An Evaluation of Practicum Courses at Farhangian University

Zahra Masoumpanah [a, *], Mohammad Hassan Tahririan [a], Katayoon Afzali [b], Ahmad Alibabaee [b]

[a] Farhangian University, Iran

[b] Sheikhbahaee University, Iran

A B S T R A C T

This study was an attempt to evaluate practicum courses at Farhangian University. Since practicum is a significant component of teacher education which links theory to practice and prepares student-teachers for their work, this study was intended to explore the extent to which (1) the practicum objectives stated in the 'Curriculum Document of TEFL' at Farhangian University were actualized, (2) the students' language teaching profession needs were fulfilled, and (3) the participants were satisfied with the courses. To this end, based on the data gathered from interview, focus-group discussion and the University documents, a questionnaire was developed and administered to 144 student-teachers and mentors. Findings revealed that although the courses were relevant to the student-teachers' occupational needs, and improved participants' motivation, self-confidence, and class management skills, they failed to fulfill a number of their needs and course objectives to a considerable degree. Findings also indicated that the way courses implemented in practice was not satisfactory. The findings are discussed and some implications are provided for student-teachers, EFL teacher educators, and syllabus designers.

Keywords: Farhangian University; language teaching profession needs; objectives; practicum

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* Corresponding author: Farhangian Universitym, Khorramabad, Iran
Email address: zmasoumpanah1356@yahoo.com

Introduction

Teacher education has received growing attention among researchers over the last decades (Ellis, 2009). It is broadly interpreted as the development of ways of teaching and the acquisition of attitudes that facilitate success in teaching career (Townsend & Bates, 2007). It emphasizes the practical preparation of prospective teachers, including language teachers, in handling classes and requires a specialized knowledge base obtained through both academic study and practical experience (Burns & Richards, 2009). Among the courses in pre-service teacher education, practicum courses are supposed to help student-teachers gain practical classroom teaching experience. These courses, as the hallmark of teacher education curriculum, provide an ideal setting in which student-teachers are supported by mentors (i.e., both teacher educators and cooperating teachers) at schools in order to develop their practical teaching competencies.

All three members of the teaching practice i.e., student-teachers, teacher educators and cooperating teachers benefit from the practicum courses in different ways. Teacher educators and cooperating teachers benefit from their mentoring experience by broadening their views of themselves and the teaching profession, deepening their understanding of teaching, cultivating leadership development, supporting communities of practice (Hanson & Moir, 2008), and deriving satisfaction and pride from their roles as mentors, through witnessing their student-teachers' progress and noticing evidence of their own impact on student-teachers' professional development (Beck & Kosnik, 2000).

Practicum courses are also beneficial for student-teachers by linking theory to practice, preparing them for their work (Hughes, 1998; Klassen et al., 2014), and after graduation by helping them with their job searches, informing their career paths, and improving skills that they use in their jobs (Sprague & Percy, 2014). They also promote student-teachers' reflective thinking and focus of attention (Sharafi & Abdolmanafi, 2014), self-efficacy (Goker, 2006; Liaw, 2009), confidence, self esteem, self reflection, problem solving capacities, and classroom management skills (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012). Besides, they reduce feeling of isolation (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012), and increase course satisfaction, general professional skills, and dedication to community involvement (Turner, 2014). In addition, they offer opportunities for student-teachers to examine and understand teaching values and behaviors, and provide skills to develop their teaching throughout their careers (Gebhard, 2009).

Research supports the teacher education programs which help teachers' increase and apply academic and pedagogical knowledge in practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). One of the main issues suggested in literature for the application of knowledge in practice is anchored in the importance of relating language teaching to the particular needs of learners. Widdowson (1983) states that language courses cannot be designed until we know about the students for whom the course is intended, and a program must be based on the aims of the students. Rorrison (2007) also believes that the learning needs of pre-service teachers must be recognized and they should learn about teachers' work in ways that are empowering and transformative for their practice.

Another issue suggested in literature for the application of knowledge in practice is actualization of course objectives during the practicum. Richards and Crooks (1988) express the importance of the objectives stated for a practicum course as reflecting perspectives about the nature of teaching, teacher development, and the approach or philosophy implicit in the program. In this regard, in an attempt to evaluate practicum courses in Farhangian University, Nourouzi (2016) focused on the competencies student-teachers obtained from practicum based on course objectives and determined the corresponding practicum course during which the student-teachers must have acquired the related competency. Through efforts to specify the objectives of

practicum courses, there has been a gradual shift from mere observation to enabling student-teachers to expand awareness of how to set their own goals related to improving their teaching (Crooks, 2003), and toward questioning, articulating and reflecting on their own teaching and learning philosophies, which include an amalgamation of assumptions, beliefs, values, educational, and life experiences (Crooks, 2003; Gebhard, 2009; Richards, 1998).

