

# Practicum as A Learning Experience for Pre-Service Teachers

 Dilafruz Sarimsakova

PhD, Associate Professor of Namangan State University, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This case study explores the role of the practicum in shaping the contextual knowledge and teaching competence of pre-service English language teachers. Through a four-week school-based practicum, student-teachers engaged in reflective journals and follow-up interviews to articulate their learning. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach and guided by Johnson and Golombek's (2016) concept framework of everyday, academic, and true concepts, this research reveals how the practicum facilitates the development of situated teaching knowledge. The findings suggest that practicum serves as a unique space where theoretical knowledge is contextualized through experience, reflection, and dialogue, leading to professional growth. The article concludes with recommendations for enhancing the impact of practicum in teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** Pre-service teacher education; practicum; contextual knowledge; reflective journals; thematic analysis; teacher learning; Uzbekistan; school-based practicum; qualitative research; teaching competence.

**Introduction:** The practicum is widely recognized as a pivotal component in initial teacher education, offering pre-service teachers the opportunity to transition from university-based theoretical learning to the practical realities of school-based teaching (Dikilitaş, 2022). While coursework provides foundational knowledge in pedagogy, subject content, and educational psychology, it is through practicum that student-teachers begin to see how these concepts unfold in authentic classroom settings.

Pre-service teachers often enter practicum with idealistic expectations of teaching but quickly realize the complexity of the classroom—ranging from managing diverse student needs to dealing with institutional constraints. In this sense, practicum acts not only as a stage for rehearsing teaching skills but also as a site for identity development and contextual sense-making. As noted by Johnson and Golombek (2016), this transformation involves the interaction between everyday experiences and academic understandings, leading to the construction of “true concepts” integrated and meaningful knowledge grounded in both theory and practice.

However, for practicum to lead to meaningful learning,

it must be more than a period of isolated classroom practice. Reflection, mentoring, and dialogic engagement are essential to help pre-service teachers process their experiences, draw insights, and develop the contextual knowledge necessary for effective teaching. This study investigates what kinds of contextual and professional knowledge pre-service teachers acquire during a four-week practicum and how these insights contribute to their development as educators.

## Literature Review

The teaching practicum has long been recognized as a pivotal phase in teacher education, where pre-service teachers apply theoretical knowledge to real classroom contexts, engage in reflective inquiry, and construct professional knowledge through practice (Farrell, 2016; Zeichner, 2010). It represents a transition from being a learner of teaching to becoming a teacher of learners. Scholars argue that the practicum is not simply a site for the application of learned methods, but a complex and dynamic learning environment that fosters the emergence of professional identity, practical competence, and contextual understanding (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Korthagen et al., 2006).

One of the central concerns in the literature is how pre-service teachers learn from the practicum experience. According to Johnson and Golombek (2016), teacher learning is a form of conceptual development involving the interplay between “everyday concepts” and “academic concepts.” Everyday concepts are drawn from experience and practice, while academic concepts are developed through formal study and theoretical engagement. The practicum offers a critical context where these conceptual domains can intersect, allowing pre-service teachers to transform tacit knowledge into articulated pedagogical understanding. It is in this sense that teacher learning becomes dialogic, situated, and reflective.

Reflective practice plays a critical role in helping pre-service teachers make sense of their practicum experiences. Schön (1983) conceptualized the teacher as a reflective practitioner who learns through “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action.” Building on this, Farrell (2019) emphasizes that structured reflection, through tools such as journals, peer discussions, and mentor dialogues, enables pre-service teachers to critically analyze their teaching decisions, classroom interactions, and student responses. Such reflection not only deepens their understanding of teaching strategies but also promotes self-awareness, adaptability, and professional autonomy.

Dikilitaş (2017; 2022) contributes significantly to the literature by emphasizing the role of exploratory practice and practitioner research in pre-service teacher development. He suggests that when student teachers are encouraged to investigate their own teaching, they engage in knowledge-building processes that go beyond imitation or technical replication. By engaging in reflection, data collection, and critical inquiry during their practicum, student teachers develop a sense of ownership over their learning and begin to construct teaching knowledge grounded in context and experience. This process fosters both pedagogical insight and professional confidence.

Furthermore, studies such as those by Allen and Wright (2014) and Nilsson (2008) have shown that the practicum contributes to the development of content knowledge, classroom management skills, and an understanding of learner needs. Importantly, the knowledge gained is often situated and contextual pre-service teachers come to understand how different school cultures, student backgrounds, and institutional expectations shape teaching in ways that cannot be fully captured in theory. This aligns with the sociocultural perspective on teacher learning, which views knowledge as co-constructed in interaction with mentors, peers, and learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991;

Vygotsky, 1978).

However, the practicum also presents challenges. Some researchers point to a gap between university-based coursework and the realities of classroom practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2010), which can leave pre-service teachers feeling underprepared or overwhelmed. Others critique the tendency for practicum placements to focus on technical compliance and classroom management rather than fostering critical, reflective, and innovative teaching practices (Britzman, 2003). These challenges underscore the need for carefully designed practicum programs that balance structure and flexibility, provide mentorship, and support reflection as an essential component of professional learning.

In summary, the literature positions the practicum as a formative space where pre-service teachers develop professional knowledge through interaction with real teaching contexts. Through the synthesis of theory and practice, the guidance of mentors, and sustained reflection, student teachers begin to construct a meaningful and contextually responsive understanding of teaching. This study contributes to this literature by examining how a four-week practicum in Uzbekistan provided opportunities for such knowledge construction among pre-service English language teachers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employed a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the learning processes and knowledge construction of pre-service teachers during a four-week school-based practicum. Case study methodology is particularly well-suited to exploring complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). It allowed the researchers to closely examine how pre-service teachers engaged with the practicum environment, interpreted their teaching experiences, and developed context-specific professional knowledge.

