking club sessions in the following way: "I am not sure what to expect from this event. There are a lot of questions in my mind. We had microteachings before, but teaching laboratory is a totally new experience for me." Another teacher added to this point and said, "I am excited, curious and stressful. Laboratories have always frightened me. When I think of a laboratory I can only see bottles, tubes and chemical substance in different colors. Are we going to make some tests on the students?" In brief, the prospective teachers' diary entries before the teaching laboratory application focus on their previous gestalts and indicate that they were concerned about their own speaking and teaching skills, and the teaching laboratory.

3.1.2 During the teaching laboratory application

The next cycle of diary entries focused on student teachers' experiences during the

teaching laboratory application and required them to look back on their action. The emerging theme in this cycle of reflections was awareness of essential aspects. An analysis of these entries highlighted student teachers' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in English language skills and teaching skills. A preservice teacher commented on his experience during the teaching laboratory in the following way: "Teaching laboratory was a very interesting experience for me. I feel so good with my own work. We worked so hard to design our lesson, but when I saw in the (visiting) students' eyes that they were having fun, I felt so satisfied. I had a chance to see my strengths and weaknesses. I realized that I need to work on my speaking skills more." Another student teacher added to this point, and said: "It was an enjoyable and beneficial experience for me. I could teach English to Engineering, Arts and Science students. They were smart, but we were smarter than them. Now, I know what works and what doesn't." Another student teacher entered the following reflection to his diary: "They were quite enjoyable and valuable moments for me. We tried several activities. We had so many materials. I guess we needn't have done that much. The important thing is not to bring a lot of activities, but to do the best with what you have in your hand. Teaching laboratory was very useful for me."

Another recurring point observed in prospective teachers' reflections about the teaching laboratory was awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching laboratory. Though no prevalent weakness of the teaching laboratory was mentioned by the student teachers, they underlined the reality of the teaching environment. Preservice teachers reported that the teaching laboratory was a "real" activity compared to the simulations in the classroom they tried before such as microteachings. Some of the prospective teachers highlighted the importance of teaching real students, and said "There were real people who didn't know English. So, I realized that I need to be real, too. All those "pretending to be" techniques didn't work with real students. Real students had real questions and real expectations from us." Some student teachers suggested that they felt like a real teacher during the applications and said, "I felt like a real teacher for the first time. "It was a great chance for me to see my mistakes and get rid of my fears. When it was my turn, everybody was looking at me. I was in control of everything. I realized that planning is an important part of

teaching." There were also some students who underlined the reality of the experience itself. One student teacher described the reality of the experience and said, "I saw real students and I felt the real air of a real classroom. Real students and real experiment of teaching are really different from our typical classroom presentations. In our classroom presentations, the students are our classmates, and they are ready to appreciate anything we do. In teaching laboratory, on the other hand, all the challenges are real. The biggest challenge for me was time management, for example. I couldn't cover all I wanted to do during my teaching laboratory experience. I need to work on time management, I think." Thus, the prospective teachers believed not only the students and the experience itself but also their roles as teachers were real in the teaching laboratory applications.

3.1.3 After the teaching laboratory application

The third cycle of diary entries consisted of prospective English language teachers' reflections written after the teaching laboratory application. The prevailing theme in preservice teachers' final reflections was creation of new gestalts. Concerning the new gestalts created, preservice teachers mentioned implications about their English language skills and teaching skills. The candidate teachers reported that teaching laboratory changed their ideas about themselves as teachers, and that their self-confidence in their teaching skills and English proficiency improved after having completed the teaching laboratory application. A prospective teacher commented on the teaching laboratory in his final journal entry, and said: "All those hard work, stress and anxiety turned into relaxation and enjoyment at the end of the class. My face turned into like this ☺ and I took a deep breath and I said to myself: "I guess, you could success." Now, I believe myself as a teacher. Another student teacher explained how teaching laboratory helped him to create new gestalts with the following words: "All our fears are replaced with satisfaction. Now, teaching laboratory means organization, hard work and satisfaction for me. After we finished, I was proud of myself."

Additionally, post-application entries also reveal that the pre-service teachers created new gestalts about the teaching laboratory and pointed out some implications on this new model. Preservice teachers reported positive attitudes towards the teaching laboratory and reported that it should continue in future. The following

comment expresses a prospective teacher's feelings after the application: "I would like to see this project in future again, because I think it is so useful for both learners and teachers. I could ask the research assistants any questions I had about the planning part. Our teacher trainers were also in the classroom, and they observed us. The feedback I received from them was really beneficial for me. Although I could see my strengths and weaknesses during the laboratory application, the feedbacks from our teacher trainers also approved my own evaluations. Teaching laboratory should become a tradition and continue for other ELT students. Now, I have a totally new image of myself as a teacher and teaching as a profession in my mind." Another student teacher entered the following comments into his final journal: "As I look back, I can say teaching laboratory reformulated my ideas of teaching through trial and error. I think teaching laboratory was like a trailer of my future teaching life. All students should have an experience like this for their future teaching career."

3.2 Discussion

Teacher inquiry [7,73,74] and reflection [75-77,32] are important in the development of an effective language teaching theory and an appropriate language teacher education. Teachers' diaries especially is a powerful means of tapping into teachers' practicum experiences. Thus, the present study aimed to offer a realistic atmosphere for practicum trainings of preservice English language teachers through "teaching laboratory model" and reveal their reflections on the model via analysis of their diary entries written prior to, during and after the application in a realistic framework.

