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Navigating the Learning Curve : Trainees' Perspectives on Their Practicum Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the overall practicum experience of 197 teacher trainees in a school-based teacher training program and their professional development into being future teachers. In particular, the research examined, through a qualitative analysis of questionnaire-collected trainee feedback, the key elements of the practicum that influenced their learning to teach and those elements that had less impact. The study also explored the main challenges and problems teacher trainees faced during the practicum and how effectively the experience had prepared them to meet the demands of teaching. The findings revealed that feedback was both the most impactful aspect of the practicum when balanced and constructive and the least impactful when judgmental and overly negative. Time management and classroom management were found to be the top two issues that persisted with trainees till the end of the practicum. Teacher trainees recommended that teacher training programs need to extend and prioritize practice over theory instruction for effective teacher preparation.

Keywords : Classroom practice, practicum experience, professional development, teacher education programs, teaching practice, teacher training, teaching challenges

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Introduction

The field of foreign language teaching has witnessed tremendous changes worldwide over the past decades regarding the theories of language learning and teaching, the methodologies and the materials adopted, and the assessment procedures followed to measure teaching and learning outcomes. Equally, this change has created a pressing need for the development of effective pre-service teacher education programs to qualify prospective teachers to ensure educational reform measures are well implemented. Teacher education is often viewed as the cornerstone of the success of any educational system that aspires to produce high levels of student engagement, school achievement, and market employability.

Pursuant to all these changes, English Language Teaching (ELT) in Morocco has also witnessed a number of paradigm shifts as a ripple effect of what happened elsewhere. The focus has generally shifted from the teacher-centered approaches towards a more learner-centered teaching methodology and communicative materials. The emergence of the Standards-Based Education reform movement in the United States during the 80s had greatly affected the teaching practices worldwide (Zagranski, 2007). These changes have greatly affected ELT in Morocco as well. The adoption of the Standards-Based Education approach (SBE) for teaching English at all high school levels in 2007 and the recommendation of the Competency-Based Education approach (CBE) for teaching English in middle schools in 2009 remain the most noticeable changes about ELT in Morocco over the last decade. The Moroccan Ministry of National Education published then two booklets (The Educational Programs and Guidelines for English Language Teaching in Middle and High Schools in 2007 and 2009 respectively) overviewing the SBE and CBE approaches and outlining the rationale behind their adoption. The two booklets also provide teachers with how-to guides to teach and assess the four skills along with the general curricular goals for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Morocco.

These guidelines were drawn up in accordance with the principles set forth in the National Charter for Education and Training (NCET) adopted in 1999. The 133rd Article of the same Charter insisted on serious reconsideration of all the aspects relative to teacher training programs and approaches and called for the integration of all the various regional training centers to mobilize and rationalize all the available resources with a view to enhancing the quality of pre- and in-service teacher training experiences.

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This last call saw its translation into the creation of a national network of what has come to be known as CRMEFs or "Les Centers Régionaux des Métiers de l'Education et de la Formation" (Regional Centers for Education Careers and Training) in the last year within the ten-year timeframe of the implementation of the Charter (2000-2009) and the beginning of the Ministry of Education's Emergency Plan (2009-2012). These regional centers were created by a ministerial decree (N° 2.11.672) in December 2011, and among the most important new ideas it brought about to these centers, according to Articles 5 and 24, is its overemphasis on the practical side of pre-service teacher training in that teacher trainees need to spend a sizeable proportion (60%) of their training year in real-life classroom settings practice teaching the different aspects of the language to develop the requisite professional competences before they actually start teaching. This professional qualification of would-be teachers takes place within the framework of what is called 'la formation en alternance' or 'training in alternation'. Otherwise stated, teacher trainees are required to take modular theoretical classes at the training center and their coursework is punctuated by teaching practicums in practice schools under the guidance and support of experienced classroom practitioners called 'mentors'. These practicum periods vary in length and structure; from individual days to blocks of weeks.

In contrast to the former almost all-theory-based pre-service training program in which high and middle school teacher trainees had to study all year long until the end of the year to do a one-week observation followed by a four-week teaching practicum, the new training program is based on an alternate practical-theoretical-practical approach in the sense that trainees start their training at the center for two or three weeks and then they leave for practical training in host schools from one to two weeks and then back to the center.

The present study then came to explore the practicum experiences of 197 teacher trainees under the new model of teacher training in the country.

1. Literature Review

2.1 The Practicum in Teacher Education

2.1.1 Background and significance

As an attempt to better prepare prospective teachers and equip them with the necessary competences, most teacher education programs worldwide have a built-in practicum component that allows teacher trainees to engage with real teaching in placement schools under the mentorship of a cooperating teacher, whose instrumental role in the training process has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Ballantyne et al., 1995; Pitton, 2006).

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While the practicum in the literature takes different structures and lengths, there is a consensus on its usefulness to provide initiation and hands-on experience to help the new entrants to the teaching profession develop a reflective practice and forge the knowledge, attitudes, and competences requisite to function effectively as language teachers (Richards & Crookes, 1988). It also grants pre-service teachers, among other things, an important learning opportunity to test out the application of their freshly gained theoretical and practical pedagogical knowledge in a natural classroom setting and to learn from their own and others' practice (Hobson et al., 2009; Richard & Farrell, 2011).

Based on the literature reviewed, the practicum is generally defined as the period of time would-be teachers, either individually or in groups, spend practice-teaching (either over several periods or in one block) in an authentic school-based context (either in one school or more) in the company of and under the guidance of a cooperating teacher referred to as a teacher mentor. A variety of terms are used to refer to the practicum, namely 'practice teaching', 'teaching practice', 'professional experience', 'clinical experience', 'student teaching', 'field experience', 'field practice', and 'field placement'. While these appellations differ, they basically point to the same component of a teacher preparation program that requires of its teacher trainees to spend a certain amount of their training time at partner schools to "learn the tools of their trade through teaching practice" (Husbands, 1997).

As a powerful "initiation into 'teacherhood'" (McNally, Cope, Inglis, & Stronach, 1994, p. 219), the practicum period represents a key phase in a beginning teacher's career. Feiman-Nemser (1983, 2001), one of the earliest researchers to trace teacher learning and development, conceptualized a four-phase professional development continuum. The first phase (pre-training) represents the early influences that shape prospective teachers' conceptions about teaching and learning. The second phase (preservice) is the time prospective teachers go to practice schools for the field practice. The third phase (induction) represents the first three years of actual teaching. Finally, the fourth phase (in-service phase) describes how teachers look up to and seek continuing professional development.

Similarly, Odell, Huling, and Sweeny (2000) depicted the teacher development continuum in similar stages, save that they dropped the Feiman-Nemser's pre-training stage and their concept starts with the preservice stage, followed with the induction and in-service stages and ends with the renewal stage. It is suggested that each phase has a unique agenda, specific concerns, challenges as well as specific support needs. It is also suggested that teachers somehow move in a predictable manner irrespective of their varying speeds, needs, and concerns.

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While Odell et al. (2000) considered crossing the induction phase as the survival gate to later stages, others viewed the practicum as the most significant time and a 'rite of passage' (White, 1989) to any stages that come later on.

According to the Moroccan Ministry of Education's referential guide to the professional practicum situation (2012), the practicum is viewed as an integral part of the training curriculum and not as a complementary addition to the preparation of Moroccan pre-service teachers. In fact, the guide stipulates that trainees are to spend more than 60% of the training time in partner schools. The guide divides the practicum into several periods referred to as 'stations' throughout the year and considers the practicum opportunity as the 'real training' (p. 5). The guide stresses elsewhere that the practicum is not only a site to apply and consolidate acquired theoretical knowledge but it is also an opportunity to develop new understandings, new competences, and new professional knowledge and practices.

The five goals set forth in the guide (p. 5) for the practicum periods are respectively (1) to stress the fact that the responsibility for the training is jointly shared between the CRMEF and the partner schools, (2) to support the trainees' gradual acquisition of the professional competences of planning, management, and assessment of teaching and learning along with doing action research and managing a project, (3) to enable trainees to know closely learner profiles, (4) to develop the trainees' skills of reflective analysis of the professional practices, and finally (5) to allow trainees to practice the act of teaching imbued with all its pedagogical, institutional, and social dimensions.

