

## The Practicum: Does it enhance the EFL pre-service teachers' professional skills?

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### Abstract:

The practicum is a key component of the Algerian pre-service EFL teacher training curricula. It provides the student-teachers with the opportunity to employ and practice their learnt pedagogical and teaching skills. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the student-teachers' perspectives of the Ecole Normale Supérieure Bouzareah, (ENSB) on their practicum experiences and the challenges they encountered during this training period in the academic year 2022/2023. Moreover, it aims to obtain deeper insight of their envisioning of the practicum. Eighty (80) Algerian ENSB EFL student-teachers participated in this study. The researcher used an open-ended questionnaire to collect data. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The findings revealed that the practicum contributed to the Algerian ENSB student-teachers' professional growth and enhanced their teaching skills. The findings also suggested some implications for optimizing the practicum in the Algerian ENSB pre-service teachers' education curriculum.

**Keywords:** The practicum; Pre-service teacher training; The Algerian ENSB student-teachers.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The practicum is a key component of any initial teacher education programme since it provides the pre-service teachers (student –teachers) with the opportunity to apply the theoretical and the pedagogical knowledge they have learnt in real classroom situations. Tuli and File (2009) described the practicum teaching experiences among pre-service teachers as the most important and the most highly valued component of teachers' education program that aims to prepare successful and effective teachers.

The practicum constitutes a key element of the Algerian Ecole

Normale Supérieure de Bouzareah's (ENSB) initial teacher training curriculum. The ENSB is a pre-service teacher training College, which provides two options of initial teacher training exit profile. A four- year Diploma for Middle school English teachers, which is equivalent to bachelor's degree in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The second option is a five-year Diploma for Secondary school English teachers, which is equivalent to master's degree in TEFL.

The TEFL course consists of two main components: Theoretical and pedagogical knowledge, regarding English language teaching (ELT) methodology on campus and the practicum. The practicum (field experience) is an integral element of the TEFL course. It is divided into two parts: Visits to different assigned schools for observation and semi-intervention all along the first semester and two blocks of two-week-practicum. One block of two-week practice at the end of the first semester (January22nd), and the second block is at the second semester (April20th). The ultimate objective of the course of TEFL, more specifically, the practicum is meant to equip the Algerian pre-service EFL teachers with the necessary pedagogical and practical knowledge, so as to prepare them for the profession and develop their teaching skills. The practicum is the most required phase for the students' graduation.

## **2. Literature review**

Teaching profession is a complex task that requires careful, adequate and constructive knowledge and training at both theory and practice. To prepare successful and effective teachers, teachers training curricula need to include theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and practical skills since they are the necessary tools of the teaching profession. (Pennington, 1990). As regard theory, pre-service teachers (student – teachers) need to acquire basic theoretical knowledge concerning the underlying principles of different theories, pedagogy, methods and methodologies of teaching, so as to increase their theoretical awareness. As for practice student teachers need practical training (practicum), which provides them with valuable opportunity to have direct contact with real classroom setting. This field experience allows the student teachers to put the theoretical knowledge into practice and develop their teaching skills and competencies.

The practicum is a vital component of any initial teacher training programme. It plays a significant role in teacher training. Cherry (2015) asserted that “the practicum is vital to successful preparation of teachers.” The practicum experience enables the student teachers practicing teaching in a real classroom context. It allows them to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained during their training on campus, connect theory and practice, and develop a range of teaching skills. Richards & Crookes (1988, p.9) declare that “the practice teaching, or practicum, is the major opportunity for the student-teacher to acquire the practical skill and knowledge needed to function as an effective teacher”.

Thus, the aim of the practicum is providing the student-teachers with the occasions to fully experience the classroom realities, which in turn, enables them to improve their general pedagogical skills. Ulvik & Smith (2011, p. 520) noted that “the main objective of the practicum is to provide the student-teachers with authentic hands-on experience in teaching. This is needed to develop their teaching skills and to start collecting experiences to enrich their professional wisdom.”

