



LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE DURING THE PANDEMIC: CHILEAN EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES DURING THEIR FIRST ONLINE PRACTICUM

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Abstract

In order to continue delivering lessons to prevent students' learning from being affected as a result of the pandemic, education systems around the world transitioned to distance learning. However, the transition process was far from being untroubled. Likewise, primary, secondary, and higher education in Chile experienced major disruptions. In 2020, schools around the country closed as a result of the pandemic, leading most institutions to migrate to online teaching. This change also seriously affected teacher education programs in Chile; carrying out a face-to-face practicum in a pandemic context resulted non-viable, forcing teacher educators and institutions to abruptly implement the online mode of delivery. The main aim of the present article is to explore a group of Chilean EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions with regards to their online practicum carried out under circumstances characterized by high levels of uncertainty and the need to rapidly adjust to new conditions. More specifically, the article focuses on two key aspects. On the one hand, it outlines the pre-service teachers' perceptions with regards to the main challenges and opportunities encountered in this experience. On the other hand, the article explores pre-service teachers' beliefs with regards to the impact that this experience might have on their teaching practice in the short and long term. The present study employed a qualitative design with an exploratory and descriptive approach. In order to take into account the voices of the participants, eight individual semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers were carried out. The main findings refer to three sets of challenges and opportunities: the focus on technological and pedagogical skills as opposed to content; autonomy in the classroom paired with neglect on the side of the mentor teacher; and the ability to build bonds as opposed to being affected by the pupils' lack of motivation. Furthermore, the study also showcases that the pre-service teachers believe that their first online practicum equipped them with useful ICTs skills that will have a positive impact both on their teaching practice in the short and long term and in their employability. Nevertheless, doubts were also raised regarding how the new skills would actually contribute to their development as teachers in regular, face-to-face contexts. The study helps understanding the effects of the pandemic on initial teacher training, which is a necessary step towards reshaping this process for future generations.

Keywords: practicum; EFL; teacher training; Covid-19; English.

Resumen

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Para continuar la entrega de lecciones que evitaran que el aprendizaje de los estudiantes fuera afectado como resultado de la pandemia, los sistemas de educación alrededor del mundo hicieron una transición hacia el aprendizaje remoto. Sin embargo, este proceso de transición no estuvo exento de dificultades. Sumado a esto, la educación primaria, secundaria y superior en Chile experimentó alteraciones considerables. En el 2020, escuelas en el país cerraron como resultado de la pandemia, que llevó a la mayoría de las instituciones a migrar hacia la enseñanza online. Este cambio también afectó seriamente los programas de formación de profesores en Chile; desarrollar una práctica presencial en un contexto de pandemia resultó inviable, lo que forzó a los formadores de profesores y las instituciones a implementar abruptamente el formato de entrega online. El objetivo principal del artículo es explorar las percepciones de un grupo de profesores de EFL en formación en relación con su práctica

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profesional, realizada bajo circunstancias caracterizadas por altos niveles de incertidumbre y la necesidad de adaptarse rápidamente a las nuevas condiciones. Particularmente, el artículo se enfoca en dos aspectos clave. Por una parte, define las percepciones de los profesores en formación en relación con los principales desafíos y oportunidades encontradas en esta experiencia. Por otra parte, el artículo explora las creencias de los profesores en formación respecto del impacto que esta experiencia podría tener en su práctica pedagógica en el corto y largo plazo. Este estudio utilizó un diseño cualitativo con un enfoque exploratorio descriptivo. Con el fin de considerar las voces de los participantes, se realizaron ocho entrevistas semi-estructuradas a profesores en formación. Los principales hallazgos se refieren a tres grupos de desafíos y oportunidades: el enfoque en las habilidades tecnológicas y pedagógicas en lugar del contenido; la autonomía en la sala de clases a la par de la negligencia por parte del profesor mentor, y la habilidad de construir lazos en lugar de ser afectado por la falta de motivación de los estudiantes. El estudio muestra además que los profesores en formación consideran que su primera práctica online los equipó con habilidades útiles en TIC que tendrán un impacto positivo tanto en sus prácticas pedagógicas en el corto y largo plazo y en su empleabilidad. No obstante, surgieron dudas respecto de cuál sería la contribución real de estas nuevas habilidades en su desarrollo como docentes en contextos presenciales tradicionales. El estudio ayuda a comprender los efectos de la pandemia en la formación inicial docente, lo que es un paso necesario hacia la re-definición de este proceso para las futuras generaciones.