The importance of the practicum component in the new model of teacher training in Morocco is clearly manifested in the ministry of education's over-emphasis of the practical side of preparing prospective teachers through the adoption of a practice-theory-practice paradigm to training. This latter allows trainees to alternate coursework at the training center with fieldwork in partner schools. This movement towards a more school-based model of teacher training is, the ministerial guide explains, based on the experiences that the training centers have accumulated over the years as well as the new developments in the field of scientific research and teacher education curricula around the world. 'Constructivism', 'Construction of knowledge', 'reflective practice and analysis' are three constructs that heavily permeate throughout the mentoring guide for the practicum.

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This ministerial reform is underpinned by the conceptual paradigm in teacher education at the turn of the century that shifted the focus from the content of training programs in the form of 'recipe knowledge' (Booth, 1993) or 'received knowledge' (Clarke, 1995) to a sharp focus on the leaning-to-teach process of developing professional knowledge in action and experiential learning (Wallace, 1991). While the constructivist theory is viewed as a theory of knowing more than a theory of pedagogy learning, teacher education programs have tried to improve upon the limited practice and view of learning to teach as the trainees' acquisition and application of technical tips and advice offered by a master teacher in the field, to a more trainee-owned process of learning to teach in a socially-situated context (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). Teacher trainees were no longer seen as passive recipients of top-down technical knowledge and instructions, but as active participants that use problem-solving and reflective thinking skills to deconstruct and construct their professional practice and knowledge in continuous and supportive collaboration with the teacher mentor.

Since teaching is a profession where newly qualified teachers are expected to assume immediate full responsibility and accountability for student learning in the same way as practicing teachers, they need to be provided with a powerful practicum experience to prepare them to meet their professional obligations (Pitton, 2006). The fact that teacher trainees are granted, under the new pre-service teacher training model, greater practice time for 'mentored learning to teach' (Feiman-Nemser, 2012) is not haphazard nor a luxury. It is rather a necessity evidenced and strongly supported by substantive findings from a considerably growing body of theoretical and empirical research. Research indicates that acquiring pedagogical knowledge is one thing and applying it is completely another area of trial, practice, frustration, anxiety, and self-discovery learning (Richards & Farrell 2011). In this respect, the practicum experience has been identified as a core component of pre-service teacher education (Morehead, Lyman, & Foyle, 2003; Pungur, 2007) and "a major site for teacher learning" where student teachers reflect on language learning and teaching theories and develop "locally appropriate responses" (Legutke & Ditfurth, 2009, pp. 210-211). The field experience also allows pre-service teachers to "simulate or approach the real teaching situation under sympathetic supervision" (Gower, Phillips, & Walters, 2005, p. 1) and helps them develop a deeper awareness of their weaknesses and strengths as language teachers (Chiang, 2008).

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Similarly, through their practicum, prospective teachers are clinically enabled to overcome the 'reality shock' of the first year of teaching (Tomlinson et al., 2010), breaking away from the 'unrealistic optimism' beginning teachers tend to harbor prior to actual teaching (Walkington, 2005; Weinstein, 1988), and to develop a more realistic conception of what teaching is and what it means to be a language teacher (Richards & Farrell, 2011). Significantly, Gebhard (2007) argued that the groundwork for a sustained in-service continuing professional development is laid early in the practicum experience where pre-service teachers are initiated to the use of a variety of professional development activities and tools like seminar discussions, action research, keeping a portfolio, mentoring, and self-observation journaling. It is argued that new teachers with field-based pre-service training background tend to exhibit more accomplished practice and operate like teachers with several years of experience behind them (Hammerness et al., 2007; Huling, 1998).

Since teachers, within the context of pre-service training, are obviously expected to acquire not only effective teaching competence but also nurture sufficient confidence in that competence, research findings have suggested that through school-based mentoring, prospective teachers receive emotional and psychological support that boosts, in turn, their self-confidence and minimizes their self-doubts (Hobson et al., 2009). By extension, for Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) teacher efficacy, defined as a teacher's "judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (p. 783), has been repeatedly associated with the teachers' behavior in the classroom, the effort they exert, the goals they set, and the effect they have on their student learning and engagement. In the same way, Klassen et al. (2011) noted that "teacher efficacy—the confidence teachers hold about their individual and collective capability to influence student learning—is considered one of the key motivation beliefs influencing teachers' professional behaviors and student learning" (p. 21). For example, teachers with higher teacher efficacy have been reported to exhibit a greater commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992), greater satisfaction in teaching, and experienced less stress than those with lower teacher efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy & Hoy, 1998). Ross (1992) has found that student achievement was higher in classrooms of teachers who had higher levels of teacher efficacy beliefs and had frequent contacts with their coaches – one tool of mentoring. In addition, with reference to pre-service training, Charalambous, Philippou, and Kyriakides (2008) suggested that the practicum experience and interaction with mentors had a significant effect on prospective teachers' efficacy beliefs.

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Based on the above, it seems clear that the school-based practicum is not a wasteful break from routine theory-laden coursework but a part and parcel of the whole training program and a platform where "theory meets practice and idealism meets reality" (Fallin & Royse, 2000, p. 19). It is also viewed as an essential experiential learning practice that student teachers need to undergo and one which has multiple benefits and goals.

2.1.2 Benefits and goals

The literature shows that the practicum experience yields a variety of benefits and is set up for a range of goals. Hammerness et al. (2007), for instance, pointed out that pre-service teachers tend to hold a number of misconceptions about teaching and learning and the practicum is a beneficial opportunity to help these teachers address this issue. Of these misconceptions, they explained, are the beliefs that teaching is 'easy' and that learning is a simple mechanical teacher-to-learners 'transfer of information'. Once they start to learn to teach with these over-simplistic understandings, pre-service teachers have a tendency to over-assimilate new knowledge about teaching and learning without deeper understanding and reflection. Feiman-Nemser (2012) stressed, in this respect, that:

The images and beliefs prospective teachers bring to the preservice preparation serve as filters for making sense of knowledge and experiences. They may also function as barriers to change by limiting the ideas that teacher education students are able and willing to entertain. (p. 108)

It is argued that these past beliefs about teaching and learning, if not appropriately attended to conceptually and behaviorally during the practice teaching, create, during the first year of teaching, a reality shock, which is defined by Veenman (1984) as "the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life" (p. 143).

Other attested benefits of the clinical experience pertain to observation, feedback, and role modeling. In this respect, Brooks and Sikes (1997) stated that observing master teachers and being observed followed with analytic feedback about the observed lesson(s) is an essential feature of the practicum. It is also reported that the practicum provides trainees with not only opportunities to observe experienced teachers but also to deconstruct and understand their effective practice (Husbands, 1997). The practicum also allows trainees to observe their host mentors model professionalism across the various aspects of their role as class teachers (Horn, Metler-Armijo, 2011).

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In her comprehensive review of the literature regarding practicum programs in the USA, Canada, and Hong Kong, Pungur (2007) found that the field experience is the time when student teachers learn how to write lesson plans and develop in- and on-action reflective practice. It is also the time when the trainees' professional teacher identity or persona as language teachers starts to emerge and takes shape (Husbands, 1997; Santoro, 1997; Walkington, 2005); and the school-based context further enables them to engage in professional dialogues with mentors and gives them a sense of belonging to the teaching community (Hobson et al., 2006; Clarke, 2008).

In an evaluation of an integrated practicum component in an EFL teacher training program (Chiang, 2008), it was found that the practicum was "the most valuable of the course" in that it was an 'eye-opening' and 'inspiring' experience for teacher trainees. The latter grew more confident in their ability to teach and discovered that teaching is more complex than having a good pronunciation of English sounds. Similarly, Booth (1993), examining the views of 45 high school teacher trainees on the practicum using two questionnaires, found that the majority (77 %) 'felt very well prepared' and their confidence in preparing lessons, teaching materials, and using a variety of teaching methods increased remarkably as a result of the field experience and the effective mentoring support they got during the process.

Regarding the varied goals of the practicum, Table 1 details a representative sample of goals for the pre-service field experience as reported by four well-known researchers in the field of teacher education. This researcher created this table based on two main criteria, namely (1) the known authority of the four researchers in the field and (2) that in the entire bulk of literature reviewed, these four lists of goals were the most pertinent attempts to be specific and exhaustive.

As a preliminary analysis of the table, it seems that there is a great overlap among the four lists of goals. The researchers provide similar specific goals despite the different wordings used to state them and their different number. The other observation relates to the fact that Feiman-Nemser, Richards and Farrell tended to phrase their goals in more or less general terms, while Richards and Crookes, Gower, Phillips and Walters were too specific in their formulation.

