Problems of Pre-service Teachers during the Practicum: An Analysis of Written Reflections and Mentor Feedback

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Abstract
Knowledge of pre-service teachers’ problems during the practicum is supremely important to the design and implementation of an effective field experience. Based on this, the current study aimed to explore the most frequent problems of a cohort of English as foreign language (EFL) beginning teachers (n = 60) enrolled in a training program. Results of an in-depth content analysis of post-lesson written reflections (n = 1511), mentor feedback (n = 1624) and end-of-each-practicum reports (n = 337) reveal 23 frequent problems with teaching methodology, class control and time management as the top concerns. Results also indicate that trainees’ development seems to go through five distinct stages. These findings offer for the first time an insight into the most pressing needs of Moroccan EFL pre-service teachers. Interpretations of the results and recommendations are discussed in relation to the context of the study.

Keywords: journal writing, mentoring, practicum, reflection, training

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1. Introduction
While it takes different structures and lengths, there is a consensus in the literature on the practicum’s usefulness to help new entrants to the profession learn the requisite competences. In the case of Morocco, the Ministry of Education has adopted a more school-based model of teacher training whereby prospective teachers spend 60% of their training in the classroom supported by formal mentors. With the advent of this model, it becomes important to explore the frequent problems of beginning teachers. Identification of pre-service teachers’ problems will contribute to an understanding of the difficulties and help optimize the practicum by building in much-needed support. It can also be used for training mentors to help them understand the needs of prospective teachers (Ganser, 1999). However, no research to date has investigated this topic and the present study tries to address this gap and the results will describe for the first time Moroccan EFL teacher trainees’ practicum frequent problems.

2. Theoretical Framework
2.1. Pre-service Teachers’ Concerns
A considerable volume of literature has been published on teachers’ practicum concerns and researchers reported different lists over the years. Yet, regardless of the context of the practicum, the program, and the subjects, Cherubini (2008) concludes, upon an extensive literature review (1969 to 2005), that “new teachers experienced many of the same initial concerns that have been documented about beginning teachers for over 36 years” (p.83). Likewise, based on his review of 83 studies from different countries (1960 to 1984), Veenman (1984) identifies classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students’ work, relationships with parents, class work organization, insufficient materials and supplies and dealing with problems of individual students as the major pre-service teachers’ concerns. Although other researchers reported the same problems in addition to others with little to different rank order, classroom discipline (Berg & Smith, 2014; Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; McNally et al., 1994; Poulou, 2007; Veenman, 1984), time management (Adams & Krockover, 1997; Ballantyne et al., 1995) and teaching methodology (Hoover, 1994; Numrich, 1996) are by far the most serious problems for novice teachers.

2.2. Reflective Teaching
The resurgence of interest in reflective teaching was largely inspired by John Dewey and Donald Schön. Dewey (1933) considers reflective thinking as a systematic, purposeful form of problem-solving both as a process of meaning-making and as a product in terms of the solutions the reflective activity yields. It is his belief that reflection is precipitated by a problematic situation and the practitioner has a genuine purpose to search for a solution along with the adoption of the attitudes of open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and responsibility.

Schön (1983) further develops Dewey’s notion of reflection and embeds it deeply in action. For Schön, reflective practice is essential to the professional development of practitioners’ tacit knowledge (knowing-in-action). Schön distinguishes between two types of reflection and these are reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. While the former implies the practitioner’s reflection
and real time adjustment in the midst of performance, the latter denotes the same process but after the action has happened. Being reflective-in-action is argued to be the ideal end-point of professional practice (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

To explore the problems of beginning teachers during teaching practice, the instruments used were mainly questionnaires and to a lesser extent with follow-up interviews (Cherubini, 2008). Trainees were mostly asked to rate the critical aspects of teaching on a scale of difficulty and the highest-scoring items were considered the most problematic. Journal writing, as a common practice in teacher education to promote reflection and help teachers diagnose their weaknesses and difficulties (Ho & Richard, 1993), was largely used and supported by numerous researchers and believed to be better than just interviews or observations (Numrich, 1996). Guillaume and Rudney (1993), for instance, argue that journal writing provides educators with a subjective lens to uncover the characteristics of the learning process to teach from the inside. Similarly, McDonough (1994) asserts that keeping a journal is a ‘real insider instrument’ and an effective tool for “methodological reflection and professional development” (pp. 63 & 57).