Palabras clave: práctica; EFL; formación docente; Covid-19, inglés

1. Introduction

In order to continue delivering lessons to prevent students' learning from being affected as a result of the pandemic, education systems around the world transitioned to distance learning. However, given the lack of access to digital resources, especially in regions such as Latin America, the transition process was far from being untroubled (Quezada et al., 2020). Likewise, primary, secondary, and higher education in Chile experienced major disruptions. In 2020, schools around the country closed as a result of the pandemic, leading most institutions to migrate to online teaching. This change also seriously affected teacher education programs in Chile; carrying out a face-to-face practicum in a pandemic context resulted non-viable, forcing teacher educators and institutions to abruptly implement the online mode of delivery (Sepulveda & Morrison, 2020). In Chile, this new modality was officially based on the Red de Tutores para Chile [Chilean Tutor Network] initiative, which was created by the Ministry of Education. This initiative emerged in order to both ensure pre-service teachers had the opportunity to complete their practicum, and to offer support to schools and teachers in their distance teaching. Essentially, this initiative officially recognised the online practicum as valid and provided certain outlines for its development.

In a context that is characterised by uncertainty, heterogeneity and the need to quickly adapt to new circumstances, the practicum becomes fundamental in the debate regarding initial teacher training. The practicum is usually understood as one of the most important aspects of initial teacher training (Rajuan et al., 2008; Tang, 2003) given that it allows students to gradually connect with the professional work and with the construction and internalization of the teacher role (Ávalos, 2002). In other words, the practicum does not only represent the transfer from theory to practice of what is learned at university (Bailey, 2009; Barahona, 2015b), but it emerges as a fundamental element in the development of the competence, identity, and professional experience of the pre-service teachers (Hirmas Ready, 2014; Mattsson et al., 2011). This is why the classroom experiences where the pre-service teachers are inserted into the school community have been understood as a key step which mediates the transition from student to teacher (Barahona, 2015a; Gao & Benson, 2012; Moraru & Ríos Santana, 2019).

In Chile, the 2016 Law on Teacher Professional Development (Ley 20903, 2016) places a strong emphasis on the practicum component of teaching programs, by establishing that universities need to offer an early and progressive practicum sequence. At the same time, they need to ensure the implementation of this process through formal agreements with educational institutions. Furthermore, university teaching programs need to have the necessary infrastructure for implementing the practicum sequence, the adequate teaching staff, and to

implement quality insurance mechanisms. Nevertheless, in this context, one of the challenges that university teaching programs still face in Chile is creating practicum experiences that are “more rigorous and effective” (Ruiz de Viñaspre, 2017, p. 7). Therefore, as Montecinos, Walker et al. (2011) state, it is necessary to further investigate the practicum, particularly regarding the activities carried out by the students, their reflections about what they are learning, and the conditions under which their practicum is developed; the relevance of this information is related to the ability to rethink the development of the practicum in initial teacher training.

Most of the research carried out in Chile with respect to the practicum is related to the professional practicum, either exploring the efficacy of this practicum (ver Báez et al., 2015; Cornejo, 2014), the efficacy of the supervisor and mentor teachers (Cornejo, 2014; Díaz & Bastías, 2012; Jofré & Gairín, 2009; Labra, 2011; Latorre, 2009; Montecinos, Barrios & Tapia, 2011), or the tensions and challenges characterizing that practicum (Gorichon et al., 2015; Hirmas & Cortés, 2015). Somewhat less developed is the literature regarding the pre-service teachers' reflections and perceptions during the practicum. Nevertheless, various authors (Bobadilla et al., 2009; Nocetti, 2016) sustain that it is necessary to explore the experiences of the pre-service teachers taking into account their own voices as they represent the main actors of the practicum. Therefore, there are various studies that refer to this aspect (Bobadilla et al., 2009; Cornejo & Fuentealba, 2008; Díaz & Bastías, 2012; Díaz et al., 2010) or which explore in depth certain beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their practicum (see Barahona, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Nocetti, 2016; Tagle et al., 2012; Williamson et al., 2015).

One of the most relevant authors that takes into consideration Chilean EFL pre-service teachers' voices is Barahona (2014, 2015a, 2015b). In her work, Barahona (2015a) outlines some of the most important contradictions between the expectations of the universities and the pre-service teachers' practices. The first contradiction encountered is that supervisor teachers expect pre-service teachers to apply specific methodologies that are not context appropriate. Second, the pre-service teachers have a very heavy workload given that they need to plan and design material for their practicum apart from their regular tasks for the university modules. The third contradiction referred to by Barahona is that the universities expect pre-service teachers to behave as teachers within the practicum classroom, while the schools regard them as students who do not have total autonomy.