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Table 1*Goals of the Practicum*

Authors	Practicum Goals
Richards & Crookes (1988, p. 11)	• To provide practical experience in classroom teaching; • To apply instruction from theory courses; • To provide opportunities to observe master teachers; • To give feedback on teaching techniques; • To develop increased awareness of personal teaching style; • To develop lesson-planning skills; • To develop ability to select/adapt materials; • To become familiar with specific methods (e.g., the Silent Way).
Gower et al. (2005, pp. 1-2)	• To allow you to simulate or approach the real teaching situation under sympatheti supervision; • To provide you with an opportunity to try out techniques: • To provide an arena for assessment; • To provide you with an opportunity to have your teaching evaluated and constructiv criticized; • To provide an opportunity for you to get used to being observed (as observation often forms part of teacher appraisal in many teaching institutions); • To encourage development of criteria for self-evaluation and self-awareness; • To create a situation of gradually increased freedom so that you become increasingly more independent — able to make decisions about what you teach and how you teach; • To help you develop your own teaching style; • To provide you with exposure to real learners, their learning problems and the factors which influence their learning; • To expose you to students at a range of levels and to develop an understanding of the differences of approach required; • To develop your sense of responsibility for your students.
Richards & Farrell (2011, p. 26)	• develop the discourse skills of a language teacher; • Develop the identity of a language teacher; • Develop a repertoire of teaching skills; • Learn how to apply professional knowledge; • Develop an understanding of how learning is shaped by context; • Develop the cognitive skills of a language teacher; • Develop learner-focused teaching; • Learn how to theorize from practice.
Feiman-Nemser (2012, pp. 108-111)	• Analyzing beliefs and forming new visions; • Developing subject matter knowledge for teaching; • Developing understandings of learners and learning • Developing a beginning repertoire of reform-minded teaching toolkit; • Developing tools to study teaching.

A second critical reading of the various goals listed in the table reveals that the teacher trainee, the learner, the teaching practice, and the context are the four major axes that the practicum goals seem to target. These axes seem to represent four basic features of the practicum situation and can be schematized as follows:

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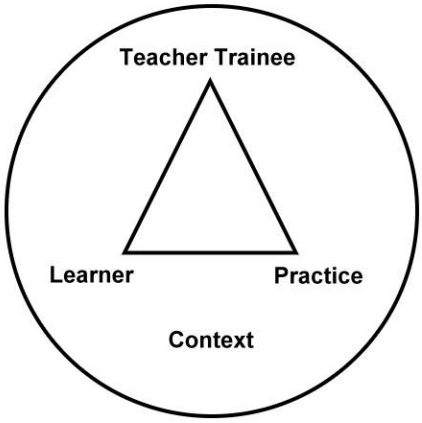

Figure 1 The Practicum Situation

The objectives established for teacher trainees during the practicum (Axis 1) aim to foster the development of their cognitive and communicative abilities while shaping their professional identity as language educators. These goals also include enhancing their self-awareness and reflective evaluation of their individual teaching styles, as well as cultivating a sense of autonomy and independent decision-making skills. Concerning the learner and learning (Axis 2), the practicum goals are to expose teacher trainees to real students in order to know more about their language needs, problems, learning styles, and the various potential factors that may affect their learning. The goal is also to allow trainees to develop learner-centered understandings of the varying levels of student proficiency and the techniques of how teaching can be differentiated to attend to all levels. With respect to the teaching practice (Axis 3), the aim is (1) to enable teacher trainees to develop a teaching toolkit and a variety of practical skills like lesson planning and materials development and adaptation, (2) to familiarize them with the different teaching methods and learning assessment procedures, and finally (3) to give them the supportive environment to experiment with new techniques and apply newly acquired knowledge. The goals related to the context (Axis 4) have to do with (1) situating the practice in a natural classroom setting (students, classroom, school, etc.), (2) providing teacher trainees with school-based mentor support, (3) allowing them to observe experienced teachers in action and be equally observed and be given assessment feedback about their teaching practice, and finally (4) helping them acquire the necessary tools to research the teaching-learning context and develop their own theories of practice.

While the above goals set the way for navigating the practical experience, the list below, developed by Gower et al. (2005, p. 3), states the end results of a teaching practice whose goals have been successfully accomplished. Based on the list, language teacher trainees, by the end of the practicum, should be:

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- more aware of the language they are teaching;
- more aware of the factors that aid or impede learning in the classroom;
- in control of basic classroom management skills;
- able to plan a series of lessons, perhaps based around published materials which are relevant to what the students need to learn;
- able to present, practice, and revise language;
- able to use activities and materials that develop language skills;
- able to help students develop their awareness of how they learn and what learning strategies suit them; and finally
- able to think critically and creatively about their own lessons.

It is interesting to note that the list is entirely based on the ultimate goal of any teaching effort, which is learning. The list seems to highlight the view that the practicum is basically an opportunity to learn to teach but it is also totally geared towards preparing teachers who are conscious of their primary responsibility to help their students learn using the most suitable methods, techniques, and materials. As discussed in the literature, the mentor teacher is considered a major source of support to teacher trainees in their learning to teach journey and the greatest influence on the quality of the field experience (Posner, 2005).

2. Methodology

3.1 Research design

As the present research sought to collect data relative to the personal views, attitudes, and perceptions of teacher trainees on their lived experiences of the new pre-service school-based practicum, it adopted a qualitative research design with the questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. The choice for the questionnaire as a survey research instrument to obtain specific written information from the respondents was based mainly on its suitability to answer the study's questions as well as for its numerous merits in comparison with other research instruments. According to Sarantakos (1998), for example, questionnaires, unlike interviews or observations, are less expensive and unaffected by the presence of the researcher; they can produce large amounts of quick results at low effort and be completed at the respondent's convenience, allowing more reflection time on the answers. They also allow the researcher to access a wider coverage of respondents including those subjects who like to write more than talk about given issues.

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Additionally, unlike interviews, questionnaires, as one of the most commonly used methods to research educational issues, do not only offer greater assurance of anonymity that leads to the generation of more frank answers, but they are also a stable, consistent, and uniform measure without variation, allowing for easy comparability between respondents' answers (Muijs, 2011).

3.2 The instrument

The questionnaire contained 6 open-ended questions and one Likert item (Q6). While the aim of the questions was to collect information about trainees' perceptions of the overall practicum experience and its resultant impact on their training to be a teacher, the Likert item asked trainees to rate the degree of their overall preparedness to take up the teaching job.

Given the total number of teacher trainees (n = 225) who had been trained at our training center, 197 responded to the survey questionnaires with a response rate of 92.5%. It is noteworthy to mention that 13 ex-trainees were unreachable despite repeated tries to contact them via close friends. Additionally, 15 other ex-trainees were sent a participation consent request message to participate in the study but for unknown reasons they did not respond to the questionnaire. A gentle follow-up reminder was sent to get them to complete the survey questionnaire but to no avail.

3.3 The sample

The target population of the present research was all the Moroccan EFL high school teacher trainees who had been trained at the different CRMEF centers nationwide over the period of 4 years. Given the qualitative nature of the present research questions and the single case study design adopted to answer them, the teacher training center of Inezgane, Agadir, was chosen as the site of data collection. The site choice was based on the non-random convenience sampling technique. The use of this technique guarantees a close investigation of a certain phenomenon in its natural setting as well as the advantages of convenience and economy (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2009). The sample of the present study then consisted of five cohorts of middle and high school EFL teacher trainees (n = 197) in the provincial directorate of Inezgane Ait Melloul.

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Table 2*Sample of the study*

Cohorts	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	Total
N° of trainees	65	60	60	40	225
N° of respondents	56	48	53	40	**197**
Gender	Males: 133			Females: 64	
Age	Less than 25 years		26 to 35 years		36 to 45 years
	28		142		27
Highest degree	Bachelor		Master		PhD
	152		45		0
Past teaching experience	Yes: 128			No: 69	
	Less than 1 year	2-5 years	6-9 years	Over 10 years	
	81	37	4	6	

3. Results and Discussion

4.1 Trainees' evaluation of their practicum experience

A. Q1: What aspects of the practicum do you feel had the greatest impact on your learning to teach?

Table 3 presents the three big themes and frequency of the most impactful aspects of the practicum as experienced and perceived by respondent teacher trainees.