That is, the practicum experience provides the student-teachers with real exposure to overall school environment, and particularly, helps them to become familiar with real classroom realities (Nair and Ghanaguru,2017). This teaching practicum experience enables the student-teachers to improve their knowledge and practice their general pedagogical skills such as developing lesson planning and lesson delivery skills; developing class management skills; and developing abilities to select, adapt and use of different teaching learning materials and resources.

Moreover, the practicum not only provide the student- teachers with the opportunity to try out the theoretical knowledge and teaching techniques, but also makes them aware of their future roles as teachers. Smith & Lev (2005, p. 291) argue that “The practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop personal teaching competence”.

In line with the above, Grower et al (2005, p.1-2) noted that “the objective of the teaching practice is to provide the student teachers with an opportunity to approach the real teaching situation under sympathetic supervision; to help them develop their own sense of responsibility and their own teaching styles.”

That is to say, the practicum experience provides the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to link theory to practice, and most importantly, it empowers them to develop personal knowledge and shape their professional identity, in the sense that, it increases their awareness of their personal teaching style, and strengthens their professional sense of responsibility, self-confidence, motivation and creativity in order to assume their new roles as teachers.

### **Related studies**

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions and points of view about their teaching practicum experiences.

Goh & Matthews (2011) examined the experiences and concerns of 14 Malaysian student –teachers during their teaching practicum. The findings revealed that class management and management of students' behaviour and discipline were found to be the major concerns of the participants.

Nair & Ghanaguru (2017) dealing with concerns of 25 Malaysian pre-service teachers during practicum. They investigated the student teachers' ability to bridge theory and practice in terms of teaching methodology and pedagogy, and the role of cooperating teachers and supervisors. The findings revealed that the participants were anxious about preparation towards practicum, lesson plan writing and evaluation by the cooperating teachers and supervisors.

Cretu (2019) conducted a study in which she investigated 127 Romanian pre-service teachers' perceptions on the more and the less successful aspects of their practicum experience. The results of the questionnaire analysis revealed that the participants reported more successful aspects and acceptable degree of satisfaction of their practicum experience regarding their personal and professional development, and the development of their professional relationship with school students and mentors.

Hanieche & Kara (2020) explored the impact of the practicum on developing 35 Algerian ENSB French middle school pre-service teachers' professional identity. Results of the questionnaires and the interviews indicated that class management, linking theory and practice, managing students' interaction, being provided with appropriate assistance and developing professional relationship with school mentors were found to be the most concerns of the participants.

The findings of the above studies show that the teaching practicum experience plays a crucial role in building pre-service teachers' professional competencies.

### **3.Aim and significance**

This study seeks to investigate and analyse the perception of 80 EFL pre-service teachers at the ENS of Bouzareah in Algeria on their first semester teaching practicum. We think that such an investigation is needed to explore how the Algerian EFL student-teachers of ENSB perceive the value and the effectiveness of their first semester practicum and gain deeper insight of the current reality of their practicum experience, in order to identify the possible challenges, they had faced. This study also attempts to contribute to the process of rethinking and optimizing the practicum in the Algerian ENSB pre-service teachers' education curriculum. We believe that all the remaining (10) pre-service teacher training colleges across the

country will certainly benefit from the findings of this study conducted at Bouzareah college.

#### **4. Research Questions**

The present study attempts to explore the perception of 80 EFL pre-service teachers at the ENS of Bouzareah in Algeria on the effectiveness of their first semester teaching practicum experience on their teaching skills development and overall professional growth. It addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do the Algerian ENSB student-teachers perceive the effectiveness of the practicum in enhancing their pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills?
- 2) What challenges have they encountered in their teaching practicum experience?
- 3) What do they suggest to optimize the practicum?