In the context of COVID-19, all the tensions contained by the highly complex practicum process are potentially further exacerbated by the new virtual teaching environment. It is also highly likely that in most Chilean cases, various other tensions emerge given the heterogeneity of the practicum centres' answers to the pandemic with regards to their working modality.

Furthermore, some of the latest research already outlines a series of challenges with respect to initial teacher training and the practicum in the pandemic context across the world. One of the main challenges currently debated is the change to the online teaching modality, which brings forth not only difficulties related to gaining the necessary technical and technical-pedagogical knowledge for developing the practicum process (Nasri et al., 2020), but also equity problems related to access to internet (Mutton, 2020). This latter theme is highly salient both in relation to the school pupils and to the actual pre-services teachers. This problematic situation also questions the relations that constitute the formative triad; for example, authors such as Flores and Gago (2020) develop the theme of the changing role of the mentor teacher in this completely novel scenario. Other authors focus on the evaluation of the practicum; in this sense, Moyo (2020) explains how in the context of Zimbabwe the answer towards the restrictions imposed by the pandemic involves rethinking the traditional, face-to-face practicum, primarily in terms of the evaluation process. The author also outlines the tensions between the necessity to rethink the practicum through the lens of this “new normality” and the resistance towards the transformation and the necessity to keep reproducing certain aspects developed across time. There are also authors who highlight that the pandemic can provide “opportunities for the development of a new pedagogy for initial teacher training” (Mutton, 2020). Furthermore, according to Hodges et al. (2020), it can be argued that developing quality practicum training online is possible thanks to the advances of technology and internet access. However, it is important to understand the differences between a premeditated and well-designed online program where long-term invested strategies have been applied, and the rapid and sudden adaptations that education institutions have had to do in an ongoing planning of online courses as a result of a health emergency (Hodges et al., 2020). Consequently, exploring student teachers’ perception on doing their practicum online can provide meaningful insights regarding this process.

The main aim of the present article is to explore a group of Chilean EFL pre-service teachers’ perceptions with regards to their online practicum. More specifically, the article focuses on two key aspects. On the one hand, it outlines the pre-service teachers’ perceptions with regards to the main challenges and opportunities encountered in this experience. On the other hand, the article also explores pre-service teachers’ beliefs with regards to the impact that this experience might have on their teaching practice in the short and long term.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative design with an exploratory and descriptive approach. It focuses on the experiences of a group of Chilean pre-service English teachers during their online practicum.

2.2. Instruments

The present study employed individual semi-structured interviews. This type of interview offers a high level flexibility for the interlocutors (Corbetta, 2003) as it enables the potential emergence of themes that are not initially considered by the researchers but which do make a significant contribution to the understanding of the studied phenomenon (Corbetta, 2003). The interview guide was developed following two key dimensions: i) the challenges and opportunities encountered by the EFL pre-service teachers with respect to their online practicum, especially in relation to the relationships they constructed with all the actors they were involved with during this process (pupils, teachers, university teachers) and ii) the EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs with regards to the impact this online practicum might have on their teaching practice in the short and long term.

2.3. Participants

The TEFL program which represented the focus of the present study lasts for five years and contemplates five progressive practicum instances, starting in the sixth semester and finishing with the so-called "professional practicum" in the tenth semester. All pre-service teachers who were carrying out this practicum at the moment of data collection were formally invited to participate in the study. Eight individual semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers were carried out. The interviewees had completed four other practicum instances. Also, as part of the program, the students had had two subjects related to the use of digital resources in the classroom prior to the pandemic. As part of the new practicum modality, they also received specialized training focused on the use of ICTs. Due to the pandemic, all interviews were carried remotely, via Zoom. Table 1 offers the interviewees' main characteristics, indicating their age, the type of school and course level in which they were placed and the teaching modality used by the school. In order to comply with the necessary ethical procedures, the names of the participants were replaced with culturally-appropriate pseudonyms as a way to protect data confidentiality. For this same reason, neither the names of the schools are specified nor the communes to which they belong.

Table 1

Participants

	Pseudonym	Type of school	Grade	Teaching modality
1.	Andrea	Public	2 nd	Hybrid + Independent workshop
2.	Paz	Public	3 rd -8 th	Synchronous
3.	Sofía	Semi-private	1 st -6 th	Synchronous
4.	Paulina	Semi-private	1 st -3 rd	Synchronous
5.	Marcela	Semi-private	1 st	Synchronous
6.	Carolina	Semi-private	4 th	Synchronous
7.	Gabriela	Public	1 st	Synchronous
8.	Francisco	Semi-private	3 rd	Synchronous

Table 1 shows that in most cases, the teaching modality used by the practicum centres was synchronous, while in some cases it was hybrid, where the pre-service teacher also conducted an extra, independently organized workshop.