Table 3 *Summary Themes and Frequencies of Trainees' Perceived Most Impactful Practicum Aspects*

Themes	**Practicum's most impactful aspects**	**Freq.**	**%**
Feedback, observation and Support	Mentors' feedback / guidance / support / sharing	112	**53**
	Being observed and observing mentors and peers teach	54	
	Peers' feedback	41	
	Trainers' feedback	25	
Experience of the teaching act	Experience of the act of teaching / real context & students	62	29.5
	Planning lessons / designing materials/quizzes	31	
	Assumption of full classroom responsibility	23	
	Students enthusiasm / motivation / interaction / rapport / feedback	13	
Rotational nature of practicum	Meeting new students / teaching different classes / levels	39	17.5
	Rotation of schools	25	
	Rotation of mentors	13	
Total / %		**438**	**100**

As can be seen from the data, the most impactful aspects of teacher trainees' practicum experience related mostly to the feedback, observation, and support of primarily mentors and then their groupmates and trainers (53%).

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The aspects related to the experience of the very act of teaching along with its connected duties and the feeling of being fully responsible for the classroom management and control were found to be the second most impactful characteristics of trainees' field experience (29.5%). The rotational nature of the practicum and the frequent change of school contexts, mentors, and students with each practice teaching period came third in their positive impact on trainees (17.5%).

With reference to the first theme, the majority of teacher trainees admitted the pivotal importance of especially mentor guidance, sharing, discussion, and, most importantly, feedback on their performance to the development of their teaching competence. A trainee stated in this respect that:

One of the greatest aspects I benefitted from in the practicum was host teacher feedback after finishing each lesson, especially if I am going to repeat the same lesson to another class. Especially when a mentor indicated the area of problem and explained how to overcome or deal with it.

Post-lesson feedback of the mentor seemed to be more than just information relayed to the trainee about his or her teaching performance; it was peculiarly a strategic tool to guide and shape trainees' future performance.

The source of the positive impact of feedback on trainees' learning to teach process came also from their groupmates. The following is a typical trainee response:

Actually, there are many aspects of the pratcticum (sic) which had great impact on my learning to teach. First, delivering a lesson and being observed by both mentors and mate trainees helped me a lot to improve my teaching. Second, feedback of the mentors and mate trainees was significant as it allowed me to reflect on my teaching experience.

Feedback seemed to serve as a rear-view mirror for trainees to look back and reflect on their teaching experience to improve subsequent performance.

Many responses to the question talked also about teacher trainers' feedback and how it helped them better their way of teaching. To illustrate, one of the trainees admitted that:

The mentors' feedback as well as the trainers' remarks, more than anything else, impacted the way I teach.

Though they were only occasional visiting observers, trainers' feedback was perceived to be highly positively influential on numerous trainees.

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Closely connected to the mentors', peer trainees', and trainers' positive feedback, the fact of observing others teach or being observed was reported to be of great impact during the practicum. The data revealed that trainees seemed to derive instrumental feedback and guidance to their learning to teach from the model lessons their mentors taught, their own teaching, and that of their peers. The following illustrative response regarding the impact of being observed is typical:

As far as I'm concerned, the aspects which had the greatest impact on learning to teach are as follows: being observed by different mentors in different high schools, getting constructive feedback from mentors and fellow trainee teachers, and shiny guidance of our trainers before and after every practicum.

As it shows, the utility of the feedback was always found, implicitly or explicitly, associated with the fact of being observed. On observing model teaching by mentors and other lessons by peer trainees, a trainee wrote about how impactful were:

Observing mentors and peers teach and having them observe my lessons and give feedback afterwords (sic).

Though the word 'feedback' was found frequently used in the trainees' responses more than the word 'observation', it was actually the latter that made the former an available source of positive impact and support to the learning-to-teach experience.

On the other hand, it is believed that in learning to teach, hands-on experience is the best teacher. In fact, with a frequency percentage of 29.5%, the trainees' experience of the act of teaching was reported to be greatly impactful on their learning to be teachers. First, they seemed to enjoy being in the real context of teaching in the company of real students and living a real teaching experience. A trainee typically noted what he found impactful as:

Experiencing real classroom teaching situations and being observed by an experienced teacher in a real classroom with real students.

Furthermore, the data revealed that the positive impact of the act of teaching was found to be frequently connected with both the feeling of being the one responsible for the teaching of students and performing the daily routines of a teacher like lesson planning, classroom management and control, working with materials, designing quizzes, and using ICT. On the aspect of responsibility, a trainee wrote that:

Assuming full responsibility of my classes was of paramount importance to me.

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This assumption of full classroom responsibility was found to gain momentum during especially the last practicum period which was usually the longest. The following is a typical trainee response in this respect:

The last practicum had a great impact on my learning teaching process. The fact that I took total responsability (sic) to teach real classes for one month, I felt I am a real teacher and not just a trainee.

Implicit in the trainee's response is the fact that the practicum was not only a time for this trainee to learn to teach but it was also a period of developing self-confidence and, more importantly, experiencing an identity transformation from a student teacher to a teacher of students.

By the same token, it was found that numerous trainees were found to seek further confirmation to their ability to teach from their students' motivation, enthusiasm, and interactions. To illustrate, a trainee wrote that the most impactful aspects of the school-based field experience were:

The positive feedback from the mentors and peers, the positive reactions and interactions with the students.

Positive feedback from the observers of one's teaching as well as that from the end recipients of that performance seemed to enhance trainees' teacher self-efficacy and forge substantially their professional identity.

Regarding the most impactful teaching routine frequently quoted by trainees during the practicum, lesson planning always came first. In this respect, a trainee stated that:

The practicum as a whole has (sic) a great effect on my teaching skills. However, the most beneficial aspects that had the greatest impact on my learning to teach were lesson planning, teaching classes and receiving feedback from both teachers and fellow trainees.

Doing the routines as a 'real' teacher appeared to further shape trainees' professional teacher identity during the practicum.

Additionally, the data revealed that the rotational nature of the practicum had significant benefits for trainees. That is to say, placing groups of teacher trainees in different schools in the company of different mentors, meeting and teaching different students at every practice teaching period was found to be an impactful and enriching experience for many. To this effect, the following is one illustrative response about the useful variety of mentors and students:

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I strongly believe that having practice at schools with different mentors and students is the greatest aspect. If I had one practicum, I could have missed learning about many things. The variety of practicums in different schools/areas made my learning journey every time totally different.

Another one stated how the periodic rotational change of schools and mentors in the practicum affected positively his perspective towards his current workplace. This trainee wrote:

I appreciate the experience I gained from working with different mentors and visiting different schools. Having the chance to go to different locations far or near the city had helped widen my horizon and [I]was more prepared and appreciative for the school I am currently in which is something I wouldn't manage if I was assigned to train in one school with only one mentor. I got the chance to discover and interact with different students and to observe different teaching styles as well.

It is strongly suggested in the above response that although the practicum time in teacher education is generally short in nature no matter how longish it seems, its impact on future teaching experience, whether positive or negative, seems, however, far-reaching.

B. *Q2: What aspects of the practicum do you feel had the least impact on your learning to teach?*

Besides the positive impact of a variety of practicum aspects, question two sought to explore teacher trainees' perceptions of the aspects that had been the least impactful on their professional development during the practicum. Table 4 shows the emerging themes of the reported least impactful aspects along with their occurrence frequency and percentage. More specifically, 31.5% of the responses were basically appreciative of all the practicum aspects and did not single out any aspect as being of less impact. The following is a typical account of this type of responses:

To be honest, I can't single out any aspect that I think it had the least impact on my training. I believe that any situation, good or bad, was a lesson to learn from. With all the ups and downs, it was a pure learning experience.

This relative majority (if all the themes are viewed separately) seemed to consider all the characteristics of the practicum, be they positive or negative, a valuable learning experience that affected their professional development "in one way or another", to use a frequently used phrase in similar responses.

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Moreover, it is apparent from the table that the majority of teacher trainees' responses (68.5%) reported a number of practicum aspects that had the least impact on their learning to teach. These had to do respectively with mentors' and peers' feedback (31%), observation of mentors and peers teach (16%), mentor profile (12%), and finally practicum management (9.5%).

Table 4 *Summary Themes and Frequencies of Trainees' Perceived Least Impactful Practicum Aspects*

	Least impactful aspects	**Freq.**	**%**
	All-positive	66	**31.5**
Feedback	Mentors' feedback	53	**31**
	Peers' feedback	12	
Observation	Observing mentors	22	16
	Observing peers	11	
Mentor profile	Mentor related issues	25	12
Practicum	Many trainees in a group	11	9.5
Management	Change of schools / teaching different classes	9	
Total / %		**209**	**100**

As such, just as feedback was found to be one of the greatest impactful characteristics of the practicum, the data revealed equally that when feedback was all-negative, unconstructive, contradictory, confusing, unreliable, or even absent was a problematic issue for many teacher trainees. First, numerous responses reported how some trainees did not seem to accept the 'negativity' of some mentors' feedback on their performance. In one of the trainees' words, the least impactful aspect of the practicum was:

When mentors give only negative feedback without mentioning alternative solutions.