For the purposes of the study, ‘reflection’ is operationalized as the “deliberative thinking about and acting on action with a view to its improvement” (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p.40) and a ‘problem’ as "a difficulty that beginning teachers encounter in the performance of their task, so that intended goals may be hindered" (Veenman, 1984, p.143).

The present study aimed to answer the following two questions:

a) What are the frequent practicum problems of Moroccan EFL pre-service teachers as evidenced by their post-lesson reflections, final reports and mentors’ feedback?

b) Based on their problems, how do Moroccan EFL pre-service teachers develop during the practicum?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The sample of the study consisted of a cohort of 60 high school EFL teacher trainees (aged from 22 to 36) enrolled in a yearlong teacher training program. Candidates join the center after a three-year university coursework study and getting a BA. Successful candidates get employed as public high school teachers.

The training year is built around seven teaching practice (TP) periods that total 19 weeks of classroom teaching (Table 1). During the first TP, trainees pay school visits to get information about structure, administration and counsels. Trainees then study modules at the center before they join their practice schools. In the last 6-week TP, trainees assume complete classroom responsibility. Unlike most practicum practices, trainees rotate schools and mentors with every TP.

3.2. Data collection and Materials
The data (Table 1) consisted of copies of post-lesson reflections, practicum reports and mentor feedback comments. Trainees were required to keep a teaching journal to write their lesson reflections and share it with mentors for feedback. Trainees were also required to submit a report at the end of each TP. Journals were checked (not graded) to make sure trainees go through the reflective process. The material for the study was collected immediately after the last TP.

Table 1: Subjects and Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TP2 (3 weeks)</th>
<th>TP3 (3 weeks)</th>
<th>TP4 (2 weeks)</th>
<th>TP5 (2 weeks)</th>
<th>TP6 (2 weeks)</th>
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<td>Males (45)</td>
<td>186 156</td>
<td>244 231</td>
<td>197 221</td>
<td>167 145</td>
<td>171 137</td>
<td>215 327</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females (15)</td>
<td>48 50</td>
<td>69 59</td>
<td>59 57</td>
<td>53 60</td>
<td>49 41</td>
<td>69 140</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
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<tr>
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<td>MF 1624</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reports 337</td>
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* Trainees’ reflections. ** Mentor feedback

Notably, some trainees did not provide their final reports while some others did not write some post-lesson reflections as they were instructed. Similarly, some mentors on some occasions did not provide any written feedback.

3.3. Data analysis

A qualitative methodology was employed to content-analyze the data to identify the most frequent problems the participants faced during the practicum. The analysis involved six main steps:

1) Dividing the data into TP periods.
2) Reading the data multiple times to determine each reported problem’s frequency.
3) Using a tally to document problems and their causes.
4) Calculating and ranking frequencies of the problems.
5) Categorizing the problems into big themes based on relationship.
6) Examining the change patterns of problems and trainees’ development over the practicum.

Expectedly, some post-lesson reflections and their corresponding mentor comments mentioned the same problem, in which case the problem was counted as one occurrence. The same one-occurrence principle was applied between reflections and TP reports.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Pre-service Teachers’ Frequent Problems

The frequent problems (see Appendix A) were organized into seven main themes and 23 sub-themes.
4.1.1. Teaching Methodology

4.1.1.1. Lesson delivery

Problems related to lesson delivery were the most frequently mentioned during the practicum. These problems ranged respectively from a complete lack of (or insufficient) knowledge of how to proceed through a lesson, a difficulty managing the lesson pace, the inability to create relevant teaching contexts and examples, failure to prompt students to interact with the teacher, managing transitions, insufficiency to lack of checking students understanding and assessing their learning.

A. Inexperience

The results clearly suggested the inexperience of trainees with the practice of teaching and that they were just beginning to learn the ropes like any other new recruits in any other profession. Since the program stipulates that trainees alternate coursework and fieldwork, this mode of training presented further challenges as trainees were required by their mentors to follow the syllabus - which obliged them to teach a skill or a lesson on which they had not yet received any training. A trainee, for example, wrote that:

“First time to teach grammar. It was a great challenge since we didn't cover all the strategies concerning the teaching of grammar.”