2.4. Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their totality. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis. The main purpose was to identify, analyse and present the patterns of themes encountered (Braun & Clarke, 2006) regarding the pre-service teachers' experiences. After having transcribed the data, the group of researchers worked on a coding process together to find the main themes. The first step was for all researchers to familiarize themselves with the data and to start generating codes individually. Then, a document which compiled all researchers' ideas on the possible codes was reviewed together. Afterwards, the first author reviewed the emerging codes and proposed the main codes taking both the preliminary analysis of the researchers and the main aims of this study into consideration. Later, the whole group reviewed and established the main codes: i) the challenges and opportunities that the EFL pre-service teachers encountered in their first online practicum and ii) the EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs regarding the impact of this practicum on their teacher training in the short and long term. Both codes correspond to the dimensions established in the interview guide. Within the first code, several subcodes emerged: expectations before the beginning of the practicum; overall experience of the practicum; new digital skills; autonomy; neglect; relationship with students. Within the second code, the following subcodes emerged: employability; uncertainty regarding the translation of the newly acquired skills in face-to-face contexts.

Since little research has been done regarding the pre-service teachers' voice in terms of their practicum in the context of Covid-19, the analysis was carried out under the inductive approach

allowing the data itself to determine the themes. Furthermore, since the main aim of this study is to explore pre-service teachers' voices and opinions, the analysis followed a semantic approach involving the explicit content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, for the purposes of this study, the participants' complete statements and sentences were taken as the units of analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Focus on Technological and Technological-Pedagogical Knowledge vs Focus on Content

Although the vast majority of pre-service teachers interviewed had initially expected to have a poor experience in their online practicum, most of them underlined that it was, in fact, a very positive experience:

At the beginning I said it sucks to finish the year online, maybe we won't learn much. But it was, at least in my case, the exact opposite. (Andrea)

I didn't expect this online practicum to work. I didn't expect kids would engage with me. I was very pessimistic and thought this practicum would be a disaster and a waste of time and pupils wouldn't learn anything and no, nothing like that happened, the kids even liked me and on our last day a girl told me she was sad because I was leaving (Paulina)

Most participants claimed to have been happily surprised to see how well their practicum developed. Nevertheless, one of the main issues that the participants faced was the sudden change of teaching and learning modality:

Every pre-service teacher has had to learn in a rush how to deal with this [situation] and how to teach in this online context. (Carolina)

All interviewees highlight that having had to quickly adapt to this online modality involved an overall focus on the technical and technical-pedagogical knowledge (Herring et al., 2016; Mishra & Koehler, 2008) rather than on the EFL content that they were supposed to tackle in their lessons. As a consequence, it is noteworthy that throughout the interviews, none of the participants reflects upon challenges and opportunities directly related to teaching EFL online;

most likely, this was primarily due to the shock they must have been under as a result of the abrupt transition from face-to-face to online teaching, where they chose to prioritize learning how to use the technical tools they needed in order to be able to conduct their lessons. Andrea refers to this choice:

I think the biggest challenge was to learn how to use online tools because I didn't have the opportunity to do so during my precious practicums. Obviously, this was not necessary during face-to-face lessons. [...] Apart from using my computer for simple tasks, I didn't know much about online teaching tools. So, during these online lessons I had to wonder "What am I going to do today for my students? What platform should I use?" and I spent entire days learning how to use these digital platforms before even thinking about the content I was supposed to teach because I wanted to do it well.
(Andrea)

I had problems trying to use Zoom. I mean, I had some experience using Google Meets, but I barely knew how to start a lesson and turn my camera on. I had to learn other important stuff such as recording the lesson or using other tools on the go [...] I had to learn all of this by myself. (Carolina)

This reflects what Hodges et al. (2020) state when claiming that although developing effective lessons online is a possibility today, ongoing and sudden adaptations resulting from a health emergency will not necessarily be successful. Most of the participants claimed that although a variety of digital tools were available to deliver online lessons, learning how to use them as well as using them effectively to achieve their lesson objectives became an important challenge, especially when comparing those lessons with face-to-face interactions. The fact that implementing online lessons was an abrupt process rather than a gradual one seems to have affected pre-service teachers' lessons primarily because of their own limited levels of computer literacy, digital literacy, and their limited experience and training using online teaching tools.