In light of these arguments, the Iranian educational system has recently made various encouraging initiatives in order to promote the practicum courses in teacher education programs. To examine the effectiveness of these courses, it seems essential first to investigate the theoretical aspect of the courses and then to compare them with the way they are implemented in practice.

Practicum at Farhangian University

Farhangian University functions under the Ministry of Science and Higher Education devolved from the Ministry of Education. It specializes in teacher education in different fields, including TEFL. Undergraduate TEFL students studying at this university have to attend at 512 hours of practicum courses (almost 15% of the overall educational hours) from the fifth semester to the end of the curriculum. In addition to classroom teaching, observation of other teachers, preparing teaching journals and portfolios, the student-teachers need to involve in multiple teacher development activities: (a) action research by analyzing past practicum reports to identify the themes or issues they need to work on; (b) lesson study, i.e., students are placed into schools in teams of three or four, then partners act as critical friends, available to observe and assist in any collection of information, to observe the partners' teachings, participate in meetings with their partner and keep a journal that documents their investigations into their own teaching; and (c) independent and autonomous work: the cooperating teachers allow students to observe and provide feedback for the peers' teaching. The cooperating teacher oversees the work done by the students and is available if necessary.

The objectives of practicum at Farhangian University, as mentioned in the curriculum for the undergraduate TEFL program are, (a) to provide student-teachers with the opportunity to practice what they learn, to broaden their experiences, and to develop their professional competencies (practicum I), (b) to provide student-teachers with the opportunity to participate in actual teaching and expect them to identify problems through investigating the learning context, and consequently, design, implement, and evaluate learning activities to solve the problems (practicum II), (c) to do action research based on the experiences that student-teachers obtain from practicum one and two (practicum III), and (d) to educate reflective teachers who attend in collaborative inquiry and undertake action research (practicum IV).

In this study, attempts are made to address the students' language teaching profession needs in practicum and explore the extent to which they have been fulfilled. In addition, practicum courses are investigated to find the extent to which the objectives stated in the curriculum are actualized and the participants are satisfied with the courses. With this in mind, this study aimed at filling the gap in literature regarding EFL student-teachers, teacher educators, and cooperating teachers' perception about practicum implemented at Farhangian University by answering the following questions:

1. To what extent can the practicum courses implemented for the undergraduate TEFL students at Farhangian University fulfill the student-teachers' language teaching profession needs, from the perspective of the mentors and student-teachers?

2.   To what extent have the practicum courses implemented for the undergraduate TEFL students at Farhangian University achieved the objectives stated for the courses, from the perspective of the mentors and student-teachers?

3.   To what extent do the practicum courses implemented for the undergraduate TEFL students at Farhangian University motivate and satisfy mentors and student-teachers?

Method

Participants

A total of 191 student-teachers, 29 teacher educators, and 24 cooperating teachers participated in this study. Out of this number, 120 student-teachers, 12 teacher educators and 12 cooperating teachers filled out the questionnaire; 42 student-teachers, 12 cooperating teachers, and 12 teacher educators participated in the interview; and 29 student-teachers, five teacher educators teaching practicum, and five cooperating teachers participated in focus-group discussion. Participants were chosen from Lorestan, Khoozestan, Mazandaran, and Isfahan provinces. From those who volunteered and filled the consent forms to participate, some participants were randomly observed in and out of their classes. All student-teachers had successfully attended the theoretical courses of the program and were attending junior and senior high schools for practicum I, II, III, or IV. Cooperating teachers and teacher educators had mentoring experience from two to 27 years. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussion were conducted with the participants of practicum courses (student-teachers and mentors) in schools and university. Interviewees were encouraged to speak freely regarding their mentoring experience. The interviews lasted 15 to 30 minutes and the duration of the focus group discussion was about 60 minutes. The questions were mainly about the participants' reflections about their needs, expectations, and problems in practicum courses. These were all audio-taped and transcribed.

Written documents and artifacts included the curriculum for the undergraduate TEFL program at Farhangian University, and reflective journals provided by student-teachers about their thoughts, feelings, actions and reactions about practicum, as well as reflections and comments on other student-teachers teaching at schools.

