



Learning to teach online: student teachers' perceptions of an online English language teaching practicum at a Sri Lankan state university

Senaratne C.D. and Hettimullage R.

Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This study examines student-teacher perceptions of an English language teaching practicum conducted online in 2020 and 2021 at a state university in Sri Lanka. This non-experimental case study investigates the changes in perceptions of participants towards online learning, teaching, online interactions, and perceptions towards the online platform as a learning environment. Using a 5 point Likert Scale format (in the pre survey) and 4 point Likert Scale format (in the post survey), this study explored 64 student-teachers' perceptions towards a newly converted online practicum. The student-teachers took part in a pre and post questionnaire at the beginning and end of the practicum. Detailed information about their online experiences was gathered through an open ended question given to all students. Questions focused on perceptions about teaching, learning online, administration of course, development of needs analyses, lesson material, duration and completion of course. The results show that participants' perceptions at the beginning of the course improved significantly towards the latter part of the course when reaching completion in 2020 when the online practicum was newly introduced. Significantly, students who were following online lectures in the year 2021 have reacted positively to the online practicum. Detailed comments provide more insights into the learning, teaching strategies encountered in the online teaching practicum. The study indicates the factors that can make a difference to change the perceptions of student-teachers in curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning strategies. It also offers an alternative mechanism to conduct teaching practicums during challenging times.

KEYWORDS: *Online teaching, Teaching educator, Teaching practicum, English as a Second Language, Pandemic*

1 INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, educational institutions globally were forced to convert all their teaching and learning platforms to the online mode. Educational institutions in Sri Lanka, including state universities began to use online education platforms as an alternative mode of instruction, launching e-learning classes that paved the way for undergraduates to complete assignments, deliver presentations, take quizzes, and even internships. It is understood that the new normal and the issues that persist in developing countries demand institutions to adopt and adapt new ways and means of keeping with the pre-arranged academic calendars. Undergoing multiple postponements, the universities had to seek new methods to make sure that the academic programmes do not get delayed further. Considering everything, the e-platform was a blessing.

The e-platforms were used as essential and practical strategies to cope with the myriad of challenges that erupted due to the pandemic and global issues that ensued thereafter.

When looking for and implementing alternatives, the most crucial aspect overall was the impact the online conversion has had on the students who have been going through endless lockdowns, and economic downturns. They have also been deprived of social interaction with peers during their study periods in the universities that they would have otherwise enjoyed. This had a significant impact on the learners (Easa & Bazzi 2021). To top it all, universities had to rely on the e-learning platforms to conduct all assessments so that students will be able to complete their degree programmes without hindrances and will not be at the receiving end with the addition of more years to their period of study on campus.

This paper examines the student-teachers' perceptions about an online teaching practicum learner independence. The easy access to learning resources, tools for creating more

offered as part of a Bachelor of Arts degree programme in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at a Sri Lankan state university. The practicum was conducted online due to the prevailing circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, such as extended periods of university and school closures.

The practicum was conducted using the online mode in 2020 and 2021. The final year student-teachers who followed the teaching practicum module in these two years were the main informants of the study.

The forthcoming subsections will synthesize the key literature related to designing and implementing an online teaching practicum and will focus on important key issues related to online teaching and learning of languages and the role of the teaching practicum in language education programmes. The remaining sections will highlight the research gap/problem vis-à-vis the significance of the present study and will introduce the reader to the context in which this study was conducted.

1.1 Literature review

1.1.1. Online teaching and learning

Online teaching will be the main stream by 2025 (Palvia et al. 2018). Online teaching and learning are techniques used mostly for distance learning and is defined as 'an outcome of distance education' (Wheeler 2012). It is a process and a tool that makes use of the internet that may include either real-time (synchronous) teaching and learning or anywhere, anyplace (asynchronous) teaching and learning. There has been a significant growth in using the e platform for teaching and learning worldwide (Nicole et al. 2019). Many advantages and disadvantages are associated with the online teaching and learning strategies. For online learners, the advantages are numerous and include flexibility, accessibility and

effective virtual learning spaces and fostering creativity in teaching, literature, databases and

expertise via the online mode are other significant advantages. Also, many disadvantages can be identified when using the online platform for teaching purposes. The interruption of internet and power supplies can pose a serious hindrance to the effective delivering of teaching sessions. It can also lead to the demotivation of students if they are to log in and out of sessions. Lunney & Sammarco 2009 (as cited by Nicole et al. 2019) observes that misinterpretation of expectations is possible especially during question and answer sessions. In addition, students can just pretend to log in without active participation in the class. In a face-to face environment these occurrences can be easily overcome whereas in the online class, the teacher can just wrap things up if the silence extends. The most important disadvantage that can be cited is the disconnect between the teacher and the learner in the online e-learning platform. There has to be extra effort put in by the teachers who should be trained in teaching on the online platform.