Nevertheless, this perceived challenge transformed into an opportunity. Mishra and Koehler (2008) introduced the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model in order to think "about the knowledge teachers need to understand to integrate technology effectively in their classrooms" (p. 2). This model consists of three knowledge bases (Content, Pedagogy, and Technology) and the interactions between them (Pedagogical Content Knowledge, Technological

Content Knowledge, Technological Pedagogical Knowledge, and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge). All participants highlighted that their first online practicum served as a terrain to gain and improve their Technological and Technological-Pedagogical knowledge:

I appreciate that I had the chance to update my ICT knowledge that in previous practicums one maybe doesn't research much because my previous schools didn't have many technological resources. (Andrea)

The best [of this practicum], it may sound ironic, but it's what I learnt about technology. I learned to use things I didn't know, internet tools, computer tools, I didn't know how to use them and I learned [that now] and they are going to be useful in the future. (Paz)

First, all pre-service teachers believe that they enhanced their computer and digital literacy, learning how to use the more complex functions of their computers as well as different digital platforms and online teaching tools. In Mishra and Koehler (2008), this represents the Technology Knowledge base which involves “the skills required to operate particular [digital] technologies” (p. 4) as well as the ability to apply information technology productively and “to recognize when [it] can assist or impede the achievement of a goal” (p. 4). Second, the participants also highlight that they acquired what Mishra and Koehler (2008) call Technological Pedagogical Knowledge. In particular Paz refers to the necessity to focus on what different platforms and tools could do before even thinking about content; according to Mishra and Koehler (2008), this represents “an understanding of how teaching and learning changes when particular technologies are used” (p. 9). This also involves the ability to discern between the different “pedagogical affordances and constraints of a range of technological tools” (Mishra & Koehler, 2008, p. 9) and the impact they have on the design and strategies employed by the teacher in light of the content. In spite of the difficult conditions that led to this learning process, all participants consider the acquisition of these two types of knowledge a positive outcome of their first online practicum, because this seems to have strengthened their teaching practice. In this sense, they mention that the activities and interactions they had with pupils in the online lessons had increasingly more positive results as they started incorporating and reinforcing the use of ICTs in their lessons.

3.2. Autonomy vs Neglect

Primarily as a consequence of the different teaching modalities that Chilean schools adopted during 2020, the participants had different types of access to their assigned classes and pupils.

In many cases, the pre-service teachers were granted a very high degree of autonomy, which pre-service teachers understood mainly as an opportunity for their teacher training:

I learned a lot about what it is like to be in charge of a class as a teacher because we are about to graduate and [...] I still wasn't feeling ready because in my previous practicum I had no idea how to handle a full class, although I knew how to design a lesson, it is different [from actually teaching that lesson] so I believe that was my greatest achievement in this practicum. (Andrea)

Maybe if this practicum had been face-to-face we wouldn't have had such authority in the classroom, for example we have WhatsApp groups with the caretakers and we moderate those groups, they ask questions there and we answer, we sent information through this group so if this practicum had been face-to-face this wouldn't have been our task. (Sofía)

The autonomy some schools granted to these pre-service teachers was very well received. Until this first online practicum, these pre-service teachers had only been able to accompany teachers in their lessons, and conduct a few activities during the semester, so many felt underprepared to teach full lessons, as Andrea underlines above. The online setting and the complex reality of their context led schools to assign more responsibility to the pre-service teachers, by allowing some of them to design and dictate synchronous workshops independently, by giving them the possibility to tutor pupils in very small groups, or by allowing them to design and deliver the synchronous classes almost independently. This autonomy was reflected in the fact that many of them had the chance to conduct their lessons alone with the students, having the freedom to choose contents and materials. In all these specific cases, the participants highlight that the extra responsibility translated into an increase in autonomy that resulted into the pre-service teachers acquiring significant Pedagogical Knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2008), such as group management, lesson planning and implementation, as well as teaching strategies and methods. This is in line with Sepulveda and Morrison's (2020) results which underline that another group of Chilean students understood their first online practicum as "an opportunity for experimentation" (p. 596). Although Sepulveda and Morrison's (2020) participants do not highlight the extra responsibility placed upon them by schools, the authors consider that "student teachers had to look for new ideas and mechanisms to actively engage with learners as a response to the requirements to deliver virtual school lessons" (p. 596). In turn, this translated

into a sense of increased autonomy, which is very similar to the perceptions of the present study's participants.