### **Research Question**

The study was guided by the following research question:

What contextual and professional knowledge do pre-service teachers develop during a four-week practicum, and how do they make sense of these experiences?

### **Participants**

The participants were six fourth-year undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor of English Language Teaching program at a regional university in Uzbekistan. All participants had completed theoretical courses in pedagogy, methodology, and classroom management prior to their practicum.

## Data Collection

To explore how pre-service teachers constructed knowledge through practice, the study employed two main qualitative data sources: reflective journals and semi-structured interview. Each participant maintained a reflective journal throughout the practicum, writing entries twice a week about their teaching experiences, classroom observations, and personal reflections. At the end of the practicum, participants were interviewed individually to further explore their learning experiences and perceptions.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflective journals and interview transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns and themes. The coding process was both inductive and deductive—driven by the research question and informed by theoretical concepts such as everyday, academic, and true concepts (Johnson & Golombek, 2016).

## DISCUSSION

This section presents the themes that emerged from the analysis of reflective journals and interview transcripts of pre-service teachers after a 4-week practicum. The thematic analysis revealed three main areas of knowledge development: (1) Understanding Learners and Learning Contexts, (2) Bridging Theory and Practice, and (3) Developing Professional Identity.

### 1. Understanding Learners and Learning Contexts

All participants reported that the practicum significantly deepened their understanding of learners as individuals with different needs, motivations, and behaviors. While coursework had introduced them to theories of learner-centered teaching, only the practicum made these ideas tangible.

"I had never realized how differently students respond to the same task. Some finished in a minute, others needed a lot of help. It made me think about how to differentiate instruction in real time." (PST 3, Reflective Journal)

Pre-service teachers became aware of classroom dynamics, social-emotional cues, and how institutional culture shaped student behavior. Such insights reflected what Johnson & Golombek (2016) call "everyday concepts," rooted in concrete, lived classroom experience. Through reflective engagement, these experiences began transforming into more generalized, theory-informed knowledge, or "true concepts."

### 2. Bridging Theory and Practice

Participants consistently described the practicum as a

"reality check" where their understanding of teaching theories was tested against classroom realities. Lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment were key areas where this bridging occurred.

"At university, we often discussed task-based learning and communicative approaches. But in school, I realized the timing and discipline management needed for these are more complicated than I thought." (PST 7, Interview)

Through this contrast, pre-service teachers began to re-interpret theoretical knowledge with practical insights. This supports Dikilitaş (2020), who emphasizes that teacher learning is dialogic and context-sensitive, with knowledge being co-constructed through experience and reflection.

Participants also reported gaining strategies for dealing with unplanned classroom events, such as off-task behavior or technological failure — examples of contextual knowledge that can only emerge through situated practice.

### 3. Developing Professional Identity

Finally, pre-service teachers described a growing sense of self-awareness and professional responsibility. The practicum helped them begin to see themselves not just as students, but as novice teachers capable of making decisions.

"I started to feel like a teacher. Even though I was nervous, I saw that my students listened to me, and I had to be prepared and confident." (PST 5, Reflective Journal)

This identity shift was often facilitated by mentor feedback, peer collaboration, and critical self-reflection. The process of journaling and discussing teaching experiences provided a space for dialogic reflection (Johnson & Golombek, 2020), which helped pre-service teachers make sense of their emotions, challenges, and small successes.

Some participants also expressed doubts and insecurities about their future profession, highlighting the importance of ongoing support beyond the practicum.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored how a four-week teaching practicum functions as a significant learning experience for pre-service English language teachers, offering them opportunities to develop contextual, practical, and reflective teaching knowledge that cannot be fully gained through coursework alone. The findings show that pre-service teachers developed a nuanced understanding of classroom realities, such as learner diversity, institutional expectations, time management, lesson adaptation, and the complex interplay between

planning and delivery. They discovered the importance of flexibility, responsiveness, and relationship-building with students. They also gained awareness of the sociocultural and institutional dynamics that shape the teaching and learning process, including classroom routines, assessment practices, and teacher roles within the school setting. These forms of contextual knowledge—often tacit or implicit—emerged from navigating challenges, receiving feedback, and reflecting critically on their own practice. The practicum enabled participants to move beyond theoretical conceptions of teaching, instead grounding their learning in authentic, situated experiences that fostered professional identity development and self-efficacy.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that teacher education programs reframe the practicum not simply as a testing ground for teaching skills, but as a powerful site of knowledge construction. Practicum structures should encourage intentional reflection through guided journaling and peer collaboration to help student teachers articulate what they are learning and how it connects to both pedagogical theory and classroom reality. Teacher educators and mentor teachers should be trained to support pre-service teachers in recognizing the value of everyday, practical knowledge, and in bridging it with academic and theoretical understandings. The timing and design of practicum experiences should also be revisited—though this study involved a four-week practicum, its impact was considerable, demonstrating that even short-term school-based immersion can deeply influence professional learning when scaffolded with appropriate reflective and dialogic opportunities. Ultimately, the practicum should be viewed as a developmental space that empowers pre-service teachers to make sense of teaching in context, fostering not only competence but also critical agency and adaptive expertise necessary for future classroom success.

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