



The Impact of Virtual Field Experience during COVID 19 on Preservice English Language Teachers' Classroom Management Perceptions and Concerns

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Abstract

This study is intended to reveal the virtual field experience of preservice English language teachers and investigate the impacts of Covid-19 enforced virtual field experience on the classroom management concerns and priorities of the participants. Within this scope, the present qualitative study included eight senior-year preservice English language teachers enrolled at a public university in Turkey and portrayed their three-month online practicum experiences by collecting data from reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation records. The findings obtained by analysing the data within the framework of grounded theory with the aid of qualitative data analysis software revealed that virtual field experience process caused a serious impact on the classroom management concerns of the participants that were observed to be communication-oriented, lesson planning and instruction oriented, discipline-oriented and learner and teacher-oriented aspects. The findings further revealed that virtual field experience increased the participants' concerns about professional development which implied that it could be used as an alternative if it is revised and redesigned

Keywords:

Covid-19, virtual field experience, classroom management, preservice teachers, concerns

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that practicum is the crucial component of teacher education program (Gebhard, 2009; Forgasz, White, 2016). However, the unforeseen Covid 19 and its inevitable consequence, virtual classrooms, posed serious disruptions and challenges

in educational settings worldwide including teacher education because of rapid transition to online mode without necessary preparation and arrangements.

Practicum undoubtedly is a process preparing preservice teachers for the realities of multidimensional classroom life and thus play a crucial role in transformation to become a serving teacher. Practicum also provides the opportunities for “learning by doing” that they bridged theory and practice and developed a personal teaching competence as suggested by Darling-Hammond (2006). During practicum experience, teacher candidates gain practical knowledge from their teaching experience, apply instruction from theory courses, take the opportunity to observe experienced teachers, increase their awareness about their personal teaching style, develop their lesson planning and classroom management skills and become familiar with certain teaching methods as suggested by Richards and Crookes (1988, p. 11).

Despite its particular significance as a component of teacher education program, practicum has also been critically scrutinized and questioned depending on its role in teacher learning. The debates have been centred on the quality and satisfactoriness of practicum experience in preparing prospective teachers fully for the profession. Perhaps, the most frequently pronounced problem is rooted in the dichotomy between theory and practice (Allen & Wright, 2014; Stenberg, Rajala, & Hilppo, 2016; Zeichner, 1990) that has been considered as the inevitable consequence of traditional apprenticeship approach to teacher education model as suggested by White & Forgasz, (2016).

Another widely argued obstacle is the contribution of practicum experience to teacher learning. Research on teacher learning has revealed that preservice teachers filter their practicum learning through lenses of existing beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching (Zeichner, 1996) which were argued to derive from “apprenticeship of observation” as suggested by Lortie (1975, as cited in Roberts, 1998). As a result, their major concerns and priorities during practice teaching with respect to classroom management were associated with survival in the classroom such as managing student behaviour and controlling classroom which constrained them to employ failsafe activities as suggested by Roberts, (1998). In this sense, it could be claimed that the contribution of practicum experience to teacher learning, and the professional development of preservice teachers is still in dispute and further research is needed to uncover the personal images of teaching of those teacher candidates to better understand and evaluate practicum experience.

There is also much debate on the duration of practicum process and the dispute centred on if more hands-on experience on-site is necessary to increase professional learning as widely articulated by teacher candidates although it has been argued that it’s the quality of practicum rather than the quantity that needs to draw attention (Koc, 2012; Zeichner, 1990).

In addition to these constraints, Covid-19 outbreak confronted preservice teachers with further challenges in Turkey. Right after the closure of schools because of temporary lockdowns, the schools shifted to remote teaching, giving courses online without taking necessary precautions and preparing technical and technological infrastructure. The teachers had to run the courses through video conferencing platforms although they were lacking essential skills concerning technological knowledge and technological pedagogical knowledge as revealed in the relevant literature (Aytaç, 2021; Hayri Sarı & Keser, 2021). Preservice teachers, although they were trained for face to face teaching during teacher education were expected to observe mentor teachers’ teaching practices in

online classrooms which were restricted to a large extent because of various technical and technological constraints, contextual variables and pedagogical reasons that resulted in limited student attendance and participation. Under the shadow of such challenges the preservice teachers were also expected to adapt to distance education process immediately, gain necessary practical classroom experience and enhance their teaching and classroom management skills.