A questionnaire was prepared based on the participants' (mentors and student-teachers) perceptions explored in interviews, documents and observations, and was organized based on Guskey's (2000) model. The first section of the questionnaire inquired about the *achievement of the objectives of the courses* (items 1-19); the second section asked about the respondents' *satisfaction level and usefulness* (items 20-36); and section 3 asked about the perceived impact of the courses on student-teachers' *self-perception, motivation, and knowledge-base* (items 37-45). These sections of the questionnaire were prepared for a Likert type scale. Open-ended questions about the problems of the respondents in the courses and what they expected from the courses followed these sections. The questionnaire was first validated with five colleagues to check for item clarity. Then, the modified questionnaire was piloted to 22 student-teachers for reliability estimation. Cronach alpha coefficients estimated for the three sections were .92, .92, and .86, respectively; and three items were deleted. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the expressed need or objective has been satisfied by choosing one of the options from 1 (Not at All) to 5 (To a Great Degree).

Procedure

Data were collected from multiple sources in two phases. In the qualitative phase of the study, the curriculum for the undergraduate TEFL program at Farhangian University (2014) was reviewed to provide a list of operationalized course objectives; semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with mentors and student-teachers to come up with a list of students' language teaching profession needs and criteria for satisfaction regarding practicum courses. The results of this qualitative phase were organized to make a questionnaire for evaluating the practicum courses. In the quantitative phase, questionnaires were distributed to student-teachers, and teacher educators in university, and to cooperating teachers at schools.

To answer the first research question (student-teachers' language teaching profession needs), data from items in the third section of the questionnaire were fed into SPSS 21; descriptive statistics (mean) were calculated, along with deductive content analysis (Patton, 2002) of the qualitative data from the open-ended questions about expectations and problems. For the second and third research questions (achievement of objectives and student satisfaction), the same data analysis procedures were applied to the second and the first section of the questionnaire. To find the major themes of open-ended questions of questionnaire, the frequency of occurrence for the recurring themes was identified and counted and the results were finally tabulated. The researcher relied on the integration of multiple sources to "build a coherent justification for the themes" (Creswell, 2003, p.196) and the research instruments, data collection and analysis procedures were carefully designed.

Results

Questionnaire results

Results indicated that more than 50% of the participants adopted a moderate standpoint toward the course in general and 36.3% had a negative attitude toward it (M= 2.7). To investigate the first research question of the study, the mean frequency of all items in the third domain of the questionnaire indicated that 79% of the participants agreed with the fulfillment of student-teachers' language teaching profession needs by practicum to a moderate or considerable degree. Similarly, for the second research question, more than 60% of the participants adopted a moderate standpoint toward achievement of course objectives (M=2.85). About satisfaction level of the participants (Q3), the frequency (percentage) of the participants' perception showed no or little difference among the degrees of perception (about 30% for each degree of the scale). The results of all participants' perception about different domains of the questionnaire are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Respondents' Perception about Different Domains of Evaluation of Practicum Courses

Criteria	Mean	Not at all	To a small degree	To a moderate degree	To a considerable degree	To a great degree
Needs	3.2093	4.7%	14.0%	39.5%	39.5%	2.3%
Objectives	2.8571	4.8%	19.0%	61.9%	14.3%	0%
Satisfaction	2.8372	7.0%	32.6%	30.2%	30.2%	0%
Total	2.7045	4.5%	31.8%	52.3%	11.4%	0%

Item by item analysis of the third section of the questionnaire indicated that language teaching profession needs were perceived to be achieved to a considerable or greater degree with the courses. The less fulfilled need seems to be 'equipping student-teachers with a variety of instructional strategies to promote student engagement' in which 41.8% of the participants perceived it to be achieved to a small degree, and the most fulfilled one seems to be 'better understanding of students and teacher roles in the class' in which 76.8% of the participants perceived it to be achieved to a considerable or great degree.