The autonomy in the online practicum emerges as a significant modification to the role that pre-service teachers are usually assigned in the face-to-face practicum. As mentioned above, in the Chilean field of EFL initial teacher training Barahona (2015a) highlights several contradictions between the university and the schools' expectations regarding the role and practices of the pre-service teacher. One of these contradictions refers to the fact that universities expect pre-service teachers to behave as teachers, particularly in the final stages of their program, while schools do not necessarily offer them autonomy. The online practicum might have modified this contraction, schools providing significant amount of autonomy to pre-service teachers, which also involves a significant amount of responsibility. In turn, this sense of autonomy that participants felt translated not only in the opportunity to experiment pedagogically, but also in terms of the authority they felt as the person in charge of the lessons. Furthermore, the participants highlight two other instances where this autonomy has been granted. First, as Sofía outlines above, some of the participants had contact with their pupils' caretakers, helping to build their feeling of authority, given that pre-service teachers had never had that responsibility. At the same time, some pre-service teachers also got involved in the school community by meeting other teachers or attending school teachers' meetings. The pre-service teachers claimed to feel welcomed and as part of the school, regardless of the distance. One participant claimed that "the online modality allowed us to see beyond the role teachers have within the classroom" (Sofía). For most participants, this practicum was their first close encounter to what being a teacher feels like.

Nevertheless, the autonomy felt by the participants was counterbalanced by the relationship many of them built with their mentor teachers. In addition to developing and constructing an identity as a teacher, practicums are crucial for pre-service teachers' training because they get to be guided and assessed by mentor teachers and university supervisors (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). This is a salient component when evaluating how enriching pre-service teachers' experiences are during their training process. In this study, most of the participants claimed having had multiple problems establishing a fruitful relationship with their mentors due to the complications of online teaching and the lack of communication between them:

I didn't receive any feedback from my mentor [...] I was the one who contacted her before lessons started so that she could check what I was going to do in the lesson and

provide me with some feedback on what was ok and what was wrong. I wanted her to make suggestions on how to establish a meaningful relationship with the pupils because she was their teacher, and she was supposed to know them. She never did that. I would always send her the activities I wanted to do in classes, but she never said whether they were ok or wrong. She did not even tell me if my performance as a teacher in classes was good. No feedback at all. (Francisco)

During my previous practicums I was always able to establish a relationship with my mentors where I would constantly receive feedback from them. This wasn't possible in this online practicum. Sometimes my mentor was not even connected in my class, or I would try to interact with him, and he wouldn't answer. He was probably doing something else during my lesson. I'm sure this wouldn't have happened if the classes had continued face-to-face. (Sofia)

Therefore, although most pre-service teachers regarded the autonomy that they were granted as a positive outcome, many of them felt somewhat neglected by their mentor teachers, mainly because of two interlinked challenges. First, most participants felt that establishing a meaningful relationship with their mentor teacher was significantly impeded by the lack of face-to-face communication. Those participants whose mentor teachers did offer support and were present highlighted the importance of using specific channels of communication (e.g. WhatsApp) for building a relationship. Second, as a consequence of the limited communication between the two parties and the impossibility of scheduling face-to-face meetings with their mentors, most participants felt that they were not provided the necessary guidance and feedback, which represents a fundamental aspect of the practical component of the initial teacher training. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the detrimental working conditions that mentor teachers faced during the pandemic, which involved overwork, overwhelm and burn out. Furthermore, it is crucial to rethink the practicum in terms of evaluation and feedback (Flores & Gago, 2020), and to reconsider its role in pre-service teachers' training process (Moyo, 2020).

3.3. Building Bonds vs Lack of Motivation

Although all participants initially had very low expectations of this practicum and the contact they would have with their students, more than half of the pre-service teachers outlined that the virtual environment allowed them the opportunity to build a closer bond with their students than what they usually experienced in face-to-face lessons:

I think this closeness to students can be reached in face-to-face lessons, but not to the level I got to during this online modality, because usually one can get along well with a certain groups of students but this time it worked with all of them. (Andrea)

According to the interviewees, managing to build a bond was a pleasant and unexpected outcome. This was a consequence of the constant interactions they had with pupils through online platforms and, also, a consequence of having their students' family and personal context closer to their lessons. In this sense, Carolina adds that:

In my previous teaching practice experiences, I struggled to connect with my students from middle school levels and I tried to engage with them and moved around the classroom trying to set this connection. In this online context, it has been easier for me to try to interact with them, ask them about their feelings, likes, hobbies, and I think that motivated them to interact with me more. (Carolina)

The pre-service teachers who had this experience highlight that this bond allowed them to reshape and improve their teaching strategies, and, therefore, improve their pupils' learning process. More specifically, this has allowed them to boost their planning skills as they have been able to better recognize, select and apply new tools considering their students' interests and a wide range of options to engage meaningful activities for students in this particular context. These aspects can be seen as fundamental in building an effective classroom environment as the bond between all the different agents within a classroom can lead to the development of an encouraging learning environment (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Therefore, being able to build stronger bonds with their pupils' did not only contribute to the pre-service teachers' feeling of being recognized as teachers for the first time, but also had an impact on the motivation of both students and pre-service teachers alike.