The trainee appeared to seek balanced feedback that not only highlighted what went wrong but also offered suggestions for improving future teaching. The focus of a mentor' feedback on just the "the bad and weak points", as mentioned in one of the responses, did not seem to be greatly appreciated by many trainees. These latter used a variety of adjectives to characterize the unsatisfactory mentors' feedback such as 'unconstructive', 'irrelevant', 'inappropriate', 'contradictory', 'futile', 'confusing', and 'inaccurate'.

Similarly, besides the unhelpful presence of negatively phrased feedback from mentors, its complete absence was also found to be one of the least impactful parts of the practicum for some. The following response is a good case in point:

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It's the part when nobody gives you any feedback about what you're doing, it happens that sometimes neither your group mates nor your mentor comment on the lesson you deliver and it feels quite ineffective in terms of your progress. It feels like you just wasted a learning opportunity.

Occasional lack of post-lesson mentor feedback did not only seem to be a lamentable reality during the practicum, but it was suggested to have had the potential to slow down the burgeoning progress of some trainees.

By the same token, the data also showed several responses reporting peers' feedback as the least impactful feature of the field experience. All these responses shared one common belief that any feedback coming from 'similar' others — peers or TP groupmates — was of little value and use because of their lack of experience in teaching. A typical response that summarizes this view is the following:

I would say getting feedback from your peers. Mentors and teachers provide you with practical advice, while peer feedback is just ideas from [an] inexperienced person viewing things from his point of view. Peers have little experience to judge you and therefore their feedback is less valuable.

For this trainee, the value of the feedback seemed closely linked to the amount of teaching experience one had behind him or her.

Along the same line of reasoning, the feedback of peers was not only found to be of less impact by some trainees, but even observing them teach was counted by others as not all the time beneficial or even 'a waste of time' as reported in one of the responses. The least impactful part of the practicum for one of the trainees was:

Spending a lot of time observing other peers teach and taking feedback from them.

It was not clear in the data whether this attitude among these trainees was based on a continuous objective evaluation of the worth of peers' teaching practice and their feedback or the whole matter was merely a subjective personal opinion.

Similarly, the data revealed additionally that numerous trainees reported how observing few teacher mentors teach did not have the impact they had expected. These trainees either just named the fact of observing mentors teach model lessons as the least impactful practicum aspect or described it as not 'beneficial', 'useless', or 'a waste of time'. It is unclear what made these trainees arrive at this judgement.

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The following response is so illustrative on this regard:

Sometimes observing a few mentors was just a waste of time. I emphasize a few.

As it shows, there was no way to guess what rendered this most appreciated rite of the practicum less valuable. Yet, one piece of the puzzle that seemed to partially explain this finding was found in one response that provided explicitly one reason why observing one mentor's model teaching was rather unbeneficial. For this trainee, the least impactful aspect of the practicum was:

The observation part especially when the mentor plans a correction session instead of presenting a lesson.

The tendency to change the core of mentor observation, namely that of modelling the teaching of a variety of skills to trainees seemed to devoid this practice of its value.

In the same vein, it has been found that practice teaching in the company of a teacher mentor who was characterized as 'unfriendly', 'unmotivated', 'demotivated', 'unqualified' – or even one who frequently interrupted the teaching of trainees – was reported as the least impactful part of the practicum by some trainees whose responses were generally phrased as the one below:

The aspect of the practicum that I feel had the least impact on my learning to teach was being hosted by [an] unmotivated mentor like the one in [name and location of the mentor's school].

Another trainee commented on the issue of interrupting that:

The intrupption (sic) of trainees while presenting and the stress on the negative points (instead of areas of development) is not only the least influential, but it is also the most destroying tool for trainees.

Just as mentoring is supposed to be of paramount importance to helping trainees develop, it can be counterproductive at times.

Regarding the last theme related to question two, the fact of placing trainees into groups of four or five when on practicum was viewed by several trainees as the least impactful side of their school field experience. These trainees explained how the presence of 'many' trainees in one group minimized their individual chances of practice teaching and development. In this respect, a trainee stated that:

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I think the aspect that had the least impact on learning to teach is that, though there were several practicums over the training year, the number of trainee teachers (Group of four) in a practicum period still lessens the opportunity to give more lessons and teach different skills.

Given the host mentor's limited number of classes taught, these trainees suggested that for optimal practicum experience TP groups had better be formed with less than four trainees.

Finally, but still within the last theme, a few trainees expressed how the change of schools during the practicum and teaching, thus, a variety of classes instead of practice teaching in one school and working with one or two stable classes was not well received. A trainee wrote on this regard that:

Teaching lots of classes. Students need to warm up to you before they full (sic) engage in your lessons. This could take three to four sessions and by that time you have to change the school and classes again.

These few trainees seemed to suggest that developing professionally needs stability so the trainee could arrive to know very well the students, the school environment, and have enough time to experiment with teaching.

C. Q3: What was/were your greatest challenge(s) / problem(s) during the practicum?

In response to question three, the data in Table 5 revealed that the biggest challenges and problems trainees faced during the practicum related significantly to the practice of teaching (74.5%) and then to the practicum context of the whole experience (20.5%) along with several issues related to the mentoring support (5%). As a preliminary observation, the data suggested that teacher trainees' practicum journey was navigated at different fronts.

When considered separately, the most frequently reported challenges were respectively managing teaching time effectively (28%), classroom management (20%), practice school distance and transportation issues (18%), struggle with lesson planning (17%), and confidence issues when encountering students for the first time (17%).

Table 5 *Summary Themes and Frequencies of Trainees' Reported Practicum Challenges and Problems*

	Challenges / problems	**Freq.**	**%**
Practice of Teaching	Time management	42	**74.5**
	Classroom management	30	
	Lesson planning / time to prepare lessons	25	
	Self-confidence	25	
	Student low proficiency level / instructions / meeting	17	

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	lesson objectives		
	Class control	15	
	Teaching certain lessons/skills	14	
	TTT (teacher talking time)	10	
	working with materials / designing interesting activities / use of ICT	8	
	BB use and layout / handwriting	7	
	Voice projection	4	
Practicum context	Transportation	27	
	Lack of ICT tools / distant schools /materials cost	18	20.5
	Practicum overload	9	
Mentorship	Mentoring support	13	5
Total / %		**264**	**100**

As such, based on the data, more than 20% of the trainees found it challenging to manage time effectively during their teaching. Though the issue was stated most of the time as only 'time management', several trainees provided some reasons why budgeting time was that difficult for them. Reasons ranged from teaching inexperience, the inability to time the various activities of a lesson appropriately, and finally the trial to cover too much content and meet all the lesson objectives in a set short lesson period. A trainee stated in this respect that:

As every novice teacher, I think the greatest challenge I met was that of time and class management (at times, the wait time is 5 seconds). The problem of respecting the timing for activities / exercises planned for a lesson was a real challenge.

Intimately connected to time management, and frequently stated with it, classroom management as in the above response was also reported by 11% of the trainees as the second most challenging aspect of the practicum. A trainee noted in this respect that:

It was time management and classroom management because we had a lot of details that we wanted to cover and also more than 36 students.

This management issue was mostly associated with issues like overcrowded classes, student lack of motivation and learning interest, reluctance to interact with the trainee, student low proficiency level, the challenge to over-simplify instructions, and disruptive behavior. The following is an illustrative response:

It was little difficult to manage the classroom and deal with misbehaving students. Some students were not interested/low achievers, it was hard to raise their motivation and involve them in the lesson.

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The challenges of time and classroom management seemed to be related to the fact of being inexperienced. Manifestations of the latter were, in turn, found to be linked to issues like self-confidence and teacher identity as well as the challenges of overcoming the uneasiness of the first experience and meeting students for the first time. On the challenge of the first teaching experience and identity, two trainees wrote the following:

The first experience to teach was really difficult and challenging.

To face those new Ss [students] for the first time and try to have a good interaction and make them feel like I am a true teacher not a trainee.

This 'first' experience along with its concomitant self-concerns seemed to renew with every new practicum period.