Table 2
Respondents' Item by Item Perception about Achievement of Language Teaching Profession Needs in Practicum Courses

Language teaching profession needs	Not at all	To a small degree	To a moderate degree	To a considerable degree	To a great degree
Student-teachers have a better self-concept, satisfaction, and confidence in their ability as a student teacher now.	11.6%	4.7%	9.3%	41.9%	32.6%
Student-teachers have more desire to try out new ideas.	4.7%	16.3%	18.6%	25.6%	34.9%
Student-teachers have more desire to know more about their field.	2.3%	16.3%	11.6%	34.9%	34.9%
Student-teachers feel better informed and knowledgeable about the new curriculum goals now.	4.7%	16.3%	11.6%	46.5%	20.9%
Student-teachers have a better understanding of students and teacher roles in the class now.	2.3%	11.6%	9.3%	41.9%	34.9%
Student-teachers have an increased awareness of the characteristics and needs of young learners	7.0%	7.0%	16.3%	51.2%	18.6%
Student-teachers have a better understanding of different learning styles.	2.3%	20.9%	18.6%	30.2%	27.9%
Student-teachers know better how to evaluate and use textbooks according to their occupational needs.	4.7%	11.6%	23.3%	37.2%	23.3%
Student-teachers are equipped with variety of instructional strategies to promote student engagement.	20.9%	20.9%	18.6%	32.6%	7.0%

Item by item analysis of the first and second sections of the questionnaire (Table 3 & 4) both indicated that the majority (more than 50%) of the participants were satisfied with all items to a considerable degree.

Table 3
Respondents' Item by Item Perception about Level of Satisfaction in Practicum Courses

Satisfaction	Not at all	To a small degree	To a moderate degree	To a considerable degree	To a great degree
The course was well-planned and organized.	11.6%	18.6%	9.3%	34.9%	25.6%
The content of the course was relevant to student-teachers' occupational needs.	16.3%	18.6%	14.0%	34.9%	16.3%
The course contained up-to-date information about student-teachers' field.	9.3%	18.6%	18.6%	32.6%	20.9%
The course was motivating and interesting.	11.6%	14.0%	4.7%	27.9%	41.9%
During the course, student-teachers were encouraged to participate in the activities.	7.0%	16.3%	7.0%	34.9%	34.9%
A variety of teaching and learning approaches were used in the course.	20.9%	27.9%	14.0%	25.6%	11.6%
The resources and materials used such as handouts were adequate.	14.0%	32.6%	30.2%	9.3%	14.0%
The atmosphere was friendly and comfortable to share and discuss student-teachers' experiences.	11.6%	30.2%	18.6%	18.6%	20.9%
The course helped student-teachers relate the theory to teaching practice.	16.3%	14.0%	18.6%	30.2%	20.9%
Student-teachers were encouraged to discuss and to find solutions to real-life problems.	11.6%	18.6%	16.3%	39.5%	14.0%
Student-teachers were given opportunities to implement what they learned during the course.	20.9%	14.0%	16.3%	23.3%	25.6%
Student-teachers were encouraged to collaborate with peers.	7.0%	25.6%	16.3%	32.6%	18.6%
The new constructivist and communicative approaches were modeled by the trainers.	16.3%	23.3%	25.6%	18.6%	16.3%
Student-teachers were encouraged to think critically about their experiences in light of the new knowledge.	16.3%	27.9%	16.3%	18.6%	20.9%
Student-teachers created materials to be used in their own classes.	18.6%	32.6%	16.3%	23.3%	9.3%
At the end, student-teachers' evaluation about the course was collected.	11.6%	18.6%	25.6%	30.2%	14.0%
The course was useful for student-teachers' teaching and professional development	9.3%	11.6%	9.3%	39.5%	30.2%

According to the questionnaire results (Table 3), the majority of the participants believed the courses were 'motivating and interesting' (69.8%), 'well-planned and organized' (60.5%), 'relevant to the student-teachers' occupational needs' (51.2%), 'up-to-date' (53.5%), and 'useful for student-teachers' teaching and professional development' (69.7%). The majority of the participants believed 'student-teachers were encouraged to participate in the activities' (69.8%), to 'discuss and find solutions to real-life problems' (53.5%), to 'collaborate with peers' (51.2%), and 'relate theory to teaching practice' (51.1%). Likewise, 51.2% of the participants believed student-teachers 'created materials to be used in their own classes' to a small degree or not at all.