#### **5. Methodology**

##### **5.1. Participants**

The target sample of this study consisted of eighty (80) final year pre-service teachers (student-teachers), enrolled in a four- year Diploma of initial teacher training programme in the teaching of English as a foreign language at the Department of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Bouzareah, Algeria. (ENSB). They are prepared to become Middle school teachers of English. These fourth-year student - teachers are aged between 22 and 23 years. Most of them are female students, whose first language is Arabic or Tamazight. Tamazight is the other mother tongue for a great number of Algerians.

##### **5.2. Setting and context**

The present study was conducted in February 2023 (a week after the first semester teaching practicum experience), at the ENSB. The Algerian ENSB is a pre-service teacher training College, which provides two options of initial teacher training exit profile. A four- year Diploma for Middle school English teachers, which is equivalent to bachelor's degree in TEFL. The second option is a five-year Diploma for Secondary school English teachers, which is equivalent to master's degree in TEFL.

The TEFL course is considered as a key component in the ENSB initial teacher training curriculum. It consists of two main components: Theoretical and pedagogical knowledge, regarding English language teaching (ELT) methodology on campus and the practicum. The practicum (field experience) is divided into two parts: Visits to different assigned schools for observation and semi-intervention all along the first semester and two blocks of two-week- practicum under the supervision of schoolteacher-mentors. One block of two-week practice at the end of the first semester (January 22nd), and the second block is at the second semester (April 20<sup>th</sup>). The main objective of the TEFL course, more precisely, the practicum is to equip the Algerian pre-service teachers with the necessary

pedagogical and practical knowledge, to prepare them for the profession and develop their teaching skills. The practicum is the most required part for the students' graduation.

### **5.3. Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research method, which is vital in educational research as it enables researchers to widen the scope of understanding of phenomena in its natural context. The aim behind this method is to explore the meanings of individuals' behaviours, actions and perceptions by recording and collecting rich and in-depth data about their opinions, experiences and feelings.

The qualitative method appears to be more flexible and utilizes limited standardized instrumentation and less structured analytical procedures for both data collection and analysis. It is associated with the use of interviews, diaries, journals and open-ended questionnaires in order to generate a detailed account of human behaviour. (Dornyei, 2007).

A qualitative method is adequate to this study as it is exploratory and provides insights into the problems under investigation. It helps the researcher to understand the Algerian ENSB student-teachers 'points of view concerning their teaching experiences during the practicum and most importantly, is to enable the researcher to gain in-depth information about how they envision the practicum in the Algerian (ENSB) initial teacher training curriculum.

### **5.4. Data Collection**

To collect data for this study, the researcher used an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire is a popular instrument of collecting data, eliciting opinions and attitudes from many participants. It is often used in the field of second/ foreign language research. It allows the researcher to gather information from the participants such as learners, teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policy makers, regarding their beliefs, skills, motivation and interests.

The open-ended questionnaire includes questions providing the respondent with greater freedom and flexibility of expression. They are free to answer in their own way. Open-ended questions are useful aids for a researcher in that: a) They can provide the researcher with rich qualitative information from the respondents' answers, and b) They help to investigate the participants' intended behaviour, feelings, views and beliefs. (Dornyei, 2007).

A week after the end of the first semester practicum experience, the student-teachers were invited to fill in a questionnaire, in which, they reflect upon their teaching practicum experience and its effectiveness on their overall professional growth. The participants were encouraged to honestly and openly express their personal opinions.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections with a total of 19 items. The first section contained two questions related to teaching skills development, and linking theory and practice (lesson planning, lesson

delivery, instruction and the use of learner-centred activities); section two consisted of (7 items), related to class management competencies development (time management, ability to control the class, selecting and adapting materials, managing learners' interaction and motivation, responding to learners' needs and interests and providing feedback. Section 3 contained (3 items) that are personal and interpersonal competencies (self-confidence, sense of responsibility, relationship with their learners and their teacher-mentors). Section 4 (5 items) deals with the assistance and feedback from their teacher-mentors, the form and manner of feedback, and the quality of feedback and evaluation. Section 5 is about the difficulties and challenges the ENSB student-teachers faced during their practicum phase. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were invited to make suggestions for the improvement of the practicum.