It has been well documented that classroom management is one of the major concerns of preservice teachers (Flower, Mckenna, & Haring, 2017; Moore, 2003; Sempowicz & Hudson, 2011; Poznanski, Hart, & Cramer, 2018;) since teacher candidates feel inexperienced to handle classroom management challenges which is considered as the leading factor in teacher attrition (Poznanski, Hart, & Cramer, 2018). It is perhaps no surprising that student-teachers fear of failing to manage classroom and losing control which was attributed to little training on classroom management that is disconnected from real classroom practice (Siebert, 2005). As a result, they were considered to be heavily dependent on their own personal beliefs and inherent images of teaching while managing the classroom which is assumed to make it difficult for them to keep students on task and focus on student learning as suggested by Roberts (1998). In this sense, it is important to reveal preservice teachers' existing beliefs about classroom management that raise concerns and doubts about their skills in handling and managing student behaviour

Within this perspective, the present study aimed to portray preservice ELT teachers' virtual field experience during Covid-19 and investigate if virtual field experience has caused any significant impact on the classroom management concerns and perceptions of participants within Turkish educational context. In line with this purpose, the following research question and sub research question guided the scope of the present research.

1. Has Covid 19 induced virtual field experience impacted the participants' existing beliefs about classroom management concerns?
 - a. If so, what are the major classroom management concerns of the participants during Covid 19 induced virtual field experience?

METHOD

The present study aimed to inquire into the subjective classroom management perceptions of participants in its natural setting, i.e., classroom environment in an attempt to interpret it, qualitative research methodology was utilized as suggested by Creswell, (2007). As the research phenomenon was investigated over three months period relying on multiple sources of data in order to analyse and investigate deeply (Creswell, 2007), case study design was employed as a type of qualitative research.

Participants and Setting

The study group for the present study consisted of eight senior year preservice teachers, Hakan, Fuat, Bekir, Selcen, Hale, Sibel, Uygur and Eren (pseudonyms are used) who were enrolled at English language teaching (ELT) program at a public university in Turkey. All eight participants consisted of five male and three female teacher candidates normally had to conduct their practicum experience at a secondary school in which they had to attend a full day, 6 hours a week for face-to-face teaching. However, because of the emergent transition to online classrooms due to Covid 19 related lockdowns, they were

obliged to maintain practice teaching virtually which were offered through video conferencing platforms.

All eight participants were divided into two groups each of which was guided by a male and a female cooperating teacher who were considered as experienced since they had been teaching English language for more than 15 years and had experience in mentoring preservice teachers. The participants were supervised by one academic staff from the university through weekly online meetings in which they reflected on their clinical experience and the supervisor tried to contribute to their professional growth by supporting the process through advises. Unfortunately, the participants did not have the chance to communicate face to face either with their cooperating teacher and supervisor which could be assumed limited contribution to their professional decision making and professional learning process.

Instruments and Procedures

In order to investigate the research phenomenon aforementioned, three main data collection tools were employed in the present study, reflective learning diary, semi-structured interview and classroom observation records of each participant. The reflective learning diary included the participants' personal records of their practicum experiences that they critically and deeply reflected on anything in the classroom concerning teaching and learning process that were intended to reveal the participants' personal meanings built from the experience. An online semi structured interview was conducted with each participant at the end of the practicum period that the participants requested to share their comments about their digital practicum experiences. Classroom observation records were collected during each participants online teaching sessions.

Data Analysis

A large volume of qualitative data was collected from three data sources during the research process. The collected data was subjected to thematic analysis using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software within grounded theory framework using an inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In order to validate the research findings and increase credibility, the collected data was triangulated through convergence of information from different sources, reflective learning diary, classroom observation records and semi-structured interview, respectively. Reliability is obtained through inter-rater agreement procedure using SPSS 23, Cohen's Kappa statistical analysis.

FINDINGS

Virtual Field Experience and Classroom Management Concerns

The present study intended to investigate the impact of virtual field experience during Covid-19 on the classroom management concerns of the participating preservice ELT teachers and the results revealed impact in five different categories and two subcategories as represented in the Figure 1..