Building relations with peers (Bart 2010) too has been identified among many other issues.

1.1.2. The teaching practicum

The teaching practicum plays a significant role in teacher education, and a well-planned teaching practicum or internship is, therefore, an integral element in any effective language teacher education programme. A teaching practicum equips novice teachers with classroom teaching experience as their teaching is observed by an experienced teacher, who offers feedback on their performance. In this process, they learn to apply their knowledge and skills related to teaching into practice and develop teacher cognition and reflection through various practical teaching-related tasks. (Brinton & Holten 1989; Crookes 2003; Darling-Hammond 2013; Hettimullage 2016; Nguyen & Ngo 2017). Teaching practicums are usually built on a reflective model of teacher education, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, taken from Wallace (1990, p.49).

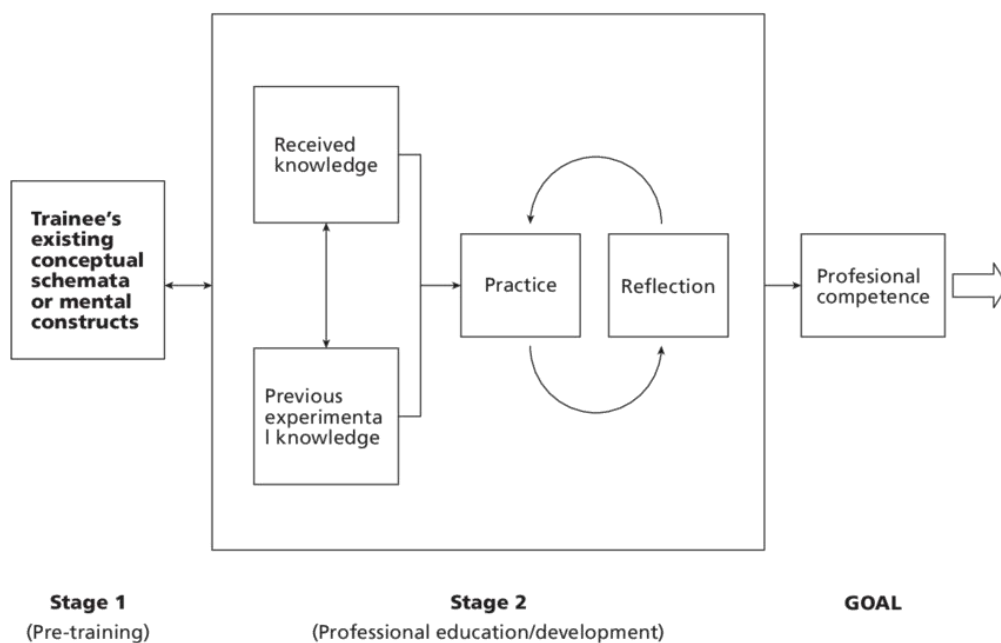


Figure 1: Reflective Model of Teacher Education (Wallace 1990, pp.49)

In a teaching practicum programme, student teachers gradually use their existing theoretical and practical knowledge, schemata and practical experience to develop an appropriate teaching style through practice and reflection.