Additionally, inexperience was also reported in terms of other few basic teaching challenges connected respectively to controlling high ratios of teacher talking time, working with materials and designing good activities, using effectively ICT tools, board layout and use, handwriting, and maximizing voice projection.

In the same vein, the data revealed that 15% of the responses cited lesson planning and teaching certain skills and lessons, especially writing, grammar, and listening as the most challenging practicum aspects. As an evaluation of the various challenges he had encountered, a trainee stated that:

What a training would it be without challenges? It is what I was staying late nights for figuring out ways to overcome them. Time management, effective ways of teaching certain items, lesson planning are among the many challenges I faced during my training. I remember spending much time preparing one lesson plan.

It is suggested that planning one lesson was not only just an issue of knowledge and skills, but also a practice that required a great deal of preparation time outside the classroom.

With regard to the theme connected to the training context, 20.5% of the responses focused mainly on two major challenges, namely the cost of commuting to some distant practice schools and how latter's lack of basic equipment (particularly the video projector) and services (printing and photocopying) financially overburdened teacher trainees. On the issue of transportation, one of the trainees enumerated his challenges as:

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(1) Having to commute to the high schools and some of them were too way far from my house that I had to take 3 taxis to get to them, which was really challenging, time-consuming and tiring. (2) not having enough money to pay for transportation.

The choice of certain distant schools for practice teaching seemed to tax on the already meagre scholarship trainees often got delayed. Similarly, having to create worksheets and make enough copies for students because the host school lacked a video projector – which would have somehow alleviated trainees' dependence on printed materials – or even did not help with making copies for its students was reported to be financially demanding and far from encouraging. The following is a trainee's response on this last issue:

Lack of materials in some schools (data show [video projector] and photocopying) which prevented me from being more creative and cost me a lot of money to make copies for the classes.

Sending trainees to practice teaching in certain schools was found to add unnecessary burden on some trainees. Though it was not explicit enough, it could be concluded that part of the help a practice school could have probably offered to its guest teacher trainees was to assist with the task of photocopying worksheets and to make sure they were placed in a classroom environment furnished with all the basic equipment for an optimal teaching practice.

The last challenge reported within the second theme had to do with the unmanageable workload of the practicum. Though reported only in a few responses, the majority of teacher trainees, based on the rest of challenges, could easily identify. A typical illustration of this challenge can be found below:

I think the most challenging thing during the practicum was having too much work to do. Trainees were overwhelmed with preparing and designing lessons, preparing a lot of lesson plans, writing reports as well as keeping journals.

Other trainees blamed this workload issue on the alternation of in-center training and the school-based fieldwork. One trainee stated, for instance, that:

The major challenge I found during the practicum was time because the training and the practicum were done in parallel, resulting in a sort of lack of performance on both of them.

As it shows, trying to keep a balance between practicum responsibilities and concurrent in-center training requirements was a real challenge.

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Regarding mentorship, the third and final theme, the 13 instances of challenge relative to mentoring support (5%) were mainly concerned with the challenges of (1) satisfying the mentors and their requirements (with the hope of securing a good grade); (2) dealing with their 'contradictory', 'incomprehensible', and even 'nonsensical' feedback; (3) putting up with some mentors' unfairness, lack of understanding their needs, and different teaching perspectives. For instance, a trainee stated that his challenges were:

Classroom management sometimes. Time management. and the BIGGEST ONE was satisfying the mentor as we were worried about the grade. I sometimes felt that I had to accept the feedback although I disagreed with its content.

Another one also stated that:

Some mentors don't take into consideration the fact that we are still teacher trainees, and thus we need to proceed bit by bit. Instead, during my first day, my mentor suggested that I should teach 4 hours straightforward.

This and other instances in the data suggested that in the absence of a mentor training program that hopefully equips participant teacher mentors with the core knowledge of mentoring and its research-based effective practices, such unhelpful behaviors will continue to plague teacher trainees' school-based filed experience.

D. Q4: What aspects of teaching do you feel the practicum has prepared you well for?

The fourth question asked teacher trainees to mention those aspects of teaching they felt the practicum had prepared them well for. As can be seen from the data in Table 6, all the aspects reported had to do solely with the practice of teaching. Specifically, the majority of trainees expressed how their self-confidence in teaching grew substantially thanks to their teaching practice during the practicum.

Self-confidence was expressed in a variety of ways starting from facing the student audience with no panic or fright, the ability to assume full classroom responsibility, teaching different classes and levels, dealing with unexpected incidents, integrating skills, and mastering the knowledge as well as the teaching of a variety of skills. On this subject, a trainee stated that:

Being in a real teaching environment with real students equipped me with almost all aspects of teaching. It also provided me with the confidence needed to teach and guide 40 or more students at once.

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Despite the challenges and problems of the practicum, it is suggested that the whole experience was a real learning opportunity. Some other trainees linked the benefits of the field experience to a specific aspect of teaching like, for instance, teaching a reading or a listening lesson. The following is a good case in point:

The aspects of teaching I do feel the practicum has prepared me well for is building self-confidence in teaching reading.

Teaching reading for this trainee seemed to have probably been a challenge in the beginning of the experience.

Table 6 *Summary of Trainees' Reported Practicum-enabled Aspects of Teaching*

Teaching aspects prepared for	**Freq.**	**%**
Self-confidence	105	**30**
Classroom management	72	**20.5**
Lesson planning	57	**16**
Class control	51	**15**
Giving instructions / TTT / BB use/ classroom mobility / voice projection / class coverage / designing quizzes	26	7.5
Time management	20	6
Integrating ICT	11	3
Working with the textbook and adapting materials	8	2
Total / %	**350**	**100**

With 20.5% as the second aspect of teaching for which trainees felt well prepared was classroom management. A typical example on this regard is the following response:

Everything in fact. But if I had to pick only one, it would be classroom management. The practicum had prepared [me]to manage the classroom and how to deal students as well as I learned different ideas on how to teach certain lessons. Which on the whole is something I appreciated when began working on my own.

Implicit in the above response seemed the trainee's belief that teaching and classroom management go hand in hand and any problem in one area affects the other.

Additionally, 16% of the trainees expressed how the teaching practice had helped them develop the skill of preparing, planning, and delivering lessons. They also stated how they managed to plan lessons in lesser time comparatively with the beginning of the experience.

Ranking fourth in frequency, 15% of trainees' responses described how the various practicum periods had helped them increase their knowledge, understanding, and confident ability to deal with a wide range of student profiles and disruptive behaviors. One such response is as follows:

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I strongly beieve (sic) that the practicum has prepared me well for being flexible, persistent and building a good rapport with my pupils to establish a healthier teaching atmosphere.

Frequently meeting new students within and across the TP periods strongly seemed to have enriched trainees' repertoire of strategies to deal with various types of learners and control disruptive behavior.

Along the same line of reasoning, the data revealed that the lengthy practice time they had during the practicum periods had also helped them acquire, correct, fine-tune, and develop a number of teaching skills and strategies inclusive of, respectively, giving and simplifying instructions, reducing high ratios of TTT, increasing voice projection and class coverage, knowing how to work with the textbook and adapt supplemental materials, integrating ICT in teaching, using correctly the board, motivating student interaction, designing tests and quizzes, and finally increasing class presence and classroom mobility. As a response to the question, one trainee listed, for example, the following aspects on this regard:

Giving instructions, class coverage, teacher talking time, teacher movement in the classroom, Ss - SS interaction and T - Ss interaction.

As suggested, learning to teach is a multifaceted experience influenced by a range of variables that interact in complex ways.

Last but not the least, when the challenges trainees had faced during the practicum were compared with the learning benefits they had gained, it could be safely concluded with much confidence that the majority of challenges seemed to have somehow decreased by the end of the field experience except for time management which was strongly suggested to have persisted well beyond. When compared, for instance, with classroom management (Figure 5), which was the second most frequent reported challenge (11%) under time management (16%), it was found that trainees seemed to have benefitted more in terms of managing the classroom than they had done with time management.