Nevertheless, another group of interviewees had completely different experiences regarding building bonds and motivation:

Motivation has been a very complicated issue for my students because feeling motivated in this (online) mode is difficult. They get stressed because they have other subjects apart from the one we are teaching, and they get frustrated to be in front of a computer for hours. We, as pre-service teachers are students too, so I understand them. (Carolina)

I think they were motivated at the beginning because everything was new. But then, slowly they got tired of being in front of a computer. It was hard for them to participate. They were ashamed of speaking through a microphone in front of others. I had around thirty students in my first lessons and ended up with 10. (Marcela)

Nobody wanted to turn on their cameras. I was the only one speaking, participating, some students would chat, but it was not the same. We were not prepared for this modality. (Paz)

Establishing meaningful relationships is always important to me. But here (online) it was not possible. Nobody would answer my questions and I never got to see their faces. Cameras and microphones off [...] I would have gotten much closer to them with face-to-face classes. (Gabriela)

Therefore, two interlinked challenges that some participants faced during this practicum was their pupils' lack of motivation toward online classes and not being able to establish a meaningful relationship with them. There are three potential reasons behind these two difficulties. First, this might have happened because of the pupils' unequal access to Internet (Mutton, 2020), which may have prevented some of them to use their cameras and microphones. Second, these issues are mainly reported by those pre-service teachers who also granted the least time for pupil-teacher interaction, either because of the teaching modality adopted by the school, or because of the type of interaction the mentor teacher allowed pre-service teachers to have with the pupils. Third, the sudden transition to the online modality also meant that the actual classes may not have necessarily been properly adapted to the requirements of a successful online teaching program (Hodges et al., 2020), at the level of the curriculum, teaching strategies, or teaching materials.

The pupils' lack of motivation represented a particularly difficult challenge because the pupils' motivation represents a crucial aspect in developing an effective lesson. At the same time, the practicum represents a crucial aspect of initial teaching training as pre-service teachers gradually get familiar with the working environment, construct their educator role, and develop important competences as future teachers (Boz & Boz, 2006; Hirmas Ready, 2014; Mattsson et al., 2011; Yan & He, 2010). Following some of the pre-service teachers' experiences of serious challenges

in building meaningful bonds with their pupils' as well as their pupils' lack of motivation, one can argue that the sudden changes in teaching modality had a strong negative impact on some of the participants' practicum, which may have also affected the way they construct their teacher identity.

3.4. Future impact

One of the crucial aspects declared by the pre-service teachers is the possible impact the abrupt change in the teaching and learning context caused by the global pandemic crisis might have on their professional development and, particularly, the set of skills they consider relevant to have as future teachers. Sofia states:

I believe that every school is now looking for people who has had experience in online teaching contexts, so the experience we have had can now be added into our professional experience, which will give us an extra skill. (Sofia)

I sincerely hope this experience has given me valuable new knowledge and skills to face my lessons and my future professional development. (Paz)

In spite of having such a short notice to even get ready for it, it will definitely be helpful because we will have a very updated knowledge linked to teaching in online contexts. (Carolina)

Most pre-service teachers outline that there is a change in the approach teachers need to take when faced to a virtual context and also how this change requires a thorough development of skills that are connected to Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). It is fair to say that these skills have been considered in the teaching and learning process for a long time (Bih, 2012). However, the current context, which has led to a full immersion into the online environment, has pushed the development of these skills forward, setting new necessities for their teaching practice. Therefore, the pre-service teachers outlined how this has created an opportunity to increase their set of tools connected to their future teaching practice. In this sense, they outline that regardless of the difficult conditions that led to the necessity of improving in this area, the benefits associated to this have strengthen their teaching practice. They mentioned how the activities and interactions they had with students in online lessons positively increased whilst incorporating and reinforcing the use of these tools in their lessons.

In general, most participants outline that they have high expectations connected to this experience and they believe the knowledge they have been able to acquire during this time will remain significant in their teaching practice.