In addition to core professional competencies such as classroom management, lesson planning and teaching methodology, the practicum helps the student teachers in training to develop transferable skills. These skills

include working under pressure, managing time, coping with unfamiliar situations, collaborating, acting on feedback, and critical thinking and problem solving (Wallace 1990; Fives, Hamman & Olivarez 2007; Malderez & Wedell 2007). Teaching practicums can consist of different types of practical teacher learning experiences. Some examples are, experienced and peer teaching observations, controlled teaching practice exercises such as micro-teaching sessions, lesson study and team-teaching activities, and more authentic experiences such as supervised and unsupervised teaching lessons with students in real classrooms. Supervised teaching practice is considered the most helpful activity for developing an appropriate teaching style. Supervised teaching involves teaching a lesson or a part of it under the supervision of a professionally qualified and experienced observer, engaging in a reflective discussion about the lesson with the observer and subsequently receiving some constructive feedback based on a set of objective criteria. In contrast, micro-teaching, where the conditions set for the teaching exercise are relatively more controlled in terms of class time, level of authenticity and complexity, class size, duration and the teacher's role, is a vital scaffolding strategy to introduce students to the practical applications of theoretical principles and techniques. Team teaching is another form of practical teacher learning and development, where peers within a teaching practice group share the same class or lesson. Auxiliary or shadow teaching involves teaching under the guidance and instruction of a more experienced teacher (Wallace 1991).

While there are claims that the body of literature on teaching practicums in the context of language teacher education programmes is insufficient (Brown & Ruiz 2016), the existing publications on teaching practicums try to understand the role and impact of this model of teacher development from the perspectives of teacher-learners and their training supervisors. In the context of the Covid pandemic, an

emerging body of literature tries to understand the impact of contingency plans executed by various teacher educational institutes and universities to conduct their traditional face-to-face teaching practicums online as access to students in classrooms becomes limited. These studies reveal that online teaching practicums have not been highly effective in developing students' practical teaching skills as much as student-teachers or their supervisors had expected. However, some essential skills for teaching in the new normal such as resilience, self-efficacy and educational technology, showed significant improvement. (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison 2020; Koşar 2021; Badawi 2021; Babanoğlu 2021; Jin 2022).

Worst case scenarios have included having to halt the practicum in the middle and asking students to submit written assignments in lieu of practicum portfolios. These studies recommend that teacher education providers develop novel strategies and adjust assessment criteria to help students develop teaching more effectively during online practicums and become more confident, effective and resilient classroom practitioners.

1.1.3. Research gaps and the significance of the study

Research on teaching practicums in Sri Lankan English language teacher education contexts and teacher education during the Coronavirus pandemic is scarce. While extended year-long practicums have always been offered as part of the pre-service English teacher training programmes in a few institutions, their impact has either not been evaluated, or such research has not appeared in the public domain. In university contexts, pre-service English language teacher education programmes with teaching practicums are a relatively novel component of the university-level teacher education programmes, and therefore developing a significant body of knowledge on how teachers develop their professional competence and knowledge base through teaching practice is of paramount significance.

1.1.4. Research Question:

In light of the research gaps highlighted above, this study aims to compare the student teachers' perceptions about following an online practicum/internship and learning to teach English online during the pandemic. The following research question guided the present study:

'What are the perceptions of student-teachers about teaching online before and after the practicum?'

1.1.5. Research context

The present study was conducted based on the student-teacher practicum, which is offered as a compulsory module in the fourth year of a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at a Sri Lankan state university. In response to the widening debate on streamlining of university education to enhance graduate employability and also to address the dearth of competent English language teachers in Sri Lankan schools, several universities commenced offering degree programmes in English Language Teaching. Unlike the traditional English studies degrees that are predominantly literature based with minor components in applied or sociolinguistics, the undergraduates in TESL are trained in Teaching English as a Second Language, Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Teaching methodology and Language policy. While the programmes are largely theoretical due to the nature of undergraduate education in Sri Lanka, opportunities for practical exposure are created through modules in practical teaching skills, professionally relevant assignments such as creating lesson plans and learning materials and frequent field visits for classroom observation. The practicum is perhaps the most "hands-on" and "useful" of these teacher-learning opportunities and therefore, plays a key role in the quality of the programme (Hettimullage 2016). At the selected university, the practicum is offered as part of a semester long internship and is offered as a compulsory module in the

second semester of the final (fourth) year of the degree programme. It prescribes the completion of 40 hours of teaching in a Sri Lankan state school recommended to the student teacher by the university. Students are advised to follow the curriculum guidelines and are expected to develop lesson plans and supplementary materials, which need to be submitted along with a reflective summary and other documents. Each student is assigned a supervisor/mentor from the Department of English Language Teaching, who will observe, and give feedback on lessons taught by the student-teacher. Prior to the internship, the students also follow a module that trains them to compile the learning and development portfolio, focusing on skills such as lesson planning and classroom management. Successful completion of the internship/practicum is a prerequisite for graduation in the degree programme.