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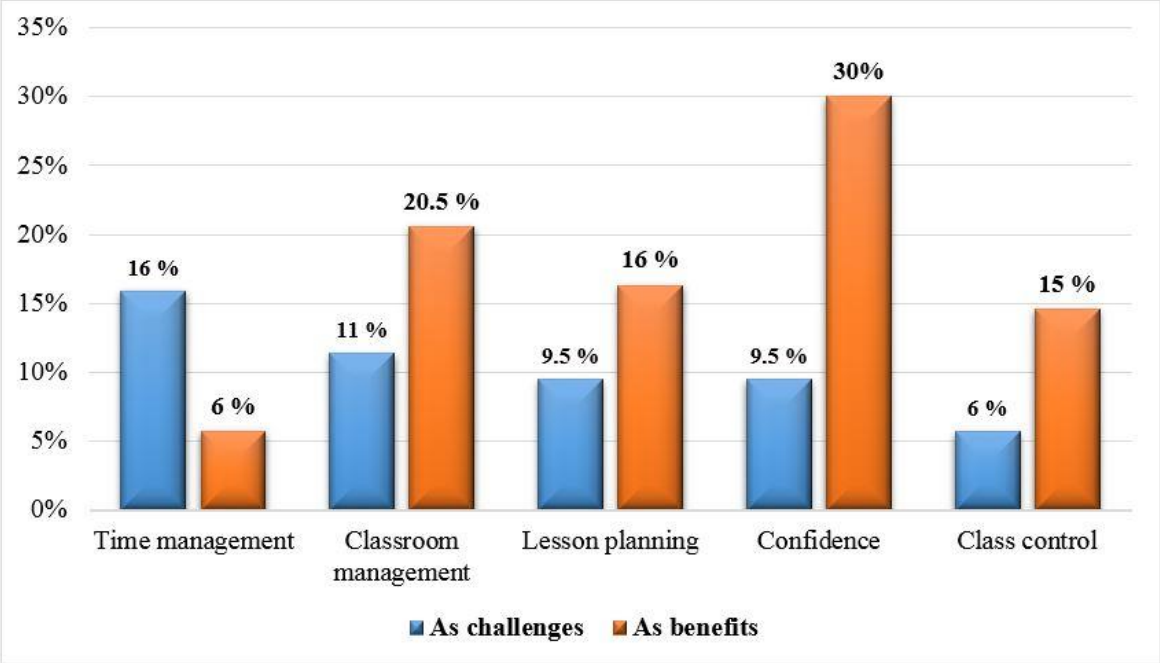

Figure 2. Percent Comparison of Trainees' Challenges and Benefits at the Start vs. End of the Practicum

Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, the data revealed that the same applied to other challenges in the sense that they decreased in frequency in favor of more incremental gains.

In sum, trainees seemed to have gained so much from their practicum experience. Yet, everyone was found to have worked on their individual needs and perceived areas needing improvement. Some others preferred to cite rather a number of adjectives the practicum had helped them to develop and these were, for example, growing 'proactive', 'enthusiastic', 'committed', 'creative', 'responsible', 'innovative', 'flexible, 'persistent', and 'caring'. The professional development through the practicum seemed to be again a multifaceted learning journey for the overwhelming majority of teacher trainees.

E. Q5: What aspects of being a teacher do you still feel unprepared for?

Question five asked trainees to state those aspects of being a teacher for which they were still unprepared. The findings (see Table 7) revealed that over a 20-percent majority of respondent teacher trainees felt they had been well prepared for their teaching job. Many of these trainees expressed the fact that a teacher always needs to seek professional development to keep updated with recent pedagogies and approaches. A trainee wrote, for example, that:

As far as I am concerned, I feel myself well prepared for all basic tools to become a teacher. However, a teacher should always continue his/her quest for professional development.

Implicit in the response is the fact that the practicum had been so helpful for the trainee that learning to teach never stops by the end of the field experience, but it is rather a lifelong process sustained by seeking further professional development opportunities.

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Table 7 *Summary of Trainees' Reported Aspects of Teaching for which they were Still Unprepared*

Teaching aspects unprepared for		Freq.	%
	Well prepared	50	**21**
Instructional aspects	Assessment / Giving feedback	25	**10.5**
	Teaching and motivating low achievers	24	**10**
	Classroom management	23	**9.5**
	Teaching specific skills	19	8
	Class coverage / Teaching large classes	18	7.5
	Class control	15	6
	Time management	15	6
	Use of ICT	9	4
	Lesson planning	7	3
Non-instructional aspects	Administrative paperwork	23	**10**
	Going extracurricular	11	4.5
	Total / %	**239**	**100**

Furthermore, the data showed that the rest of teacher trainees still felt unprepared for a number of instructional as well as non-teaching related aspects. Instructionally, the first aspect was related to assessment of student learning in terms of designing, preparing, and scoring quizzes and tests.

10.5% of trainees felt the need for more knowledge and practice of how to evaluate and test students' knowledge and performance. On this regard, a trainee teacher stated that:

I feel unprepared to design and score quizzes and tests of appropriate level. I still feel unsatisfied with the way I'm doing it.

Given the fact that the practicum is overall synonymous with the specific practice act of teaching lessons, any trainee-initiated assessment of student work during the practicum did not seem to be of a priority, especially that the module of assessment is usually taught later in the training year, around before TP6 and after the coverage of the modules of planning and managing teaching and learning.

In the same vein, dealing with, engaging, and motivating 'low achievers' for the lesson was found to be an issue some trainees (10%) felt still unprepared to overcome. The following is a typical illustration of the issue:

I sometimes feel I am unprepared to deal with some types of low achievers who have no interest at all in learning. I also still need to work hard to know how to motivate the unmotivated students.

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This trainee seemed to realize that teaching had to be an inclusive practice that should engage each and every one in the class.

Significantly, the experience of these trainees with teaching low achievers whose proficiency level was reportedly low was most of the time related to the issues of the difficulty of teaching certain skills (8%), inadequate class coverage (7.5%), time management issues (6%), and high ratios of teacher talking time (3%). Besides listening, reading, speaking, and grammar, writing was perceived as the hardest of all the skills, especially when it was taught to low achievers. In this connection, trainee wrote that:

The aspect of being a teacher that I still feel unprepared for is teaching writing, especially to low achievers since my students are very reluctant to learn the subject and I am still working on how to deal with this issue. Another one is high TTT that needs to be reduced but I often overlook.

The problem did not seem exclusively related to the trainee's lack of preparedness or practical knowledge of how to teach writing, but it seemed, likewise, due to the fact that some unwilling students were reported as 'low achievers'. It was also found that dealing with low achievers had adverse impact on teacher trainees' management of time. To illustrate, a teacher trainee admitted that the one aspect of being a teacher he still felt unprepared for was:

Time management especially when teaching certain lessons to low achievers. You just can't do it right or as planned. sometimes I end up not reaching my goals especially when it comes to reaching the production stage!

As it shows, teaching reportedly 'low achievers' or 'uninterested' students presented a variety of challenges for trainees and affected their performance in various ways.

Along the same line of reasoning, the data revealed additionally that despite the fact that trainees were found to have derived numerous benefits in terms of classroom management, this latter was found to be an aspect some trainees were still unprepared for. This issue was essentially tied to two major aspects, namely: grouping mixed ability and style large classes and controlling disruptive behavior. On the first issue, a trainee stated that

After the training I was still worried about classroom management: students' different learning styles and group work within overcrowded classes.

The fact that trainees were preoccupied with the issue of classroom management gave evidence to their growing awareness that for learning to take place, it requires the creation of an environment conducive to learning and appealing to all the students.

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The trial to create such an optimal learning environment was also found to be compounded by issues relative to class control and dealing with disruptive behavior. When asked the question, one trainee, for instance, replied that:

Well, if there was an aspect which needed more attention right after the training practicums that would be how to deal with misconduct situations which pop out in the classroom.

In fact, learning to teach seemed to be not a matter of coming up with a workable lesson plan or designing appropriate materials, but it was also for trainees a matter of essentially possessing effective techniques to set rules, establish order, engage students, and enlist their cooperation.

Similarly, the last two teaching-related aspects several trainees felt still not ready to handle effectively were respectively using and integrating ICT in their teaching (4%) and planning lessons (3%). While the first was reported due to either lack of equipment in the host school or lack of enough in-center training on the use of ICT tools, the second related mainly to choosing appropriate materials and sequencing the lesson steps.

On the other hand, unrelated to teaching, 14.5% of teacher trainees reported two other aspects that they felt still unprepared for and these had to do with (1) how to deal with the administrative personnel and official documents and (2) how to manage and involve students in extracurricular activities like school clubs. Given the fact that 80% of respondent teacher trainees were at the time of data collection in-service teachers, this finding seemed to suggest that these ex-trainees either felt so well prepared for teaching that they were able to see clearly the importance of networking beyond the classroom and learning how to deal with administrative paperwork; or they learnt about the importance of the latter once they joined their respective workplaces of appointments. Two select responses provided evidence to these two conclusions. On being well prepared, a trainee wrote as a reply that:

Almost, I feel I have been prepared for everything as a teacher from planning lessons, managing a class, assessment, having different skills to motivate and encourage students ... and so on. Maybe, I didn't get prepared well for involving students in clubs and extracurricular activities: tools, strategies and mechanisms.