### **5.5. Data Analysis**

Qualitative Thematic Analysis was used in this study to analyse the data gathered from the questionnaires. The aim of the use of thematic method was to enable the researcher to gain in-depth information on student-teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding their teaching practicum experiences. The Thematic analysis method is considered as the most flexible and the safest method for researchers since it offers a well-structured process for getting an overview and discovering the main themes of their research. It aims at identifying themes, understanding experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set. (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Rucker (2016) suggests a process of six steps to find or identify themes in the research data: Getting familiar with the data (reading and re-reading); coding (labelling) the whole text; searching for themes with broader patterns of meaning; reviewing themes to make sure they fit the data; defining and naming themes, and the write-up (creating a coherent narrative that includes quotes from the respondents).

Based on the above principles, data gathered from the Algerian ENSB student-teachers' questionnaires were subjected to thematic analysis. First, the student-teachers' questionnaires were coded. The codes were assigned in order to categorise and organise the questionnaires' data into meaningful groups or headings. Those headings were then further analysed, broken down, and sorted into themes. The obtained themes were reviewed and refined in order to check if they fit the data. Finally, the themes were defined and named.

## 6.Results

Based on the above principles, and after a careful analysis, the following results were obtained:

### 6.1. Pedagogical and Personal Teaching Competencies

#### a. Pedagogical and teaching skills development

The findings indicated that the practicum experience provided the ENSB student-teachers with the opportunity to improve on their pedagogical knowledge and practice their teaching. All the respondents argued that the practicum experience allowed them to put the theoretical knowledge into practice and develop their teaching skills and competencies. One participant declared that.

*the practicum helped me a lot in applying the theoretical knowledge into practice and provide me with the opportunity to improve my teaching skills.*

Another participant said that.

*The practicum helped me improve my teaching skills. Now I have clear idea how to design lesson plans and teach them to the pupils.*

The practicum also provided them with valuable opportunity to fully experience the classroom realities and enabled them to be aware of their future roles as teachers. One respondent said that.

*It was a great opportunity for me to know how teaching works and get an idea about what we will be facing in the future.*

#### b. Personal competences development

The findings revealed that the practicum experience empowered the ENSB student –teachers to develop knowledge about themselves as teachers. Most of the respondents (97.5 %) built a capacity to recognise their strengths and weaknesses, gain confidence, increase their sense of responsibility and shape their teaching style. One respondent said that.

*The practicum was a great experience that made me know about my potentials and capacities as a teacher and helped me develop self-confidence. From the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week, I felt being more confident and no longer stressed or afraid while teaching and confronting students.*

Grower et al (2005), and Smith & lev (2005), argued that the practicum experience plays a crucial role in increasing student-teachers' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses of their personal teaching style, in developing their self-confidence, and in stimulating their motivation and creativity in order to assume their new roles as teachers.

### 6.2. Teacher-mentors' assistance and feedback

As regard the schoolteacher-mentors' role, the findings revealed that (93.75%) of the respondents commented that their teacher-mentors played a significant role in enhancing their practical classroom skills. They assisted them and provided them with constructive feedback that helped them improve their teaching skills and contributed to their professional confidence. One respondent said that.

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*Our teacher-mentor's feedback was objective, effective and constructive because she guided and assisted us through constructive criticism, not just mentioning faults or blaming us, instead she corrected us and attracted our attention to the alternative solutions that can be used and made us present the same lesson correctly with other classes.*

However, a few respondents raised the issue of the negative relationship and behaviour of some teacher-mentors. Results showed that five trainees (6.25%) complained about their assigned teacher-mentors' attitude towards them. The teacher-mentors did not act as pedagogical trainers who assist the student- teachers to practice teaching, so as to help them develop self-confidence and improve their professional competencies through constructive feedback. One respondent noted that.