This programmatic alternation of training and fieldwork seems to contribute to trainees’ inexperience.

B. Lesson pace management

Many trainees did not seem to have a clear concept of neither lesson pace nor when exactly to shift gears up or down. There was no significant difference between the cases of quick and slow pace management problems (74 and 69). This result shows trainees’ constant search for the appropriate lesson delivery pace.

Three factors were frequently cited to explain the ‘rush-rush’ attitude to deliver lessons, namely 1) too much focus on lesson teaching than on student learning, 2) racing against time, 3) intention to cover more content during the available timespan. For the slow pace cases, trainees’ reflections revealed that the main causes were 1) students’ low proficiency as they had to decrease the pace to over-explain, 2) lack of teaching experience and 3) class control issues.

C. Contextualization and Modeling

Part of this lack of methodology knowledge had to do with trainees’ inability to provide students with relevant contexts and modeling of the language to help them understand easily. For instance, a trainee reported that all the steps to prepare students for a reading lesson were followed but the key words explanation was not contextualized, which made it later difficult for students to answer related tasks. Similar examples included providing ambiguous contexts, absence of effective prompting students to interact and finally taking students’ language knowledge for granted.
D. Managing lesson transitions

Managing effectively transitions among the different activities placed an extra burden on some trainees. The reported cases described how they were unable to create smooth transitions across the activities. The aspects of this problem were the non-use of appropriate language to signal transitions and sometimes a failure to mobilize students by getting their listening attention before starting the next activity. In this respect, a mentor advised a trainee to:

“Try to bridge your activities with smooth and meaningful transitions → part of planning! Telling the class you are “moving to the present” is not well thought. Remember also to attract students’ attention before you start the next activity and make sure they are quiet, on task and not doing something else.”

Just as this problem reflects the inexperience of the concerned trainees, it also shows their tendency to view teaching as discrete, each time focusing on one aspect.

E. Assessment for learning

The insistence to get all the lesson steps correctly seemed to haunt trainees and consequently oriented their attention to themselves and on what they were doing more than on student learning whose assessment was not initially of high priority for some trainees. A trainee regretfully concluded that:

“It’s important while planning to not plan only the lesson content and instructions, but also how to involve the students and prompt them to speak. Unfortunately, I focus a lot on what I have to do and forget about what the students will or could do!”

Asking students whether they have understood and addressing ‘is this clear?’ question was the mainly used pattern of checking students understanding. In other instances, mentors reported a complete absence of any learning assessment. What could be another explanation is that the assessment module is usually taught later in the year.

F. Time management

Time management was a major concern that received much attention till the last TP period. Based on their frequency, inability to cover the whole lesson plan (414), wait time issues (196) and inadequate timing of activities (96) were the main problems of time management.

Trainees found it very difficult to finish all the planned activities. Given the view that any lesson consists of three parts, namely the pre-, while- and post-phases in teaching the four skills or three stages of presentation, practice and production in the case of grammar and communication lessons, trainees expressed their dissatisfaction at their continuous inability to cover the third part of the lesson at best and the second and the third at worst.
Trainees were torn between either respecting each activity’s pre-set timeframe to cover the whole lesson plan or allowing students more time and leaving some activities uncovered. The wait time was reported to be either 1) very long and untimed, 2) short or not enough or 3) not set at all. Trainees varied widely on this concern but the majority provided longer wait time periods, sometimes on purpose and other times out of oblivion.

Additionally, some trainees were unable to estimate exactly the time each activity would take while teaching. The majority tended to time activities shortly and, thus, including more tasks to fit the 50-minute span. The consequence was spending more time on the first activities and failing to cover later ones. Reasons provided ranged from overestimating students’ linguistic level, planning many activities and inexperience in teaching certain lessons.

G. Board management

Inconsistent with the literature, the results suggested that the board use was a highly frequent problem for trainees. It might be the fact that in Morocco, due to the lack of smart boards, photocopying facilities and even, to a lesser extent now, video projectors in the majority of public schools, the blackboard is still the main tool for teachers to transmit a major portion of the lesson.