The figure clearly displays that classroom management theme is consisted of "teaching", "the learners", "the teacher", "order", "communication" and "others" categories each of which includes relevant codes. "Teaching" category is subcategorized into "planning" and "instruction" as shown above

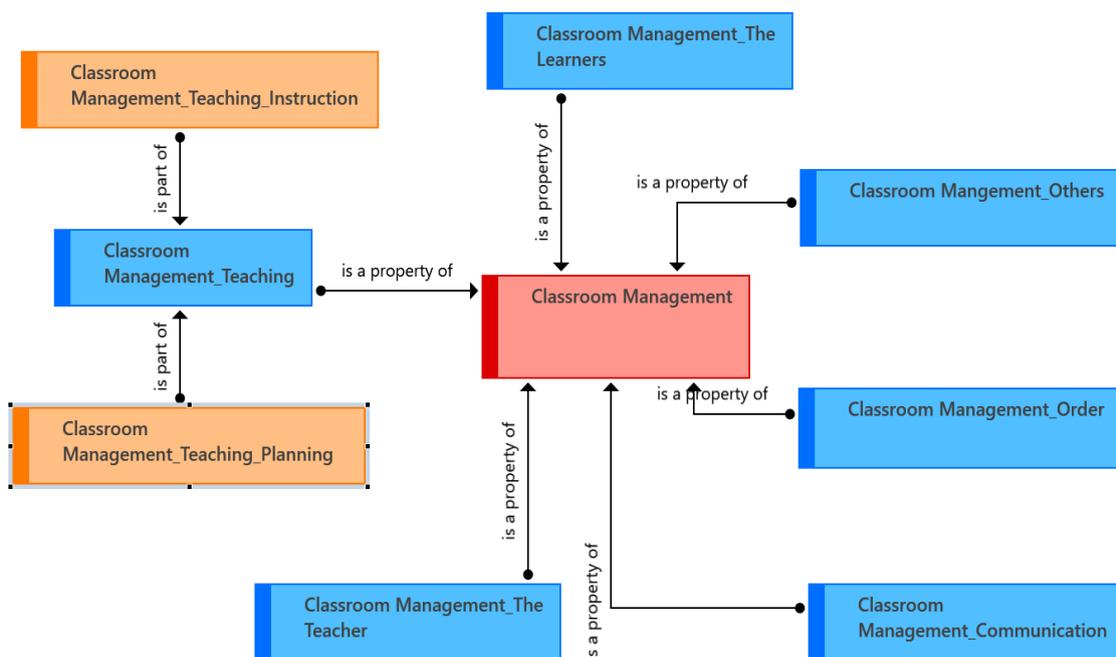


Figure1. Network view of participants' classroom management concerns

Major Classroom Management Concerns during Virtual Field Experience

The findings concerning the participants' major classroom management concerns were presented under six main categories, communication, order, teaching, the learners, the teacher and others, namely as discussed above. Although the study provided wide-ranging findings that are relational to the scope of the study, only the main classroom management concerns that were observed to be significant on the basis of groundedness and frequency were discussed because of the space constraints.

Communication Oriented Classroom Management Concerns

The data revealed that all participants made strong explicit references to “*non-verbal communication*” which refers to use of body language, facial expressions, mimicry and gestures in teaching. The code was referenced in 26 occasions which corresponds to 38 % of the given category. The following quotation selected randomly from Selcen's data represents how she attached importance to non-verbal communication strategies during online teaching.

If I had a chance, I would prefer face-to-face education for practicum experience. Firstly, I could not have eye contact with the students, I couldn't observe their body language. Therefore, I was unable to give correct feedback on their state of response. Secondly, I had to trust to what I heard from the students for feedback, I was with their voices only (Selcen, 56:2).

The second code label that was observed to be central in the beliefs of the participants and frequently applied is “*teacher-student relationship*” which was observed in 23 instances with 34 % frequency within the category. The following quote stands as an example how one of the participants was strongly concerned to build strong relationship with the students and how it impacted her instructional strategies.

I try to do my best to interact with the students in a friendly manner. They are young learners and they need to feel that their teacher loves them. That's why I try to tell their mistakes softly not to hurt their feelings. I believe that they can feel comfortable in my lesson (Sibel, 59:1).

The other codes “*positive communication with students*”, “*getting to know the students*” and “*greeting students*” are not discussed as the number of references were limited in number and thus considered insignificant.

Order Oriented Classroom Management Concerns

With respect to order-oriented classroom management concerns, two codes stand out on the basis of frequency. The first most grounded code within the category is “*asserting authority*” which has 11 quotations attached corresponding to 39 % of the total. The code represents the participants’ priority and raising concerns in asserting power and authority as a teacher as exemplified in the following quote.

My other problem as a teacher candidate was not holding authority. I had no strict reactions to students at all. For example, a student draw a thing randomly on the screen when I was lecturing in the first week of my lesson. I reacted so soft that the student kept doing it. But now I realize that I had to be more strict in the classroom. Being a strict teacher was a bad scheme in my mind until now but I have learned that it is a necessary feature of a teacher in some occasions (Eren, 87:2).