From 2020 onwards, conducting the internships smoothly and professionally in the traditional face-to-face mode became a major challenge due to the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Therefore, a strategic decision was made in 2020 to move the internship to the online platform, with the aim of providing the opportunity for students to complete a key component of their degree and graduate on time. Although this was seen as a contingency plan and a significant amount of dissent came from both the students as well as the academic staff, the smooth transitioning from face-to-face to online delivery was planned, particularly by making adjustments to the assessment specifications and the content of the preparation programme. New sessions were introduced to train students in online teaching methodologies and strategies, compiling e-portfolios, conducting needs analyses online, planning lessons and materials to teach online interactively, using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Teams. Supervisors were appointed and were given briefings on the changes made due to the new normal. They were guided to mentor and

supervise students on overcoming the challenges posed by online teaching using video conferencing platforms, an educational phenomenon relatively new to the student-teachers as well as their supervisors.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY / MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research design

This research follows a mixed-method design, and has been influenced by interpretive and pragmatic paradigms of educational inquiry. It follows an exploratory and naturalistic case study approach, an empirical mode of inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 1994 13). In the present case study, the student-teachers were asked to evaluate their attitudes and perceptions about the online teaching and the new online practicum based on their recent experiences. The study relied on two questionnaires that were delivered before the commencement and after the completion of the practicum/internship. These questionnaires collected both quantitative as well as qualitative data about their perceptions and experiences.

2.2 Participants

The population of this study was the final year students of a BA degree programme in a Sri Lankan state university. As the size of the population in question was small and was easily contactable, the study used the census sampling method and collected data from all possible respondents. This involved the 37 student-teachers who completed the practicum in 2020 and 27 who completed it in 2021. The participants were contacted using email and were invited to complete the two questionnaires. All the respondents participated in the study voluntarily, and consent was obtained from all participants in the questionnaire itself. It was a voluntary exercise.

The questionnaire mentioned that by taking part, students are giving consent to use the data for purposes of this study. All identity markers related to the participants and their affiliated institution were removed from the data prior to the commencement of process of data analysis.

2.3 Data collection methods

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2.4. The questionnaire

Each questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part explored the students’ attitudes and perceptions about the online teaching practicum and teaching English online, using a 4 point Likert scale. 11 statements/questions focused on students’ attitudes towards the online practicum experience. The remaining 13 questions asked the students to evaluate their perceptions about teaching English online, in comparison to teaching face-to-face. Table 1 outlines the 24 items of the pre- and post-practicum questionnaires.

At the end of each questionnaire, an open-ended section was added to elicit student-teachers’ comments and responses more freely about their experience of learning to teach English online during the practicum. The online questionnaire format was selected since it was suitable for collecting data related to their perceptions and attitudes effectively and efficiently within the constraints created by the pandemic (Dornyei 2007). It was believed that the questionnaire format allowed the researchers to collect the required data efficiently and quickly. However, some limitations were noticed and will be reflected upon, towards the end of this article.

Table 1: Questionnaire Items

Categories	Items
Perceptions on teaching	<i>Online teaching practicum is better than the F2F teaching practicum. Online practicum is more flexible (in fixing classes, arranging times) than F2F. Online practicum is the best choice under special circumstances. Conducting the practicum online is easier than teaching in schools. Use of technology enhanced the teaching experience.</i>
Perceptions on learning	<i>Students are afraid of online learning Online learning is better than F2F learning Online learning motivates the learners Online learning is more effective than F2F learning in the ESL classroom There is more interaction in online learning</i>
Administrati on of the course	<i>Adequate guidance and support (how to use zoom, CAL, developing online teaching activities, learning material etc.) was given prior to the commencement of the online practicum by the course coordinators</i>
Developing lesson materials	<i>Online teaching fulfills language learning needs Online courses are the best for learning English as a Second Language under special circumstances</i>
Duration & completion of the course	<i>The online practicum enables the student-teachers to gain new skills to adapt to the new normal</i>