Board management presented four areas of difficulty and the top difficulty was illegible handwriting. Trainees also had a real difficulty deciding what to write, where to place it and how to present it. Some utilized color chalk randomly while others used only white chalk for everything on the board. Additionally, certain trainees tended to write almost everything on the board, which had an adverse effect on time management and students’ engagement. Conversely, some trainees who, instead of committing certain content to the board, opted for orality.

H. Teacher Talking Time

The data suggested that high TTT levels were due to over-explaining new information to students, repeating and echoing their answers and finally over-emphasizing a unidirectional mode of teacher-student interaction.

There was a general agreement that students’ low proficiency was the main cause to trainees’ high TTT. Using a teacher talk that is complex or contains difficult words and expressions was identified as a second cause in that some had to repeat explanations to make their language comprehensible. In this respect, a trainee wrote that:

“’The only problem I had was their level was low. So I had to over-explain and go slowly through the lesson/tasks. I also still need to work on my elevated language and use simple terms and vocabulary to avoid repeating and raising my TTT.”

Trainees sometimes resorted to over-explanation due to using difficult materials, the nature of lessons and teaching inexperience.

I. Giving Instructions and Questioning

Many trainees found giving clear instructions and/or asking questions a real challenge. The four major causes ranged from 1) improvisation, 2) students’ low proficiency, 3) trainees’ difficulty to
adapt to students’ level and finally 3) trainees’ inability to choose the appropriate timing for instructions and questions.

Lack of clarity was frequently used to describe the unsuccessful instructions and/or questions trainees gave. It was also found that some trainees, instead of rephrasing the difficult instruction/question, kept repeating it with no clear understanding of why students did not interact. Others were aware they needed to produce clear instructions but discovered the task too challenging.

J. Reinforcement

The findings showed that many trainees found difficulty correcting students’ errors. The reported behaviors were a lack of correction to inappropriate or insufficient correction know-how. Mentors reported numerous cases of trainees who did not intervene to correct students’ mistakes as was expected.

Additionally, trainees’ reception of students’ correct answers vacillated from a lack of positive reinforcement, through insufficiency and inappropriateness of thereof to the use of a limited set of non-differential praise expressions. The following extract is a mentor’s plea to a trainee to praise students’ correct answers:

“Try not to forget praising your ss’ correct answers because it’s very encouraging when you do praise, and a lot discouraging when you don’t. Positive feedback encourages ss to participate and work harder.”

Trainees tried to frequently provide positive feedback, but the praise words used were either few, limited or not emphatic enough. Some trainees overused ‘yes’, ‘ok’, ‘good’ and ‘that’s great!’ as sole positive reinforcers. While these words are encouraging, they tend to lose their effective force if over-utilized non-differentially with all answers.

K. Students’ Proficiency

Analysis of trainees’ reflections exhibited serious concern over students’ linguistic level and how the latter constituted a hindrance that created (and blamed for) numerous challenges with other teaching areas. The following extract is illustrative. A trainee stated with a tinge of frustration that:

“One of the biggest challenges I had in this TP was the low level of students. It is highly challenging to teach students who can’t even understand the simplest instructions.”

Trainees adopted three attitudes when reflecting on the issue: defensive, self-critical and realistic. Some pinned the blame entirely on students and defended their inability to teach classes with serious language problems. Others were too self-critical of their inability to adjust their teaching to students’ learning and the third category of trainees were too realistic in their approach
and viewed that their inability to simplify their talk and/or materials was compounded by students’ low proficiency.

L. Use of the first language

The findings of the study showed that the cases of first language (L1) use were limited during the practicum, inclusive of both trainees and students as users. Due to students’ low proficiency and sometimes their lack of interest, some trainees used L1 in the majority of cases to either explain some vocabulary words, to clarify a given rule or to help students (through translation) do tasks successfully. Trainees also used L1 as a class-controlling strategy to stop misbehavior when all else failed.