Table 4

Respondents' Item by Item Perception about Achievement of Objectives in Practicum Courses

Satisfaction	Not at all	To a small degree	To a moderate degree	To a considerable degree	To a great degree
Practicum I					
Student-teachers can identify the educational and pedagogical problems at the school and classroom level	7.0%	16.3%	18.6%	34.9%	23.3%
Student-teachers can explain educational and pedagogical problems through scientific evidence.	11.6%	18.6%	30.2%	18.6%	20.9%
Student-teachers can give reflective commentaries on their observations and empirical findings.	2.3%	16.3%	14.0%	34.9%	32.6%
Student-teachers can analyze actual teaching practices and adapt them with theoretical findings.	9.3%	11.6%	27.9%	37.2%	14.0%
Practicum two provides student-teachers with the opportunity to participate in actual teaching	9.3%	9.3%	25.6%	41.9%	14.0%
Total	4.7%	18.6%	44.2%	30.2%	2.3%
Practicum II					
Practicum two expects students to identify problems through investigating the learning context	9.3%	16.3%	18.6%	41.9%	14.0%
Student-teachers are expected to design, implement, and evaluate learning activities to solve the problems.	2.3%	32.6%	18.6%	27.9%	18.6%
Student-teachers are expected to reflect on the pedagogical issues by exposing them to the applied knowledge which is an integration of intuition, declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, conditional knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge.	7.0%	16.3%	32.6%	30.2%	14.0%
Student-teachers are expected to reexamine the experiences they gain from participating in teaching and provide commentaries on their findings.	7.0%	20.9%	20.9%	32.6%	18.6%
Student-teachers are expected to control classrooms independently,	7.0%	11.6%	32.6%	30.2%	18.6%
Total	4.7%	20.9%	53.5%	20.9%	0%

Practicum III					
Student-teachers examine their own professional capacities to identify their weak points.	0%	18.6%	30.2%	32.6%	18.6%
Student-teachers make use of instructional planning and their supervisors' assistance in order to compensate for their weak points	14.0%	20.9%	25.6%	27.9%	11.6%
Student-teachers are provided with the opportunity to teach in classrooms without their mentors' help	4.7%	14.0%	18.6%	48.8%	14.0%
Student-teachers are expected to write reflective commentaries on their teaching practices, codify, and analyze them.	7.0%	18.6%	32.6%	23.3%	18.6%
Total	2.3%	25.6%	39.5%	30.2%	2.3%
Practicum IV					
Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to design and implement instructional units based on the analyses of the curriculum and in collaboration with their mentors	9.3%	20.9%	32.6%	30.2%	7.0%
Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to assess the influence of the instructional units on students' achievement.	4.7%	23.3%	16.3%	30.2%	25.6%
Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to describe the experiences they obtain in lesson study	4.7%	25.6%	23.3%	25.6%	20.9%
Practicum four provides student-teachers with the opportunity to report their findings from their own professional performance.	9.3%	18.6%	23.3%	37.2%	11.6%
Total	7%	16.3%	55.8%	20.9%	0%

Results indicated that the majority of the participants had positive opinions toward 'giving reflective commentaries on their observations and empirical findings' (67.5%), 'identifying the educational and pedagogical problems at school and classroom level' (58.2%), and 'analyzing actual teaching practices and adapting them with theoretical findings' (51.2%). Besides, 55.9% had positive opinions toward 'the opportunity to participate in actual teaching', 'identifying problems through investigating the learning context', and 'studying the learning context, and designing instructional units'. Moreover, 62.8% of the participants believed they are provided with the 'opportunity to teach in classrooms without their mentors' help', and 55.8% believed the course provided them the opportunity to 'assess the influence of the instructional units on students' achievement' to a high degree. The total perception of the participants about each of the four practicum courses (Table 4) indicates they mostly adopted a moderate standpoint toward each practicum course.

Qualitative results

Open-ended questions in the questionnaire included questions about the participants' expectations, advantages, and problems of the courses. Analyzing their responses to the question

about their expectations, as depicted in Table 5, revealed that according to the participants, the main expectations include 'training the mentors', in addition to 'starting courses earlier in the program and allocating more time and importance', and 'learning reflection and critical thinking'. They also expected to 'add prerequisite courses in which student-teachers learn about action research and lesson study'.

Table 5
Participants' Expectations

Expectation	Frequency
Training the mentors regarding the precise implementation of the courses	9
Allowing student-teachers to teach and learn from their own practice	7
Starting schools which are associated with the university and close to it, with experienced teachers to educate language student-teachers.	4
Improving student-teachers' teaching competencies	5
Introducing different teaching approaches for different situations	5
Promoting student teacher's flexibility	5
Making a link between theory and practice by using action research and lesson study	7
Starting courses earlier in the program and allocating more time and importance of experiential learning	8
Allowing students to work independently and autonomously	5
Learning reflection and critical thinking to reflect on their own and others' teaching	8
Improving psychological knowledge and the way to engage in students' feeling and psychological problems	6
Adding prerequisite courses in which students learn about initiatives like action research and lesson study	9
Receiving teachers' reflection on students' voice	4

The extract below from the student teacher's responses to open-ended questions reveals the seriousness of what they expect:

> *We first need to know what action research is and how to do it, so we should have courses of action research and lesson study before we enter into the context of school… our mentors themselves have problems with these issues. (Student teacher #38)*

The second open-ended question asked the participants about the advantages of practicum. As Table 6 shows, the participants perceived the main advantage of practicum as to 'improve motivation and self-confidence' of student-teachers, and to be 'relevant to student-teachers occupational needs'.