The second most frequently referenced code within order category is “*controlling disruptive behaviour*”. The code was referenced with 10 quotations and the percentage of association is 36 %. In the following quote, Eren explicitly states his concerns of controlling young learners’ unwanted behaviour.

I was pretty nervous because of the age range of the students. I mean, the young learners are pretty fun to teach but they have some attitudes that need to be controlled strictly. And the controlling of these behaviours are much harder on the online platform. That is why I was so nervous. I was quite concerned to turn the class into a chaotic environment. (Eren, 80:1).

The data further revealed findings concerning “*giving warning*” and “*holding ground*” which were observed in just a few instances and not discussed because of the space concerns.

Teaching Oriented Classroom Management Concerns

The teaching category is subcategorized into two as planning and instruction as mentioned before. With respect to planning subcategory the most salient codes are “*preparing lesson plan*” and “*instructional materials*” each of which were referenced with 17 and 16 quotations respectively. The overall percentage of both associations consists more than % 50 of the total number of data segments within planning subcategory that is 63. The following quote voiced plainly by Bekir introduces how he is intensely concerned about preparing lesson plan.

The hardest thing was writing the lesson plan. When I was designing the activities and sections of the lessons, thinking about how it will look on the lesson plan was affecting the way how I decide on what when, how, or why to use. While I was

writing the lesson plan, I was constantly considering the flow of the lesson, the unexpected things to happen during the instruction, and writing the plan accordingly. Also I came up with many different ideas to include and it was a total mess (Bekir, 1:4).

The other planning-oriented classroom management issues central in the perceptions of the participants were “*variety in activities*” and “*appropriate learning activities*” which reflects their perspectives of preparing various activities in order to respond learning needs and learner differences as revealed by the findings.

Concerning instruction-oriented classroom management concerns, a number of codes are evident as exposed by the findings. The most grounded code within the category on the basis of participants’ perception is “catching attention” which was strongly articulated as a challenge in online teaching environment by all participants as revealed in the following quote.

The most difficult part of online teaching was catching the attention of the students during instruction. If I had lectured in a traditional classroom atmosphere, It wouldn’t have been the hardest part, I guess (Uygar, 68:2).

The findings further indicated that the participants attach importance to “*fun*” issue while teaching which was referenced in 20 instances. Especially, Hakan made strong, explicit references to the code especially when he was commenting on his cooperating teacher’s instructional practices stating that how his mentor teacher included “*fun*” element into his teaching which triggered smiles and laughs in the classroom.

Another strong finding that was observed to impact participants’ beliefs was “*classroom language*”. The reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews and especially classroom observation records revealed that the participants were gradually obsessed with using target language in the classroom which confronted them with confusions and certain constraints during practice teaching sessions. Also, the participants harshly criticizes cooperating teachers’ use of native language as classroom language which was considered as the main reason behind students’ limited language proficiency as given in the following quote.

My mentor teacher speaks mostly in Turkish. When she speaks in English, she immediately translates into Turkish unfortunately. I think it is not necessary because students can understand simple instructions in the target. language. By doing this, she triggers to think in Turkish. She should prefer to speak in English so that students can provide answers her questions in English (Hale, 38:4).

In a similar vein, the data provided significant finding concerning “*considering learners’ level*” and “*considering learners’ interests*” which seem to be prioritized as classroom management concerns in the participants’ cognition as observed in the findings. Both codes were associated with 37 quotations in total together within instruction category.

“*Error correction*” is another distinctive concern of the participants depending on the data which was observed in 19 data segments. Especially, Selcen placed importance to error correction after observing her cooperating teachers’ error correction techniques that seemed to contradict with her existing beliefs stating that “sometimes he directly says “no!” to children while they are trying and struggling to make sentences. He prefers

providing explicit feedback which includes directly saying wrong. It effects their motivation negatively”.

The other important findings that were considered to be significant within instruction subcategory are “*traditional teaching activities*” which was observed to impact participants beliefs’ about classroom management because of cooperating teachers’ teaching practices that was considered inappropriate to online teaching environment as voiced by the participants, “*time management*” which seriously constrained teacher candidates executing lesson plan properly during practice teaching sessions because of the time limitation in video conferencing platforms.