4.2.2. Classroom Management

4.2.2.1. Class control

Trainees’ struggle to maintain classroom order and to practice teaching, already fraught with challenges, had a negative impact on delivering lessons. Trainees reported how, in their trial to manage misbehavior, they finished with incomplete lessons, de-concentration, loss of temper and, worse still, getting confrontational with disruptive students. The following extract is illuminating:

“The lack of discipline was a big hindrance to the delivery of the lesson. Students did not keep quiet. I had to interrupt the lesson several times. As a result, I lost control and concentration.”

In fact, the primary focus of trainees to teach well was straitjacketed by a forced call to tackle misbehavior.

The data revealed four causes to class control issues, namely (i) students’ indifference and demotivation, (ii) their perception of the trainee’s classroom role, (iii) the mentor’s absence and finally (iv) trainees’ approach to class control. Trainees frequently complained about how hard to teach students who were uninterested, unmotivated, reluctant to learn and defiant at times.

Mentors’ feedback indicated that some trainees lacked effective class control strategies to rein in disruption. Among the trainee-related variables, mentors reported exaggerated nervousness against what mentors qualified as ‘healthy noise’, stopping the lesson at each trivial incident, getting sometimes confrontational with disruptive students, using threats, shouting, scolding, use of games, jokes, using untimely fun and finally the inability to strike a balance between being authoritative and creating a safe learning environment.

4.2.2.2. Class coverage

Consistent with the evidence that trainees were too focused on teaching, they seemed to want to waste less time on how many students were involved in the lesson so long as the delivery was going as planned. Ineffective class coverage cases (232) outnumbered those times when trainees tried to involve students (13). The findings showed that certain trainees, when trying to interact
with students, focused mainly on high achievers and front-seaters. Following is a sample of mentor feedback on this issue.

“Class coverage is still missing in your teaching. Only few students were involved and participated while backbenchers and side benchers were merely watching.”

Students received unequal amount of teacher attention depending on where they sat in the classroom and whether they participated or not. This ineffective class coverage was attributable, by trainees, to several factors, particularly lack of knowledge, class control and class size. Some trainees clearly admitted that they did not know how to engage students in their lessons.

4.2.2.3. Classroom groupings

Classroom management was also a challenging area for many trainees, especially in terms of working with, managing and monitoring groups. Lack of experience, over-preoccupation with content delivery, undesirable students’ noise and over-crowdedness were the chief factors that militated against trainees’ efforts to manage group work. To illustrate, some trainees were frustrated over their inability to manage groups of students in an over-crowded classroom filled with unhealthy noise. They found difficulty with both controlling their noise and monitoring their work. Consequently, grouping students, for trainees, was often synonymous with a jam session of noise generation.

Tolerating some healthy noise when working with groups is expected if under control. This healthy noise was, however, an issue for some trainees who were too strict about class control. A mentor advised that:

“N.B. group work activities are always associated with some kind of noise. So, you should tolerate some healthy noise while dealing with group work activities as there is no way of asking students to work in groups and keep silent meanwhile!”

Over-crowdedness and grouping students seemed to complicate the challenge to master other aspects of teaching and rendered classroom management a complex goal to achieve.

4.2.2.4. Classroom Interactions

Many trainees’ classroom communication was characterized by a teacher-student interaction mode, where TTT outweighed student talking time (STT). While there was far more teacher-student interaction than student-teacher interaction, student-student communication was by far limited. The following excerpt is illustrative:

“T-S interaction overweighs S-S. You should vary your mode of work. Try to increase ss-ss interaction by using more pair and group work. For example, you could have asked students to work in pairs to discuss important changes in the family code.”
This teacher-centered mode of teaching at times escalated into a lecture, which explains, in part, trainees’ high TTT ratios. Trainees seemed content with a more teacher-centered approach to classroom interaction - focusing more on content delivery than on student-student communication.

4.2.2.5. Rapport with students

The data disclosed only a limited number of cases where trainees either had trouble rapport-building or were advised to avoid certain unhelpful behaviors. Mentors employed a variety of adjectives like ‘over-serious’, ‘tense’ and ‘threatening’ to describe the attitude of trainees who struggled with rapport-building. Few trainees adopted a negative attitude towards students and addressed negative comments to them.