Table 6
Participants' Perceptions of the Advantages of Practicum

Advantages	Frequency
The courses are motivating	12
Encouraging students to reflect on teachers and peers' teaching	6
Relevance to student-teachers' occupational needs	11
Watching and learning from experienced teachers	8
Planning and thinking about the learning environment	4
Building flexibility and responsiveness in trainees for using different teaching approaches in different situations	4
Being introduced different teaching approaches for different situations	5
Learning strategies from the experienced teachers	5
Learning to adapt the lesson plan based on the learners' level of proficiency	5
Learning classroom management	8
Learning to attract students' attention	4
Learning to confront different kinds of learners	3
Learning how to function in the socio-cultural context of school	4
Learning to use new technologies in teaching	5
Learning about different cultures in different regions within their country	4
Learning to confront unexpected events and behaviors, and parents	5
Learning to confront cheating and cheaters	3
Learning about assessment and how to control and administer tests	3
Learning class management and responding properly and in time to what happens within the classroom	5
Improving student-teachers' self-confidence	9

The excerpt below from the responses shows the aforesaid advantages:

> *The only course which was helpful for us was practicum in which we learnt how to confront different kinds of learners. We learnt from teachers even if they were weak. We observed them and learnt what to do and what not to do. (Student teacher # 4)*

The third open-ended question asked the participants about problems they had with practicum courses. The greatest problems, according to the participants (Table 7) were 'lack of proper observation and supervision of teacher educators', 'lack of critical thinking'; in addition to 'lack of satisfaction with the way the courses were implemented in practice'.

Table 7
Participants' Perception about Course Problems

Problems	Frequency
The way courses implemented in practice is not satisfactory	8
Educators are not available most of the time	5
Educators are not willing to answer students' questions	5
There are not enough resources, classes, time and competent teachers available	3
Some teachers put a great deal of stress	3
No proper observation and supervision of teacher educators	9
Cooperating teachers' behavior towards them was not appropriate	3
Schools receiving the student-teachers do not cooperate with them	3
No action, no excitement, no variation in activities, and no lesson planning	4
Cooperating teachers talk haphazardly about everything in class and waste class time	4
No critical thinking	8
Teachers, school principals, and staff are uncooperative	4

The two extracts below document the participants' perception of their problems in practicum courses:

> *Practicum is 10 times more helpful than other courses provided that it is implemented based on what is stated in the curriculum, planned correctly and carefully, and both mentors are trained and specialized for this course. (Teacher educator # 12)*

> *We have to sit in the last row of the classes like students and we have no right to talk, discuss, ask questions, teach, or criticize their teaching. (Student teacher # 41)*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the practicum courses at Farhangian University to explore the extent to which the stakeholders' needs and course objectives were achieved. Also investigated here, was stakeholders' level of satisfaction with the courses. Analysis of the participants' responses to the questionnaire showed that the participants agreed there should be some modifications in the way these courses were implemented in practice.

Analyzing the participants' responses revealed they needed training and prerequisite courses to learn how to conduct action research so that they can conduct such studies during practicum. This finding was supported by Zare-ee, Moh Don, and Shu Sim (2015) who found Iranian university instructors' conceptions of action research in line with traditional views of research, and it is believed that narrow conceptions of action research make it obscure and unappealing (Mehrani, 2016). Thus, there is a need for training student-teachers and mentors, both as a requirement of the course and as a way for mentors to heighten their awareness of students' needs and to play more important roles in educational systems (Mehrani, 2017).

As the participants cited, learning to conduct lesson study is also one of their major professional needs. This finding is supported by Sarkar Arani (2015) who claims that the collaborative lesson study cycle rarely takes place in professional development programs in Iran since the teachers tend to work more individually than collaboratively and without receiving any criticism. Besides, since lesson study is reported to have the potential to help teachers promote their teaching and

boost students' learning (Moghaddam, Sarkar Arani, & Kuno, 2015), training the mentors and adding prerequisite courses focusing on lesson study seems inevitable.