In connection to the second conclusion, another trainee stated as evidence that:

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I'd say it's not with teaching as much [as] it has to do with the relationship I'm supposed to build with the administration. once I went to the school I was destined to work [in], I faced a lot of problems of how to deal with the administration and official documents: writing reports, filling in grade sheets… etc. There should be periods of the practicum that are specifically devoted to the relation of teachers to administration in order to develop an understanding of the administrative responsibilities and duties of the teacher.

Once again, the common idea of equating the practicum with practicing solely teaching seemed to be a mistaken belief. Trainees expressed the need to reach beyond the classroom context and gain knowledge about building relationships with administrative staff, handling various official documents, and understanding the rules for organizing extracurricular activities and creating school clubs.

F. Q6: How well prepared, in general, do you feel to take up a teaching job?

This Likert item asked trainees to rate the degree of their overall perceived preparedness to take up the teaching job immediately upon the end of the practicum. The data in Table 8 show that an important segment of respondent teacher trainees felt 'fairly prepared' (57%) and 'very well prepared' (37%) as a function of the practice they had during their field experience. The results also indicated that while several trainees did not know whether they were prepared or not (4%), few others expressed their lack of readiness to assume the teaching responsibility (2%).

Table 8 *Results of Trainees' Perceived Overall Preparedness for Teaching*

	Freq.	%	Mean	SD
1. Don't know	0	0		
2. Not well prepared	4	2		
3. Neither prepared nor unprepared	8	4	4.29	.641
4. Fairly prepared	112	57		
5. Very well prepared	73	37		
Total / %	**197**	**100**		

Moreover, though the majority of responses on average were clustered far from the mean, the variation (Ϭ: .641) was standard and expected in the sense that trainees had been expected to get the necessary training and develop the requisite readiness to undertake their role as language teachers. This finding provided more evidence to the fact that the majority of respondent teacher trainees benefitted a lot from the practicum experience in terms of teaching self-confidence.

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G. Q7: What do you think should change to improve the practicum?

This question asked teacher trainees to state what they believed were the needed changes to enhance the quality of the field experience. Table 8 summarizes the various changes suggested by teacher trainees. Specifically, while 15% of trainees did not see the need to change anything in the way the practicum was run, the majority suggested a variety of changes relative to the way the practicum was managed (72%) and the types of support trainees hoped to receive while practice teaching (13%).

As such, the following is a typical quote from one of those trainees who were satisfied with the way the practicum had been run by the CRMEF in collaboration with practice schools. The trainee stated that:

From my experience, I find that there is nothing that needs change as we had a very valuable and insightful training that helped us build self-confidence and learnt so many things about pedagogy since we dealt with varied high school levels and students as well as different perspectives from many mentors.

Similar other responses highlighted, more or less, the same benefits and some even stressed the need to either keep and reinforce the status quo or add in other (unspecified) things that were likely to improve it.

Table 9 *Results of Trainees' Suggestions to Improve the Practicum*

	Suggestions to improve the practicum	Freq.	%
	No change needed	32	15
Practicum management	More practice, less theory	82	**72**
	Oversize of trainee groups	30	
	More trainer visits	11	
	More ICT training	10	
	No mentor assessment of trainees	7	
	More focus on assessment	6	
	Focus on administrative & extracurricular side	6	
Material support	Distance of schools	12	13
	Provision of photocopy service	8	
	scholarship	7	
Total / %		**211**	**100**

On the other hand, the top suggested change by teacher trainees (36%) had to do with the request to extend the duration of the field practice teaching to over 80% of the training year or even to one whole year in a two-year training program arrangement. The following extract is a typical response from one of the trainees who wrote that:

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Practice, practice and practice! I believe trainees need more time teaching inside the classroom and the practicum should be more practical than theoretical allowing trainees more opportunities of teaching ...

Explicit in this and other similar responses is the unanimous belief that learning to teach is basically teaching in practice, and not reading on or steeping in theorization about teaching. Several of these pro-change trainees even called to have the practicum be separate from the in-center theoretical training and its concomitant assignments that were qualified as 'exhausting', 'burdensome', and 'interfering' with their trial to do their best during the practicum. Additionally, several others suggested that the whole field work component had better be only one block, in one place with the same students and mentor, and be, preferably, programed after trainees have finished the theoretical side of the training curriculum.

As novices, trainees did not seem yet to see the link between practice and theory and that the latter has the potential to basically framework almost everything a teacher does in the classroom. On this issue, a trainee stated that:

I find that learning about how to do action research or learning theories about teaching is waste of time. Teachers need to learn how to deal with Moroccan ss [students]...and none of those theories is applicable in our cultural context because reality is far from what we studied within the four walls.

Preoccupation with mastering the procedural aspects of teaching appeared to overwhelm these teacher trainees and somehow led them to overlook the importance and utility of theory as a guiding framework for an educated practice.

Similarly, many trainees identified group size as one of the least effective aspects of the practicum. They explained that the number of trainees per group should be limited to a maximum of two or three. It was suggested by many responses that the presence of five trainees in one group, as currently done, minimized not only trainees' individual chances of teaching but consequently reduced significantly their chances of getting individualized mentor support as well.

Moreover, despite the fact that CRMEF trainers had it as a routine to pay periodic visits to teacher trainees when on practicum, some trainees were found to call for more regular trainer visits to check trainees' progress and provide feedback. Some more trainees even requested that trainers had better be the ones to come, observe, assess, and grade trainees during every TP period. The most often quoted reasons for this request was that mentors held different views towards different aspects of teaching and also had different personalities. Trainees felt that being graded differently on what they believed was a 'similar' performance did not do them justice. In this respect, a trainee illustrated this issue in the following way:

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Mentors' reports shouldn't be the basis on which you (trainers) assess trainees because they themselves (mentors) have different opinions about an aspect of teaching, so it's trainers' role to visit trainees at least twice to have a [sic] clear feedback about trainees.

In the same vein, another trainee stated differently that:

I believe that assessment has to be revisited; I think mentors should not grade teacher trainees; they just need to compose a report on the performance and it's up to a trainer committee to decide on the grade. Why [is] this change necessary? while some mentors are generous, others are mean / tough. Mentors must be CAREFULLY selected.

These two responses seemed to strongly suggest that in light of mentors' divergent views about teaching and subjective bias, trainee assessment needed to be a collaborative work among mentors and trainers throughout the life span of the practicum.

To conclude the first theme related to the practicum management, several trainees suggested that more time had better be devoted to: (1) training on the use and integration of ICT tools to support both learning and teaching, (2) focusing on assessment, especially of learning in terms of designing, grading, and interpreting test results; and finally (3) educating trainees on the non-instructional aspects of the profession, particularly the relationship with the administration staff, guidance relative to dealing with administrative paperwork, and lastly managing and engaging students in extracurricular activities.

Regarding the last theme, the data revealed that though the frequency of occurrence was only 6% of the overall suggestions, the need for financial support was pressing. Because a few placement schools were situated far from the training center, the economic expense of commuting, apart from the time wasted on trips to and back from these practice schools, was a heavy burden for some trainees, if not all, given the meagre scholarship they often got delayed. The practicum proved to be a demanding experience for trainees in terms of time, effort as well as money because they had to pay for their transportation and to spend on their materials preparation (printing and photocopying). Among the reported suggestions, there were calls (1) to increase the value of the scholarship and make it monthly (and timely) instead of quarterly (and often delayed); (2) to choose high schools nearby the center for the practice teaching periods; and finally (3) to open the CRMEF copy center for trainees to make copies of worksheets and lesson plans.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of the practicum as a critical learning experience for teacher trainees to develop their teaching skills. Trainees deeply valued the feedback they received on their performance, alongside opportunities to observe mentor teachers teach model lessons. Several challenges were, however, identified, such as the need for extended practice time and smaller trainee group sizes to ensure optimal learning conditions. Trainees also underscored the importance of gaining experience beyond the classroom, including learning how to assess student progress, manage administrative tasks, and engage in extracurricular activities. These findings suggest that enhancing the practicum by addressing these concerns could better prepare future teachers for the multifaceted responsibilities of the profession.

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