Nonetheless, some pre-service teachers are also cautious regarding the extent to which they may be able to deploy this sets of new skills they acquired online in future regular, face-to-face classes. Regarding, this, Andrea states:

From a positive perspective, I have had the opportunity to learn and develop new skills in ICTs, but, from a negative perspective, it is not the same to teach online than to teach in virtual contexts. I do not know how the teaching context will be when I graduate, but if it is in a face-to-face context, it will not be the same. It is not the same to manage a class in an online context than to manage them in person, in the classroom, while trying to keep everything under control and do the things one is supposed to do. (Andrea)

Thus, it can be inferred that although the pre-service teachers regard the acquisition of new skills as an opportunity, they are also wary of how much these skills will have contributed to their development as teachers in regular contexts. This can be connected to the way teaching university programs are set considering an orthodox teaching context which is based on face-to-face lessons. Thus, methodologies, curricula, and disciplinary skills, and contents are framed under a scheme which conceives the teaching and learning process within a physical classroom. Therefore, the dynamics of a lesson consider activities that imply a physical classroom environment which deems a radically different setting from that of a virtual teaching reality. This can be linked to how pre-service teachers may feel overwhelmed by a teaching context which was not foreseen in their preparation and it also showcases the gap which needs to be filled thinking ahead in terms of future methodological, disciplinary and curricular teacher training.

4. Conclusions

The main objective of the present article was to explore the experiences of a group of Chilean EFL pre-service teachers during their first online practicum. The main findings refer to three sets of challenges and opportunities: the focus on technological and pedagogical skills as opposed to content; autonomy in the classroom paired with neglect on the side of the mentor teacher; and the ability to build bonds as opposed to being affected by the pupils' lack of motivation. Furthermore, the study also showcases that the pre-service teachers believe that their first

online practicum equipped them with useful ICTs skills that will have a positive impact both on their teaching practice in the short and long term and in their employability. Nevertheless, doubts were also raised regarding how the new skills would actually contribute to their development as teachers in regular, face-to-face contexts.

The importance of the study resides in the exploration of the Chilean EFL pre-service teachers' voices regarding their first online practicum. Focusing on this group's first online practicum, the study provides a snapshot into the most significant dimensions that shaped the EFL pre-service teachers' experiences which led to compelling mismatches between their training, expectations, and actual working conditions. In this sense, one of the most critical findings of the study refers to the fact that although the EFL pre-service teachers expected to obtain the necessary tools to teach the content and try different methodologies, the need to adapt to the new online platforms trumped the attention usually given to the discipline. Priority was given to the how instead of to the what.

Furthermore, the study also highlights how the change from the face-to-face practicum to the online practicum also carries lingering issues that need to be addressed in order to improve the initial teacher training process, particularly in the Chilean context. In this sense, two aspects can be highlighted. First, following the experiences of the interviewees, there is a clear need to better integrate technology in the regular, face-to-face classroom and, at the same time, provide adequate training to the pre-service teachers during their initial teacher training regarding the use of ICTs. Second, the highly varying experiences that the interviewees had with respect to the level of autonomy, support and neglect in the classroom cannot be attributed solely to the sudden change to the online modality. While the change in modality might have exacerbated this reality, it does represent a long-term issue, particularly in the Chilean initial teacher training process (Hirmas Ready, 2014). It is therefore important to further strengthen the relationship between schools and universities through an organized process of institutionalization which can clearly articulate the conditions under which the practicum process is carried out.

The limitations of the study are its exploratory nature and the fact that it was conducted at a small scale, at the level of one TEFL program. In light of this, further research could be carried out at a larger scale, employing comparisons between different TEFL programs across different contexts. Another limitation represents the low level of specificity related to the challenges and opportunities experienced by the participants in relation to EFL content and teaching strategies. As mentioned above, this is primarily due to the fact that the study maps the participants' initial reactions to the new mode of carrying out their practicum, which led to them giving priority to aspects that were not necessarily subject specific. In the future, it would be particularly interesting to highlight whether there emerges a reprioritization of the EFL content as opposed

to the focus on acquiring ICTs skills. Also, it would be necessary to delve into the opportunities and challenges that EFL pre-service teachers encounter with respect to the English content they are supposed to teach and the affordances and constrictions of the online modality. Furthermore, research could be conducted with respect to how pre-service teachers envision their online practicum trajectory, exploring thus differences between the first online practicum and the subsequent similar instances. At a broader level, it is necessary to explore and understand ways in which the initial teacher training process has been affected by the challenge of the pandemic over the long term. In this sense, it may be useful to examine the continuities and transformations that teacher training programs, policies, and personal expectations have suffered as a result of the sudden changes in the practicum modality.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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