*my teacher mentor did not assist me in developing my teaching skills. She focused only on my negative aspects of our lessons which demotivated me. It was not constructive at all.*

Establishing a poor relationship with student-teachers and providing them with harsh negative feedback hinders their normal professional growth; and impedes the development of their personal knowledge and self-confidence. The above issue is due, in our opinion, to the lack of experience of some assigned schoolteacher-mentors. It seems that those teacher-mentors are unaware of their responsibility and the importance of their role in developing a good practicum. This attracts our attention to the selection of the schoolteacher-mentors.

Zeichner, (2002) noted that teacher-mentors need to be aware of the value and the importance of their role in teacher education. Their task is to assist and guide others in their learning and development, which is not easy if they are not conscious learners themselves.

Establishing a good rapport between teacher- mentors and student-teachers has always been considered as an essential element of any successful pre-service teacher preparation programme. Ulvik & Smith (2011) assert that the relationship between pre-service teachers and school mentors is a key characteristic of a good practicum, and the success of the practice teaching depends primarily on the type of. the relationship established between them.

Results of this study also indicated that some teacher - mentors did not provide the Algerian ENSB student teachers with the opportunity and freedom to practice their own way of teaching, but they forced them to apply and imitate their own styles. One of the respondents argued that:

*Being obliged to follow the teacher and the materials she provided, so it was hard to feel comfortable with that.*

### **6.3. Difficulties encountered during teaching practicum.**

#### **a. Practicum Duration**

The duration of the practicum (1 month in total) was the crucial issue that emerged from data analysis. All the respondents expressed the same concerns regarding the practicum duration. They complained about the time allocated to the practicum phase, which in their point view, did not allow them to fully practice teaching and develop their professional skills.

One respondent commented that.

*The practicum was a unique and a wonderful experience for me. However, two weeks were not really sufficient to fully practice teaching and develop abilities in designing activities and selecting the needed materials for my lessons.*

Another respondent expressed the same concerns regarding the practicum duration and said that.

*Time allocated to the practicum was not sufficient to practice every theoretical part we dealt with in classrooms. It was impossible to apply everything we learned at the university in just 2 weeks. It was really challenging.*

#### **b. Class Management**

Class management was another major issue that the ENSB student-teachers raised.

##### **b.1. Time management**

Managing time during practicum was a challenging issue for the majority of the Algerian ENSB student teachers. The findings indicated that (93.75) of the participants were not able to appropriately manage their time for the whole lesson or at the level of the activities. One respondent acknowledged that “I was not able to finish each lesson in one hour.” Another respondent said: “Honestly speaking, we were unable to manage our time appropriately.” This might be due to the student-teachers’ lack of experience.

##### **b.2. Control of the class**

Another challenge that the Algerian ENSB student teachers faced during their teaching practicum was class control. The findings revealed that (75%) of the respondent found difficulties to control their learners. One respondent said: “It was too hard to control my class; the students were too talkative.” Another said. “It was difficult for me to control my students’ behaviour because their number in class is large.” This shows that the ENSB student-teachers lack experience in dealing with large classes, which in our view, stands as an obstacle for student –teachers to control their learners.

### **6.4. Suggestions**

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants of this study were invited to make suggestions for optimizing the practicum. Most of the suggestions were related to the practicum duration, teacher-mentors and feedback, micro teaching, and ENSB supervisors.

**a. Practicum duration**

All the participants insisted on the need for extending the practicum duration in order to have full exposure to classroom realities, in which they will have more opportunities to act out their theoretical knowledge in real classroom setting, improve their teaching skills, develop self-confidence and shape their teaching style. One respondent suggested that.

*It would be much better if the duration of the practicum was longer than that. I hoped more time was devoted to it. For Example: 3 blocks of three-week practicum period. It would empower us to well prepared for the profession, before we become officially teachers.*

Another participant's comment was related the observation visits duration and timing.