4.2.3. Getting Prepared

4.2.3.1. Lesson planning

Due to inexperience and that the lesson planning module is taught late, the task of designing lesson plans constituted a real challenge in terms of content, procedure and form. Content-wise, many trainees tended to include numerous activities, which created problems of time management and at times exhibited a mischoice of materials that were either irrelevant, lengthy, or difficult. Procedure-wise, the main problems were the erroneous succession of steps and the absence of assessment measures. The number one problem, form-wise, had to do with the unclear formulation of the lesson’s objectives. Mentors frequently criticized the generic statement of objectives. Other issues concerned lesson plans that were either un-elaborated, disorganized, contained misspellings or lacked timing for activities.

4.2.3.2. Working with materials

Materials preparation was a trying long process for almost all the trainees. Despite the huge time invested, the process was a worthwhile learning experience for them. Significantly, the results indicated that trainees can be conveniently divided into two groups: those that over-relied on the textbook as the only resource and those who were more emancipative with new materials. The second group was highly critical of textbook materials and used several adjectives like ‘boring’, ‘challenging’, ‘outdated’, ‘poorly designed’, and ‘lengthy’ to describe them.

4.2.4. Reaching Out

4.2.4.1. Voice Projection

The findings revealed that many trainees had a difficulty with projecting their voice over the whole classroom while several others’ speech was either ‘monotonous’, ‘unclear’ or lacked the right intonation pattern. For instance, the following excerpt highlights some aspects of this issue:

“Although your voice was clear, it was not loud enough for ss to hear. Often times it was not audible. Make sure your voice projection is better to have more presence in the class.”

As the teacher’s presence is not only physical but also oral, speaking quietly, quickly and/or monotonously seems to de-emphasize the teacher’s presence in the classroom, which in turn may
lead to misbehavior. A teacher then needs to have an articulate and strong voice that can carry above the noise and over large distances.

4.2.4.2. Classroom Mobility

It was found that the majority of cases related to classroom mobility were about trainees who tended to stick to one spot, especially by the desk or the board. These trainees were encouraged to navigate the classroom and change places as needed. The following extract shows a mentor enticing a trainee to wean himself away from sticking to one place:

“Watch backbenchers. Often times, they are totally isolated from the class. How? Don’t stick to BB, turn around the class. Don’t stick to one place.”

The fact that these trainees were not totally aware of their classroom immobility shows clearly that their whole attention was placed on delivering the lesson more than on anything else. Developing self-awareness of one’s body movement in action seems to need more reflection-in-action practice.

4.2.4.3. Body Language Use

As the teacher is the most important visual aid in the classroom, the findings revealed that trainees seemed to underuse the power of body language to communicate and reinforce the vocal message. There were numerous cases of trainees’ failure to use their body gestures purposefully to support an explanation, explain a vocabulary item, control the class, ask students to do something, etc. Examples included lack of eye-contact, turning one’s back to students and pocketing hands.

4.2.5. Context of Placement

4.2.5.1. Mentor Support

Trainees’ reflections were replete with highly positive feedback about mentors’ support during the practicum. Yet, the mentoring was not without its downsides as the data revealed few cases of dissatisfaction with few mentors on a variety of issues, namely model lessons observation, feedback, and absenteeism.

A. Observation

The program requires of mentors to model varied lessons during each TP’s observation session. Yet, the data disclosed few cases where trainees had reduced observation time (one day instead of two or three), observed the same lesson taught repeatedly, or had, at worst, no observation at all. All the mentors provided model lessons on various skills but few failed to give the same modeling experience to each hosted group of trainees.

B. Feedback

It was found that trainees preferred to receive plenty of feedback that is both written and oral, more performance-based than content-based, specific and helpful, honest and constructive, and encouraging and motivating. Almost all mentors provided generous feedback except for a few
cases when trainees expressed a need for it but it was either not provided or communicated in a disagreeable form. While trainees thrive on positive feedback, positive-but-oral-only feedback was not of much help to them. In fact, it, regardless of its sincerity, puzzled trainees as to how they were doing. The following reflection is illustrative:

“As the lesson was successful, Mr. [name of mentor] didn’t write anything again in my teaching journal about the lesson. He only provided oral feedback that was all praising and positive. I really don’t know how to feel about this. I hope he is not saying so without meaning it as I find it strange to be praised by him all the time.”