2.5. Data collection procedures

As it was challenging to liaise with school principals due to multiple periods of school closure and issues in ICT accessibility, the student-teachers were invited to choose learners who would be willing to commit to a month-long English language programme with access

to computers and the internet. Each learner was issued a letter of introduction/recommendation by the department so that they can seek the necessary permission from the parents/guardians or the school principals of the participant students. Consent was obtained from parents/guardians prior to the commencement of the course. The student-teachers conducted online needs analyses with their prospective students, and lesson materials and lesson plans were created based on these findings. The online English course included 40 hours of instruction for the chosen set of students. The assigned supervisors were expected to approve all lessons, lesson plans, and needs analyses. Each student teacher got informed consent from all of the students in the English class they were teaching. Zoom was used to deliver the online training. With the help of the university's ICT center, CAL accounts were created. A one-month practicum was held (40 hours of teaching, 2 hours per day, 10 hours per week). The pre-teaching questionnaire was distributed prior to the start of the teaching practicum, and the post-teaching questionnaire was distributed just before the programme reached completion.

Prior to the commencement of the practicum and towards the end, when instructions and guidelines were presented, the questionnaires were administered to the student-teachers. The questionnaires were designed using google forms and the link was shared twice. The first questionnaire, which was developed on a 5-point Likert Scale format, received 37 out of 39 responses from student-teachers in 2020. Twenty seven (N-27) student-teachers (out of 27) completed the form in the 2021 batch. Hence, 64 student-teachers, all in the final year of the TESL special degree programme took part in the study. During the practicum, the student-teachers were provided continuous support on teaching online, which served as a form of intervention mechanism in this study. The training and support intended to create a positive change in the attitudes and perceptions of the student-teachers. However, it was not

presupposed as such findings can only be obtained through a systematic inquiry, such as the present study.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results of the pre-practicum questionnaire indicated that student-teachers had extremely negative perceptions regarding online teaching and completing the practicum. For example, 74.3 % of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that the online practicum is better than the traditional face-to-face practicum, in the pre-course survey. Similarly, 68.6 % perceived the online practicum to be less flexible, despite the fact that the online contingency plan was introduced to enhance flexibility of delivery and give them the opportunity to graduate on time. The participants had a divided opinion as to whether the online practicum was the best option in the given pandemic circumstances, although equal percentages 37.1% either remained neutral or decided to agree/strongly agree with this statement. 71.4 % believed that conducting the practicum online was more difficult, although in fact, it was much easier for scheduling times for classes and selecting students in an online practicum. According to the student-teachers' perceptions expressed in the pre survey, the only advantage of the online practicum was that it was safer than a face-to-face practicum in the given pandemic situation. The participant student-teachers' negative perceptions towards the online practicum seemed to stem from their views about online learning and teaching. The majority thought that online teaching and learning of a language was more difficult, less interactive and therefore, a demotivating and scary experience that would increase students' language learning anxiety. Many participants (61.3%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the use of technology would enhance the learning experience, although a significant percentage of the sample population (34.1 %) remained neutral regarding their position, even on this statement.

Their ratings related to teaching and learning online reveal that the student-teachers in general (85.3%) felt insecure and less confident about adapting to an online teaching and learning environment vis-à-vis aspects of teaching such as giving instructions, classroom management, developing rapport with the learners as it was their first experience using online platforms for teaching language skills. This seems to be mainly because they had received their preparatory training for teaching in traditional "brick-and-mortar" classrooms. Although the student-teachers were offered a number of practical teaching skills related courses including one on Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) during their first three years, none of these courses had focused on teaching English online synchronously. Their CALL module had focused mainly on integrating digital technologies in face-to-face classrooms and they appeared less confident about applying their understanding of communicative and task-based language teaching methodologies in online learning environments.