*It would be better, if we start the observation sessions at the second semester of the third year instead of the beginning of fourth year, in order to have sufficient time for field practice in fourth year.*

**b. micro-teaching**

Other participants are suggesting the integration of micro-teaching sessions in the TEFL course, in which they present lessons and perform as a real class teacher for their classmates. They believe that this will prepare them to perform better during their field practice. One respondent suggests that.

*I think it would be amazing if we had more practice on campus. For example, if the teacher trainer gave us some time to prepare a lesson plan and present it to our classmates as if they were our pupils, especially, right before the teaching practicum We would learn a lot from each other and be prepared for the real classroom practice at school.*

**teacher-mentors and Feedback**

Other respondents focused more on schoolteacher- mentors' roles and their feedback. They suggested that teacher- mentors should be aware of their roles and act as facilitators who should guide and assist the student teachers in their learning of teaching during the practicum and provide them with more freedom and opportunities to practice teaching and develop their own way of teaching. One respondent suggested.

*I suggest that the teacher- mentor gives more opportunities to the novice pre-service teachers to be more creative and work on their own way of teaching, and not to force them to apply his or her way.*

Others commented that it will be better and more beneficial if the student-teachers are provided with both oral and written feedback. This will help them reflect on their own way of teaching.

One participant said that.

*I prefer the written feedback so that I check my mistakes and get back to my supervisor Comments when needed.*

Another crucial issue was raised by the student teachers which is the presence of their university supervisors during their teaching practicum experience one participants argued that; "It would be better if our supervisor

from ENSB was present in our practicum.” We think that university supervisors need to visit student teachers during their practicum and should collaborate with school mentors to make of the practicum as effective as possible.

## **7. Discussion**

The present study aims to investigate the Algerian ENSB student-teachers’ perceptions regarding their practicum experiences and its impact on their overall professional improvement.

### **7.1. Results of the Study related to Research Question One: The practicum experience and Student- teachers Professional Development.**

Question one investigates the effectiveness of the practicum experience in enhancing the Algerian ENSB student-teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and practice of teaching. Results of this study indicates that the practicum experience contributes to the Algerian ENSB student-teachers’ professional growth to a greater extent. It offers them with the opportunity to try out their theoretical knowledge and teaching techniques. The whole number of the respondents confirmed that the practicum experience enabled them to improve their general pedagogical knowledge and practice their teaching skills such as developing the writing of lesson plans, designing activities for their lessons and lesson delivery skills; developing class management skills; developing skills in designing tools of evaluation, and developing abilities in selecting, adapting and using different teaching learning materials for their classes. One participant commented that:

*The practicum helped me improve my teaching skills. Now I have clear idea how to design lesson plans and teach them to the pupils.*

Moreover, the practicum experience enables the Algerian ENSB student-teachers to develop personal knowledge, sense of responsibility and self-confidence. It also increases their awareness of their personal teaching style and helps them conceptualize their future roles as teachers. The findings of this study reveal that all the respondent agreed that the practicum enabled them to know about the classroom realities, which in turn. created their view of the profession to be prepared for their future roles as teachers. One respondent said that.

*It was a great opportunity for me to know how teaching works and get an idea about what we will be facing in the future.*

Based on the above findings, we can argue that the teaching practicum experience plays a significant role in enhancing the Algerian ENSB student-teachers’ teaching skills, and in shaping their professional identity as teachers to a greater extent. The findings of this study reinforce the idea that the practicum plays a vital role in improving the pre-service teachers’ professional skills and in shaping their professional identity. These findings are in line with Richards & Crookes (1988); Grower et al (2005); Smith & lev (2005); Cherry (2015) and Nair & Ghanaguru (2017).

### **7.2. Results of the Study related to Research Question two: The practicum experience and the difficulties faced by the student teachers.**

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Question two attempts to gain insights into the Algerian ENSB student-teachers' views on the difficulties and the challenges they have faced during their teaching practicum experience.

According to the findings, practicum duration, classroom management, and teacher mentors 'relationship and feedback were the major concern of the Algerian ENSB student-teachers.