Reflection and critical thinking, and being trained in these skills were also suggested by the participants of this study as major professional needs. Comparable results were reported by Faghihi and Anani Sarab's study (2016) in which it was revealed that the current institutional arrangements do not enhance reflection. While Burton (2009) asserts that reflection is an essential tool in teachers' professional development, both the result of the current study and Faghihi and Anani Sarab's (2016) revealed a low level of reflection during the courses which can be attributed to the absence of theoretical knowledge and support structure for reflective practice. Therefore, exploring students' learning styles and critical aspects of the teaching context by the student-teachers and the mentors during the practicum courses should be expected from student-teachers only if they have been completely trained in such activities as reflection and critical thinking.

As perceived by the participants, 'being equipped with a variety of instructional strategies, teaching and learning approaches' were also the major professional needs. Brown (2007), and Richards (2015), in this regard, mention the importance of knowledge of language learning and teaching strategies for language teachers. According to Brown (2007), language teachers should understand what strategies and teaching approaches make language learners successful, so that they can establish a milieu for language learners to realize and use effective language learning strategies. Thus, knowledge and motivation to change teaching strategies make teachers reflective over their teaching practices (Ball, 2009). Although productive pedagogies which are linked to robust theories of learning should be clearly constructed during the practicum, and the related teaching experiences carefully scaffolded, for pre-service teacher learning (Rarrison, 2007), teachers resort to a transmission model of education, which leaves little room for reflection on the procedures and techniques of teaching (Khanjani, Vahdany, & Jafarigohar, 2016).

The practicum courses, as perceived from the participants' responses, should start earlier in the program and should be allocated more time and importance. Participants reported that the short duration of the practicum made it difficult to form personal relationships with students, learn the system, or get a realistic sense of the demands of teaching. In the latter case, giving more teaching opportunities to student-teachers in the class was seen as useful experience. This finding is also supported by many scholars (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2002; Volante, 2006; Zeichner, Miller, & Silvernail, 2000) who believe that extended practice teaching experiences is a hallmark of excellent programs and everyone regards the practicum as the core feature of a teacher education program (Volante, 2006). The results of the present study also underscore the necessity of this extension and modification of the program to provide ongoing contact with students.

The findings also showed practicum advantages as being 'relevant to student-teachers' professional needs', and 'improving their motivation, self-confidence and class management skill'. In line with the findings of Soodmand Afshar and Hamzavi's study (2017), the present study showed building students' self-confidence and motivation to be important by the participants. There is a general consensus among the participants that practicum is an essential component of the teaching program, a source of motivation for student-teachers, and a link between theory and practice. However, if it fails to meet students' needs and expectations, feeling of dissatisfaction may emerge (Sinclair, 2008). The findings of the present study are also consistent with Sinclair's (2008) in which practicum was reported as a positive experience by almost all student-teachers. They were reported to be more motivated, committed and enthusiastic as a result of the hands-on and successful experience of working in real classrooms with real teachers and real students. Participants of the current study believed practicum showed them what the job of being a teacher was really like.

Findings also reinforced the idea that classroom management was one of the issues that pre-service teachers encountered as an inevitable part of the teaching profession, and they had to confront and learn along the way regardless of what they teach (Macías & Sánchez, 2015). Thus, the current study supports studies in which student-teachers prefer the practicum over their coursework (e.g., Macías & Sánchez, 2015; Sinclair, 2008; Soodmand Afshar & Hamzavi, 2017; Volante, 2006), in this case for enhancing motivation, self-confidence, class management skill and being relevant to student-teachers' occupational needs.

Insufficiency and lack of flexibility in using teaching methods, resources and materials in schools during the practicum courses was one of the problems perceived from the participants' responses. Since expert teachers respond more flexibly to contextual variables than novice teachers (Tsui, 2009), observing the experts in the classroom during the practicum can enhance student-teachers flexibility in using teaching methods, resources and materials. This view is endorsed by Gardner (2010) who believes teachers in this century need to depart from the past pedagogies and develop the flexible and innovative sorts of learning dispositions needed for learners and their future work.

Another problem with these courses was perceived by the participants to be, 'lack of cooperation between schools and university'. While preparing EFL teachers to face the demands of their future career requires the cooperation of different parties (Khanjani, et al., 2016), the participants in this study specified their concerns as confronting uncooperative teachers, staff, and school members and the need for such cooperation. This finding is supported by Rarrison (2007) who considered collaborative relationships between schools and university to create and be created by a shared understanding of how theory and practice intersect to prepare student-teachers for a future of change, challenge and lifelong learning.