The diary entries written prior to teaching laboratory applications emphasize student teachers' previous gestalts and underline concerns about their English proficiency, teaching skills and the teaching laboratory. In line with our findings, Hascher, Cocard & Moser [77] also note that student teachers often feel ambivalent when they start a practicum as they are "afraid of failure, of a lack of acceptance by their mentors, of misunderstanding by pupils and of problems with classroom management and discipline" (p. 625). Pre-service teachers' reflections prior to the teaching laboratory conform with the previous literature and suggest that although they received a great deal of input about teaching approaches and methods in their courses for three years, pre-service teachers still

did not feel confident about practicing teaching in real.

The second cycle of reflections on teaching laboratory, on the other hand, focused on awareness of essential aspects. Despite the concerns about language skills, teaching skills and teaching laboratory reported before the onset of the application, interestingly, the students gained an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in English and teaching skills and highlighted the reality aspect in the sessions. Before the teaching laboratory application, prospective teachers participated in microteaching sessions, in which they performed a kind of teaching simulation in front of their classmates playing the role of students. On the contrary, during teaching laboratory practice prospective teachers were responsible for teaching the target language to real students in a real teaching environment. In this context, student teachers in Beck and Kosnik's [78] study explained that being in the role of a real teacher help them develop professionally, because when they are in full charge of the class they had more opportunity "to figure things out", and being "an equal with the teacher," being "considered to be a teacher by the class," enabled them with the freedom to put their "own stamp on the class" and develop their "own style" (p.88). The reality aspect in the teaching laboratory as opposed to the fake simulations, helped prospective teachers to experiment with their teaching skills and gain an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses under the control of their supervisors within the borders of the university.

As an extension of positive feelings and the awareness experienced during the teaching laboratory application, prospective teachers created new gestalts and upheld favourable attitudes towards the application when they finished their sessions, as reported in the reflections entered after the application. Teacher candidates' concerns prior to the teaching laboratories were replaced with self-assurance and contentment after the application. Prospective teachers' diminished concerns and increased self-confidence corresponds to the results of Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Silins, Banfield & Russell [79] and Hascher et al. [77], who investigated students' stress and emotional well-being during and after the practicum experiences. While Murray-Harvey et al. [81] concluded that the students' stress recessed significantly during their second practicum, Hascher et al. [77], found that the positive self-

esteem and emotional well-being of student teachers augmented after the practicum. Student teachers' good mood during the teaching laboratory application and the reality aspect involved in the session complements with the enhancement in self-confidence and well-beings of prospective teachers. It is also possible to say that the teaching laboratory application contributed to teaching knowledge of pre-service teachers and increased their self-confidence. Munby, Russell & Martin [80] underline the significance of practicum experiences for teacher education and states, "knowledge of teaching is acquired and developed by the personal experience of teaching" (p. 897). Teaching laboratories provided pre-service language teachers with a genuine personal experience of teaching in a controlled environment.

In sum, teaching laboratories provided student teachers with various opportunities to learn on the basis of their experiences and the concerns they develop while they are experimenting with teaching. In line with realistic approach to teacher education [51], during teaching laboratories the prospective teachers had the opportunity to reflect on, and sometimes review their previous gestalts and develop a personal practical theory meaningful to them. Practicum-related reflection helped to develop student teachers' practical theories in line with recent studies on teacher education [81,82]. Following the development of personal practical theory, the student teachers were more prone to reach the level of formal theory building.

4. CONCLUSION

Prospective teachers' reflections on the teaching laboratory model have important implications for language teacher education. In many schools around the world students studying in other departments such as law or medicine have their own practicum arenas at school such as laboratories or courts, which enable them to put theory into practice before going out of the school and facing the challenges of a real work environment. Many pre-service teachers, however, do not have a chance to practice their teaching skills in a real environment within the borders of their school prior to their first practicum experience out of their school. Teaching laboratories give prospective teachers a chance to transfer the theoretical knowledge onto practice in a real classroom among real students under the control of their supervisor instructor within the borders of the university.

Thus, they can have a more smooth transition to the real teaching environments out of the university.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. First, the nature of diary studies bring limitations to the study. The data gathered through diary studies are based on subjective perception of learners' experiences [e.g.,83,84]. Additionally, learners may vary in self-awareness and articulateness [85]. Therefore, the data could be idiosyncratic and the results of the present study may not be generalized to other prospective teachers. Future studies can employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods to confirm the findings from the current study. Second, the teaching laboratory was limited to one application for each group in the present study. Thus, each prospective English teacher had only one chance to participate in the application. The number of applications can be increased in further studies. Third, the teaching laboratory model was limited to prospective English language teachers. Future applications can be extended to prospective teachers studying in other departments, as well. Finally, preservice teachers were supposed to teach college level students in the present study. Though teaching college level students is one kind of authentic teaching experience, especially in Turkey, where a significant number of English language teachers teach college level students at universities, future teaching laboratory applications can also include K-12 students to provide a more authentic and diverse teaching experience.

To sum up, there is an increasing demand worldwide for better trained English teachers and for more effective approaches to their education and professional development. Through the efforts of scholars and researchers language teacher education has improved considerably both in breadth and in depth [86]. Teacher educators around the world are developing purposeful and well-designed programs to prepare teacher candidates for the challenges of real teaching environments. Laboratory teaching applications in this respect can give prospective teachers a chance to combine theory and practice and transfer the theoretical knowledge onto practice in a real classroom among real students.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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