The findings reveal that the practicum duration was the major concern raised by the participants. All the respondents expressed the same concerns regarding the practicum duration. They complained about the time allocated to the practicum phase, which in their point view, did not allow them to fully practice teaching and develop their professional skills. One of them noted that:

*Time allocated to the practicum was not sufficient to practice every theoretical part we dealt with in classrooms. It was impossible to apply everything we learned at the university in just 2 weeks. It was really challenging.*

Devoting appropriate and sufficient time for the practicum period means offering the Algerian ENSB student teachers with more real classroom exposure and valuable time that allow them act out their general pedagogical knowledge, improve their teaching skills, develop self-confidence and develop an awareness of their own teaching style. Richards (1990), insisted on the need for an extended period of classroom practice in order to provide more opportunities for the novice pre-service teachers to learn how to apply teaching techniques in real classroom settings and acquire reflective teaching skills.

Class Management, regarding time management and control of the class were other challenging issues that the majority ENSB student-teachers also raised. Results show that (93.75%) of the respondents found difficulties in managing their time appropriately. One respondent commented that; "I was not able to finish each lesson in one hour."

Results also reveal that (75%) of the respondent found difficulties to control their learners. One respondent said: "It was too hard to control my class; the students were too talkative." Another said. "It was difficult for me to control my students' behaviour because their number in class is large." This shows that the ENSB student-teachers lack experience in dealing with large classes, which in our view, stands as an obstacle for student –teachers to control their learners. These findings tally with the findings of Goh & Matthews's (2011); Nair & Ghanaguru's (2017); Cretu's (2019) and Hanieche & Kara's (2020).

Teacher-mentors 'relationship and feedback were also concerns raised by the participants. The findings reveal that most of the participants (93.75%) of the respondents commented that their teacher-mentors played a significant role in enhancing their practical classroom skills. They assisted them and provided them with constructive feedback that helped them

improve their teaching skills and contributed to their professional confidence.

However, a few participants (6.25%) were not satisfied with their teacher-mentors' relationship and their manner of supervision. They claimed that they were not appropriately assisted by their teacher-mentors, who were not helpful in providing them with guidance and support, and who did not act as pedagogical trainers who assist the student- teachers to practice teaching. They also added that their teacher-mentors did not provide them with constructive feedback that helps them develop self-confidence, autonomy and improve their professional competencies. One respondent noted that.

*my teacher mentor did not assist me in developing my teaching skills. She focused only on my negative aspects of our lessons which demotivated me. It was not constructive at all.*

Shantz & Brown (1999), consider the relation between the teacher-mentors and student- teachers as one of the core components of the field experience, which has an impact on the type of the feedback provided to the pre-service teachers, the degree of mentoring of the teacher mentors provides, the evaluation the pre-service teachers receive, and most importantly, the degree of autonomy given to them. Thus, a good rapport and healthy relationship between teacher-mentors and student-teachers is vital in the success of the practicum experience.

This study's outcomes also indicated that few teacher - mentors did not provide the trainees with the opportunity and freedom to practice their own way of teaching, but they forced them to imitate their own styles. One of the respondents argued that.

*Being obliged to follow the teacher and the materials she provided, so it was hard to feel comfortable with that.*

This result also reveal that the teacher-mentors seem to be unaware of their roles as facilitators of learning who need to provide the student teachers with relevant constructive feedback and help them reflect on their teaching practice. This is due, in our view, to the fact that these the teacher-mentors do not possess sufficient training in how to supervise and scaffold the student-teachers. These findings are convergent with Hanieche & Kara's (2020).

Pennington (1990, p.133) clarifies that the role of teacher mentors is "to assist individuals in developing themselves to the fullest extent possible, so that they may ultimately create their own reality, or teaching style." Therefore, teacher mentors need to be aware of their roles and create a supportive environment, in which they provide the student- teachers with freedom and assistance, so as to enable them to reflect on their current way of teaching and empower them to develop self-confidence and autonomy and encourage them to create their own style of teaching rather than obliging them to follow their mentors' styles.