The Learners Oriented Classroom Management Concerns

The most grounded code within the category is “*students’ participation*” which was attached to 38 data segments corresponding to 38 % of the total number. The findings revealed that the participation of students to the activities during teaching was prerequisite for all participants and their one of major concerns in the classroom as echoed by one of the participants in the following quote.

When I think of whole practicum process, I can say a lot of things has changed for me. However, the biggest change is about my perspective of student’s participation. I have seen a lot of students who don’t want to participate in the classroom activities. In theoretical lessons during my teacher training at university, I was taught that idea every student should participate in the class activities, but I have observed that it is not the case. My friends and I tried to design different activities, but we couldn’t help them participate in. If they don’t want to learn, you can do nothing (Uygar, 78:4).

The other significant variable that was salient within the category is “*learner characteristics*” that was observable in 22 instances in which the participants touched on, the learners’ attention span, energy, affective and individual features ... etc. that were perceived to be fundamental in classroom management. Selcen, repeatedly stated that it was difficult to keep pace with young learners as they had never ending energy.

“*Learner differences*” was another strong finding that was central in the beliefs of the participants which included 15 quotations attached to. The data revealed how participants were concentrated on differences among learners in different grades and how they considered these differences while planning and arranging activities. The following quote stands as a representative for the given code.

We didn’t have any experience with different classrooms of the same age students but we had experience with fifth- and sixth-graders. There were a lot of similarities and differences. There was a recognizable cognitive level increase with sixth year students. Fifth year students were a little bit more excited and engaging. I designed my activities accordingly considering these differences and used more visuals for the fifth-year students to help them keep their attention on the screen (Bekir, 1:10).

The last code that was observed to be influential in the beliefs of participants was “*students’ motivation*” which was linked to 14 data segments. The participants generally complained about the lack of motivation in students which they attributed the reason to online classroom settings that was considered to be rich in distractors.

The Teacher Oriented Classroom Management Concerns

The data also provided findings concerning teacher requirements for successful classroom management which included “*tendency to professional development*”, “*reflective thinking*”, “*technological competence*” and “*self awareness*” each of which had substantial impact in the beliefs of the teachers.

The first code that is most grounded on the basis of frequency count is “*tendency to professional development*” which was associated with 23 quotations represents the data segments about participants’ perspectives of professional thinking and development. It was observed that all participants were open to innovations and realize the value of professional development in teaching career as articulated in the given quote below.

There is no disappointment, but much lessons to learn. That’s what I am trying to do. I should improve, update, upgrade, change, and evolve myself. In that way, not only I can teach better, but also I can better handle with the students and have better professional career (Hakan, 30:2).

The following code that were observed to exert substantial influence on the classroom management beliefs of the participants were “*reflective thinking*” which was observed in 16 instances that they commented on how practicum experience help them realize weaknesses, critique their teaching and promoted to give better teaching decisions as quoted by Selcen as an example.

Since they are young learners, it would be better for me to give the grammar in an implicit way in context. Honestly, I have tried but I couldn't be manage. We need to improve myself in this aspect to maximize learning (Selcen, 55:7).

The other two codes which were moderately significant were “*technological competence*” that they considered vital to able to teach in digital learning-teaching environments and criticized certain teachers because of the lack and “*self-awareness*” which included data segments that they considered practicum experience as a pathway to raise their consciousness about their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher candidate.

Other Classroom Management Concerns

The data further provided findings that caused serious concerns which were assumed to grow out of distance education itself. There were three codes that were observed closely related and dependent on each other which were labelled as “*practical experience*”, “*anxiety*” and “*adaptability for distance learning*” each of which were observed to have similar degree of impact on the participants.

The first code “*practical experience*” which was observed in 20 instances implies the restricted impact on the professional development of teacher candidates because of the limited practicum duration and online delivery as revealed in the following quotation

I basically have little idea about a real classroom environment and also the duration of the process is not enough. I wish we could experience a real classroom environment which could have made deeper impact (Eren, 89:3).

Relationally, the process seemed to cause “*anxiety*” and “*adaptability for distance learning*” concerns on the part of the participants each of which were associated with 19

and 14 data segments in order which were seemed to impact classroom management concerns indirectly as observed in the given quotation below.

It has been quite challenging for both students and us to adapt to virtual field experience. I still don't see myself as an online education teacher. Honestly, I don't like the online education but I have tried hard to learn managing this online process specifically what to do and what not to do in the classroom. I was able to see my failures in this process (Hale, 35:15).