The participant student-teachers' responses changed significantly by the end of the practicum and almost all of them developed positive perceptions about online teaching in general and the online practicum experience in particular. The researchers believe this was mainly due to the guidance provided during the practicum by the supervisors and the course coordinators. Most respondents to the survey felt that the online practicum was more successful (62.2%), more flexible (81.1%) and that it was the best 94.6%, and the safest (94.6%) option in the given pandemic circumstances. After completing the practicum, 56.8 % of the respondents thought that conducting the practicum online was easier than doing it face-to-face in a traditional classroom. Almost all the respondents now agreed that technology enhances the learning and teaching experience and that it was a motivating and engaging experience that increased the amount of interaction. After the

completion of the practicum, only a minority continued to believe that students were afraid of online learning and teaching (29.7 %) and that it was a demotivating experience (37.8%). Overall, the student-teachers' view that the online practicum was the easiest (56.85 %) and safest (94.7%) option during the pandemic remained unchanged. These findings suggest that many thought that implementing an online practicum was challenging, even at the end of their internship period. Most respondents felt that doing an online practicum was as effective as doing a traditional face-to-face one in a physical classroom, although different skills and strategies in classroom management and educational technology would be required to make learning successful.

Overall, the student-teachers provided positive evaluations about practicum administration. Student-teachers unanimously agreed on the level of guidance and support provided for acquiring the new skills they needed to prepare for teaching during the pandemic, such as using video conferencing platforms, learning management systems and creating materials for the online language learning classroom. The respondents thought that online practicum enabled the student-teachers to gain new skills to adapt to the new normal. When organizing an online practicum or transitioning a traditional teaching practicum into the online mode as in the present situation, it is vital to analyze the contextual constraints as well as any gaps or deficits in student-teachers' existing skill set and provide remedial training opportunities so that they would feel more confident to adapt to the new situation.

4 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to present a comparative analysis of the student-teachers' perceptions about learning to teach English on an online practicum/internship in the final year of their honours degree in TESL. Although it was extremely challenging from an administrative point of view to conduct the

practicum successfully during the pandemic due to school closures and the other complexities arising from it, the practicum was considered an indispensable component of the student-teachers' professional learning experience and was therefore mandatory for the completion of their degrees. Therefore, a new online version of the practicum/internship was introduced to replace the traditional teaching practicum that was conducted in-person with students in real classes in state school contexts. Certain adjustments, such as allowing the student-teachers to find their own students and fix class schedules with them were necessary to ensure the success of the practicum in its contingency form. The findings suggest that student-teachers faced the challenge of adapting to the new experience of teaching online during a period of fragmented instruction and also acquired a host of new skills and competencies, particularly in the use of digital technologies for teaching languages, despite their initial anxieties and lack of confidence that it would lead to a positive educational experience for them and their students. Therefore, we can conclude that the advantages of the online practicum outweighed its disadvantages. However, given that the students would be required to teach face-to-face more in the future as they start their first teaching job, they would require more time and practice to transfer the learning gains of the online practicum to their real classroom teaching experiences and would require more support than usual.

It should be noted that the student-teachers' lack of experience with teaching online may have been the main reason for the negative perceptions expressed in the pre-practicum questionnaires. This issue needs to be addressed by adding a component of teaching online synchronously to the computer-assisted language teaching modules, focusing on micro-skills for teaching online, strategies for motivating and engaging online learners, as well as facilitating and moderating online interaction, particularly the use of the breakout

rooms for small group work. Before teaching real students online, the student-teachers can be provided with opportunities to observe video-recorded online English lessons and engage in more controlled peer-teaching and micro-teaching activities in order to gain more confidence and scaffold the development of the necessary skills. The student-teachers were assisted by the faculty to find students and fix class schedules, by making formal links with schools and making the necessary arrangements at a more formal and institutional level, which ensured more consistency, quality and uniformity of the learning experience for each student.

While this study used questionnaires that were considered a more practical and feasible way to obtain data from as many respondents as possible in the pandemic circumstances, more extensive data could have been elicited from interviews, which would result in a more in-depth understanding. Given the small sample size, the authors do not intend to generalize these findings to all student-teachers completing their practicums online in future. However, the majority of these findings would be of significant relevance to most other contexts where practicums were conducted online due to the pandemic and school closures. Given that online delivery has become an influential new norm in English language teaching, more research would be required on how teachers need to be prepared to teach online, particularly during their pre-service practicum and internship periods (Brown & Ruiz 2017). Future studies should also focus on evolving teachers' cognitions during such practicum and internship periods and how teachers develop contextually appropriate pedagogies for online teaching and manage their professional development. As online teaching will be a key norm in the Covid endemic world, continuing to provide teachers some exposure and training to teach online would be an essential component of English language teacher education programmes.

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