### **7.3. Results of the Study related to Research Question three: The Algerian ENSB student - Teachers' suggestions for optimizing the practicum.**

The findings reveal that all of the participants considered the practicum as essential in developing and fostering their teaching competencies, and thus, it should be revisited and optimized. They argued that the Algerian ENSB initial teacher training curriculum should extend the duration of the practicum, so as to enable them to benefit from a longer training period. They suggested that to make of the field practice more favourable and effective, it should be extended at least to 3 blocks of 2-week training.

They believe that extending the practicum to 3 blocks will provide them with more exposure to real classroom situation, where they have sufficient time to practice the pedagogical knowledge they have gained during their training on campus. Moreover, they think that it is better to start the observation visits earlier, that is, in the second semester of their third year.

Other participants are suggesting the integration of micro-teaching sessions in the TEFL course, in which they present lessons and perform as a real class teacher for their classmates. They believe that this will prepare them to perform better during their field practice. We think that integrating micro teaching sessions in the ENSB curriculum will benefit the trainees and prepare them for the field practice.

Other respondents focused more on their schoolteacher- mentors' roles and feedback. They suggested that teacher- mentors should be aware of their roles and act as facilitators who should guide, assist the student teachers in their learning of teaching during the practicum and provide them with more freedom and opportunities to practice teaching and develop their own way of teaching. One respondent suggested.

*I suggest that the teacher- mentor gives more opportunities to the novice pre-service teachers to be more creative and work on their own way of teaching, and not to force them to apply his or her way.*

Others commented that it will be better and more beneficial if the student-teachers are provided with both oral and written feedback. This will help them reflect on their own way of teaching.

One participant said that.

*I prefer the written feedback so that I check my mistakes and get back to my supervisor Comments when needed.*

Another crucial issue mentioned by the student teachers was the presence of their university supervisors during their teaching practicum experience. One participant argued that; "It would be better if our supervisor from ENSB was present in our practicum." We think that University supervisors need to visit student teachers during their practicum and should collaborate with school mentors to make of the practicum as effective as possible.

## **8.Conclusion**

The practicum is a key component of the Algerian pre-service EFL teacher training curricula. It allows the student-teachers to employ and practice their learnt pedagogical and teaching skills. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed at investigating the Algerian ENSB student-teachers 'points of view regarding their practicum experiences and the challenges they had encountered during the teaching practicum in the academic year 2022/2023.

The findings of this study revealed that the teaching practicum experience enabled the Algerian ENSB student-teachers to improve their general pedagogical knowledge and practice their teaching skills such as developing the writing of lesson plans, designing activities for their lessons and lesson delivery skills; developing class management skills; developing skills in designing tools of evaluation, and developing abilities in selecting, adapting and using different teaching learning materials for their classes. Moreover, it provided them with the opportunity to experience the classroom realities and enabled them to conceptualize their role as future teachers.

The findings of this study also shed light on some difficulties faced by the Algerian EENSBS student-teachers during their practicum experience. Results indicated that practicum duration, classroom management, and teacher- mentors 'relationship and feedback were the major concern of the Algerian ENSB student-teachers.

## **Recommendation**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for different aspects of the practicum are made.

- The ENSB pre-service teacher education curriculum should reconsider the duration of the practicum and extend it to 3 blocks of two-week training, in order to provide the student teachers with more exposure to real classroom situations.
- Micro-teaching sessions should be integrated into the existing ENSB pre-service teacher education curriculum.
- The success of the practicum is largely dependent on schoolteacher-mentors and university supervisors; therefore, teacher-mentors should be aware of their critical role and act as facilitators. They should establish good rapport with the student -teachers and provide them with constructive feedback and try to avoid negative criticism so as to enable them to develop self-confidence and enhance their professional growth.
- University supervisors should visit student teachers during their practicum and should collaborate with school mentors to make of the practicum as effective as possible.

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