Lack of proper supervision of student-teachers in their placement schools by teacher educators was also mentioned as a concern during practicum courses. This concern is also mentioned by Rorrison (2007) who believes teacher educators must support classroom teachers to mentor the pre-service teacher learning with timely guidance and support which foster successful learning relationships and by conversations with peers which aid reflection and transformation of the sense of 'self' as a teacher within a learning community.

In practice, what happens in the practicum courses follows the traditional methods of teacher observation which may not help students make a link between theory and practice while in theory and within the *TEFL Official Curriculum* (2014), these courses should help them make such a link by using different strategies. With an emphasis on reflective observation, narrative writing, thoughtful analysis of experience and the use of action research, lesson study, case studies and narrative research, mostly manifested in the practicum courses, the curriculum claims to provide student-teachers with opportunities to learn lifelong skills and to continue professional development. In other words, these courses hold the potential to help nearly every student teacher improve teaching skills, yet, in actual practice, they help almost no one.

Student-teachers' performance should be evaluated for both being assured of the quality of instruction and also providing opportunities for further professional development. There is either no in-service education for teacher educators or if there is, the quality of the classes is under question. However, scholars like Richards and Ferrell (2005) emphasize the importance of ongoing in-service teacher education. The aforementioned issues are very fundamental language teaching profession needs and problems of the student-teachers and they mostly show that all three groups of the participants need ongoing education in different aspects of their field.

Conclusion

Students and mentors voiced their concerns, needs and problems through a validated questionnaire, aiming to evaluate the practicum courses implemented at Farhangian University. The findings of the study revealed possibilities for change offered by the participants, like equipping student-teachers and mentors with a variety of instructional strategies, teaching and learning approaches, using adequate resources and materials, promoting their flexibility, reflection and critical thinking, prerequisite courses in which students learn about action research, etc., holding in-service education for teacher educators, solving the problems existing between schools and the university, and constant teacher educators observation and supervision.

The findings of this study cast light on the advantages of the courses as improving their knowledge about different methods of teaching and using computers, and their ability to motivate students and make them believe in themselves and their teachers. Thus, presenting the practicum courses more efficiently, training the mentors, and allocating more time would make the courses more satisfying for prospective teachers.

Few studies have explored the problems that student-teachers might face during their studies at this university; consequently, there has not been much effort to assist the students in need. The factors mentioned in this study may have direct relation to the students' target needs or they may be the obstacles that hinder students from achieving from practicum courses. The findings of this study could help student-teachers, EFL teacher educators, and syllabus designers. The results could help train more competent teachers by raising their awareness of their role in the practicum process. EFL teachers may expand their knowledge and abilities in language teacher education and the challenges students face while implementing the practicum courses. Curriculum developers can upgrade practicum courses, for student-teachers by incorporating prerequisite courses like 'reflection and critical thinking', 'action research' and 'lesson planning' into teacher education curriculum. They can also do it by providing in-service training for teacher educators to raise their awareness about their own professional status, role, and contribution to the educational process. We hope that the findings could have the potential to provide a drive for further investigation in the area of language teacher education and diminishing the problems that novice teachers graduating from this university face. Hence, it is recommended that further follow-up studies be conducted over the mentioned problems in order to explore their influence and alternative solutions. The present study can be replicated with larger samples from more provinces and also graduates of the program, as teachers in schools, (the new curriculum had no graduates at the time of this study) to obtain different findings and provide more confidence in the reported results.

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Zahra Masoumpanah has PhD in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and is currently an instructor at Farhangian University. She has published several articles and has lectured in national and international conferences. Her current research interests include SLA, curriculum development and teacher education.

Professor Mohammad Hassan Tahririan is currently a professor of applied linguistics at Sheikh Bahaee University. He has served on the editorial boards and/or the review panels of several national and international journals. He has published many articles and books and has research interests in ESP, material development, text analysis, and contrastive linguistics.

Ahmad Alibabaee is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at Sheikhbahaee University. He received his PhD from University of Isfahan. He has published many articles in several national and international journals. His major areas of research are research methodology and second language acquisition.

Katayoon Afzali holds PhD in TEFL and is an assistant professor at Sheikhbahaee University. She has lectured in English conversation, letter writing, etc., and engaged in supervising research for the past ten years. Her research interests include discourse analysis, literary studies, film translation and stylistic analysis.

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