It is therefore likely that positive feedback, be it written-only or just oral, may not be of much help if not coupled with an emphasis on specific areas that needed attention.

The data suggested that some trainees were provided with ‘very negative’ and ‘discouraging’ feedback at times when the reverse was badly needed. On this issue a trainee wrote:

“I totally find myself in positions where I was not before in the last practicums. For example, in this practicum, I succeeded in reaching the production stage easily without any constraints and successfully managed to engage almost 80% of students in my classroom activities. The responsiveness of the students was enough to demonstrate the success of my lessons. Yet, the mentor criticized the seemingly relaxed pace, and the logical steps I followed in teaching certain elements and skills.”

This trainee felt demoralized at his mentor’s unpathetic feedback that failed to put his performance in its correct developmental perspective. It follows that mentors need to be aware of trainees’ needs at different stages of their development.

C. Absenteeism

Some trainees reported that their mentors were sometimes either absent during some of the lessons or observed only parts of them. This absence (complete or partial) had a negative impact on trainees’ performance in terms of feedback and class control. The role of the mentor in the classroom is important, not only as a second pair of eyes but also as an authority that deters students’ misbehavior and allows the trainee an optimal practice environment.

4.2.5.2. Practice School

The findings suggested that when the mentor’s classroom is under-equipped, trainees’ practice teaching is seriously crippled even when appropriate mentoring was provided. Specifically, the data highlighted three main problems that had to do essentially with (i) deficient classroom
equipment, (ii) the over-crowdedness issue along with students’ indiscipline and (iii) the remoteness of the school location. Classroom-wise, the top complaint was about the non-availability of a video projector - a factor that limited the use of ICT materials. They also complained about the lack of loudspeakers, enough classroom tables, color chalk and the absence of plug sockets for the projector in some of the classrooms.

School-wise, the fact that three practice schools are located remotely from the training center seemed to pose serious problems for trainees who described the trip to and back as ‘long’, ‘exhausting’ and ‘money-consuming’. The commute’s expense was a heavy burden on the majority, if not all, given the often-delayed meager scholarship. Regardless of its delay’s reasons, this practice does not serve the greater purpose of the new reform in teacher education.

4.2.6. Content Adequacy

Analysis of mentor feedback revealed that some trainees still had gaps in their language knowledge. The reported errors related to mispronunciation, lack of knowledge and/or confusion of some grammar rules, provision of some inaccurate vocabulary definitions and various misspellings on the board.

4.2.7. Self-concerns

Unsurprisingly, it was found that trainees felt mostly stressed, nervous or anxious and lacked self-confidence when they either first started the practicum or met their classes for the first time. In fact, trainees seemed to harbor self-doubts about their competence through the first teaching experience. As such, it is strongly suggested that pre-service teachers are highly preoccupied with their self-concerns more than with teaching or students at the beginning of their practicum (e.g. Fuller, 1969; Hoover, 1994). The following excerpt is typical:

“This is the first session that I teach in my training as a whole. I felt very nervous and agitated. This was reflected in the way I treated students in a very firm manner, fearing that they will feel my restlessness. As far as the lesson was concerned, I can tell it was victorious especially if we consider that it is my first time that I teach the whole session.”

It was a struggle for the trainee to establish her authority as an able teacher in front of students and do her best to maintain self-composure and class control. The lesson was ‘victorious’, which indicates the trainee’s success to lift the challenge of controlling her emotions, managing the class and eventually doing a satisfactory performance.

4.3. Question 2: Developmental Changes of Trainees’ Concerns

While the majority of problems were completely resolved or dropped in frequency, the issues of methodology, class control and time management persisted.

Based on the analysis of problems, the development of Moroccan EFL pre-service teachers seems to consist of five general and interdependent stages (Figure 1). During the initiation stage,
trainees are introduced to the school buildings, counsels, administration staff members’ functions, daily administrative routines and observation of teachers at work. Trainees are encouraged to ask questions and complete a range of observation grids to write a report about their visit. This stage can be described as worry-free in terms of practice teaching.