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of virtual field experience during Covid-19 on the classroom management concerns of the participating preservice ELT teachers. Within this perspective, the study uncovered that the participants have significant communication concerns derived from the lack of non-verbal communication, known as body language, which was considered vital for effective teaching and classroom management (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Duta, Panisoara, & Panisoara, 2015; Nematovna, 2022; Tai, 2014; Zhan, 2016). This could be attributed to the nature of online teaching sessions delivered through the use of video conferencing platforms that constraints both teachers and students to benefit from the advantages of body language, mimicry and gestures in teaching because of the technical and technological limitations which coheres with the existing literature (Alawamleh, Al-Twait, & Al-Saht, 2022). The findings also revealed that the other major communication concern of the participants is building strong, positive teacher-student relationship which was interpreted as virtual field experience did not cause changes in the priority concerns of prospective teachers in terms of establishing and maintaining positive teacher student relationship as it was listed among the major concerns in the relevant literature (Jong, et al., 2014).

Based on the obtained findings, it was observed that virtual field experience raised the participants' already existing concerns about establishing and maintaining discipline and control in the classroom which has been widely acknowledged in the relevant literature (Irwin & Amobi, 2006; Latz, 1992; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012;). It's thought that the increase in the participants' excessive concerns over holding authority and disruptive behaviour could be related to the online delivery of the teaching which caused to emerge new types of interruptions and disruptions that needed to be handled such as constant monitoring of attendance, participation and engagement of students rather than dealing with noise in traditional face to face classrooms. (Hardesty, Egelson, & Klein, 2022; Sunzuma, Zezekwa, Mutambara, Chagwiza, & Gwizangwe, 2022; Zilka, 2021).

The findings further revealed that the participants' were seriously concerned about lesson planning which included designing instructional materials and preparing various appropriate activities for the students which was assumed to originate from immediate transition to online teaching because of Covid-19 outbreak and correspondingly, the participants' lack of technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) which has been considered vital in order to integrate technology into teaching effectively (Finger, Jamieson-Proctor, & Albion, 2010; Koehler & Mishra, 2009) as highlighted in the relevant literature (Adipat, 2021; Nasria, Husnin, Mahmud, & Halim, 2020).

The study also provided important findings in terms uncovering participants' conceptual thinking of teaching that was observed to be learner oriented in nature. The findings presented that the participants' priority concerns while teaching were to provide

a fun learning experience for the learners through variety of activities that they considered learners' levels, interests and levels into account in order to catch their attention. In line with this finding, the participants significantly considered learners' participation and motivation during their practicum experience and paid further attention to learners' difference and characteristics which was supported by classroom observation records and reflective diary entries. The finding is supported by the the studies investigating preservice teachers' beliefs and perceptions about teaching and claiming a shift from a traditional teacher oriented instruction to learner-centred perspective as a result of the innovative attempts to enhance teacher training that has powerful impact in shaping teacher candidates ideas about teaching (Arvanitis, 2018; Osmanoglu, 2016; Sheridan, 2013). The participants' excessive concerns about using the target language as classroom language and error correction were observed to be related to the mentor teachers' teaching practices that contradicted with their existing beliefs and didn't fit with their own agenda about teaching which highlights the significance of mentors in contributing the professional development of teacher candidates (Izadinia, 2015; Izadinia, 2018).

Despite the challenges and lacks of digital practicum experience, it was considered that the process contributed to the professional development of the participants through stimulating concerns about reflective thinking as they had to revise and question teaching decisions constantly which was assumed to originate from the infamiliarity with the new remote teaching environment that caused major adaptability and anxiety concerns. It was also observed that this new mode of teaching raised the awareness about the strengths and weaknesses of the participants and enabled the development of new competences that would be useful for their professional development. Within this perspective, the study provided consistent findings with the relevant literature emphasizing the role of digital teaching environments in the development of new skills and competences for the prospective teachers (Brinia & Psoni, 2021; Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to uncover the classroom management concerns of preservice ELT teachers during Covid-19 rooted digital practicum experience and observe if first-time remote field practice experience has caused any changes in the participants' priority concerns. Within this perspective, the study revealed significant findings about the participants' hidden beliefs about classroom management unveiling that the process increased the participants' communication concerns, discipline concerns, lesson planning and instructional concerns significantly which have been considered to originate from the nature of distance education itself. It has been also observed that e-practicum raised the participants' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and increased the tendency for professional development by stimulating reflective thinking. In this sense, it could be suggested that it could be used as an effective alternative for traditional face-face field practice if necessary technical, technological, and pedagogical aspects were revised and redesigned for a better implementation in Turkish educational context.

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