![Diagram of the Five-stage Conceptual Model of Trainees’ Development](image)

**Figure 1: The Five-stage Conceptual Model of Trainees’ Development**

In the *self-establishment* stage, trainees get paired with their mentors for their first practicum period. During this stage, trainees’ main concerns seem to center on survival issues like facing an audience and trying to overcome their first-encounter-with-students anxiety, stress, fear, and feelings of lack of self-confidence, adequacy and authority. Given the rotational nature of the practicum, these self-concerns recur with every TP and new classes but with less intensity thanks to experience and successful performances.

In the *discrete teaching* stage, trainees seem over-concerned with specific aspects of teaching that are too challenging for them. With each teaching experience, trainees focus exclusively on one problem at a time, trying different strategies and workarounds to resolve it. During this stage, trainees tend to view teaching as made up of discrete skills that have to be mastered separately.

In the *holistic teaching* stage, trainees start to view teaching as a holistic experience - its once-discrete parts need to work in unison for better results. For instance, some trainees clearly realized that when teaching a class with a majority of low achievers, they tended to over-explain things which resulted in high TTT ratios that in turn affected classroom interaction and time management. This and similar ‘domino effect’ scenarios were the main driver of trainees’ holistic perception of teaching.
In the final learner-focused teaching stage, trainees further realize that effective teaching is not only staging a successful performance, but rather a performance that maximizes student learning. Trainees, at this stage, start to believe that effective teaching should necessarily include an awareness of students’ differing needs, interests and learning styles. Aware of this, other examples demonstrated trainees varying activities to match students’ proficiency and make a wider student appeal.

It is noteworthy that these stages are not linear but highly recursive in that some trainees sometimes seem to be in more than one stage in one time, and that the amount of time trainees spend in each stage may differ widely dependent on a variety of personal, contextual, economic or professional factors. Yet, despite trainees’ idiosyncratic differences, the general tendency and the characteristics of each TP strongly support this five-stage developmental model.

5. Implications and Recommendations for Teacher Education

The majority of trainees’ problems in this study are generally similar to those reported by other researchers in the literature review, especially methodology of teaching, disruptive behavior and time management that were ranked as the most frequently occurring problems. It can be concluded that although the specific order varies, Moroccan EFL beginning teachers’ practicum concerns are comparatively similar to their counterparts elsewhere.

Building on the reported problems, the following is a suggested 10-item set of high-priority needs of trainees during the practicum. They seem to have the need for:

1. a supportive and adequately equipped practice environment.
2. positive emotional feedback to boost self-confidence, especially at the outset of the practicum.
3. guidance on planning lessons, presentation of content and using materials.
4. managing classroom discipline and time.
5. using the blackboard effectively.
6. motivating students.
7. enhancing language awareness.
8. mentor modeling varied lessons.
9. body language and mobility awareness.
10. a suitable scholarship to the various challenges (e.g. materials and transportation).

The evidence from this study suggests that the way how teachers are selected to be mentors needs to go beyond the exclusive consideration of the candidates’ qualifications to adopt an approach that considers not only the candidate mentor but also the location of the school and the classroom where trainees will practice teaching.
The other recommendation is that mentors need training on how to mentor. The ministry places a greater emphasis on formal mentoring but when mentors are selected, they do so with relatively little understanding of what mentoring entails.

6. Conclusion

One significant finding of the study is the identification of 23 most frequent problems representing seven general themes. While the majority of problems were somehow overcome by the end of the practicum, teaching methodology, class control and time management were still unresolved. The second major finding was the theoretical conceptualization of a dynamic five-stage developmental model of trainees’ pedagogical knowledge based on their expressed practicum concerns. The current findings add substantially to our understanding of Moroccan pre-service teachers’ pressing needs and their early development. Reflective journal writing has also proved to be a rich source of insider information on trainees’ teacher learning processes and an effective instrument for data collection from a subjective lens.

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References

Problems of Pre-service Teachers during the Practicum

Moussaid & Zerhouni


## Appendix A  A Summary of the Results: 23 Most frequent Problems of Moroccan EFL Pre-service Teachers

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* Ranking is based on each problem’s overall frequency.