EFL Teaching Practicums in Vietnam:
The Vexed Partnership between Universities and Schools

Ho Phuong Chi Nguyen

(hophyongchi.nguyen@rmit.edu.au)
RMIT University, Australia

Abstract

The teaching practicum is an integral part of any pre-service teacher training programme. It is when trainee teachers move from university studies to actual school teaching practice under field supervision. However, the partnership between universities and schools in organising the practicum has been questioned. This paper reports on a study investigating the effectiveness of the teaching practicum for English as a foreign language (EFL) trainee teachers at three universities in Ho Chi Minh City as manifested in the training programme, the practicum arrangements and the mentoring practices. Data were collected by means of interviews with key practicum stakeholders including six university academic staff members, six university mentors, six school mentors and twelve EFL trainee teachers. Documents related to the teaching practicum from the three institutions also provided a rich source of qualitative data together with questionnaire data obtained from 141 final-year EFL trainee teachers. Some interesting differences were found in the way the individual universities worked with the host schools although a consistent theme emerged that showed a low level of university-school collaboration in supporting pre-service English language teachers during the practicum. Implications for EFL teacher education and the reinforcement of partnerships between universities and schools in preparing EFL teachers are discussed.

1 Introduction

In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is responsible for planning and managing all education and training matters at the national level. Teacher education courses are typically offered at stand-alone teacher training institutions such as Ha Noi University of Education, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Hue University of Education, HCMC University of Education and provincial teacher training colleges. However, a number of multi-disciplinary universities across the country have also established their own teacher-training departments such as Ha Noi National University, Da Nang University, Sai Gon University and Can Tho University. Normal entry to English language teacher education courses is based on a University and College Entrance Examination score or its equivalent, which is calculated on the basis of students' results for English, Mathematics and Literature. Entry is competitive but the cut off points for entry vary from university to university and year to year.

In the draft guidelines for English teacher education, MOET (2010) proposed that students enrolling in a 4-year undergraduate English teacher-training programme have to undertake two teaching practicums in schools, which account for at least 10 out of 210 academic units needed for the total four-year degree. With the minimum practicum requirement being five weeks (25 days) of supervised professional practice for third-year students (with at least two teaching periods for assessment) and five weeks (25 days) for fourth-year students (with at least six teaching periods for

assessment), individual providers are able to decide how the practicum component of their programs is organised.

However, in the MOET guidelines, little is said about the mutual cooperation and responsibility that universities and schools should engage in with English as a foreign language (EFL) trainee teachers in teaching. The norm of the partnership arrangement is that each participating school agrees to host a number of trainee teachers who will then be judged as qualified based on their ability to successfully perform the predefined tasks and activities set out in the practicum handbook. Once placed at the host school, the trainee teachers are under the supervision of the school mentor and the university has little subsequent involvement. Therefore, the trainee teacher is compelled to balance obligations to the university requirements with those of the classroom culture of the school (Korthagen, 2001). The arrangement of the practicum in Vietnamese EFL context is also believed to allow insufficient integration of theory and practice for the trainee teachers. The way in which each practicum is organised at the host school separately from university learning gives pre-service teachers very limited opportunities to develop their contextual knowledge and understanding of the teaching realities, because teaching practice is often "separated, superficial or patronizing" (Le, 2004). The timing of the practicum is also not appropriate because the main teaching practicum is offered in the last semester of the final year when pre-service teachers have finished all their university courses. Most have little motivation to undertake the practicum, because it does not allow concurrent learning.

This study, driven by the research question "How facilitative and collaborative is the relationship between universities and schools in supporting trainee teachers' learning to teach in the practicum?" is an attempt to investigate university-school partnerships in the Vietnamese EFL context. The research is of significance to policy-makers who design and ratify guidelines for English teacher education programs as well as teacher educators concerned about the learning and assessment of prospective teachers.

2 Background

The teaching practicum is an integral part of any pre-service teacher training program to help teacher candidates grow into their professional role as teachers and to become active participants in the profession. The outcomes of socialisation during the practicum are influenced by the interactions that trainee teachers develop with their students, school mentors, university mentors, peer trainees and school authorities. It is during these stages that trainee teachers may form personal teaching styles and philosophies that will guide them through the multiple, varied and complex pathways of teaching (Griffiths & Tann, 1992). The teaching practicum also provides beginning teachers with actual teaching experience, and intensive developmental feedback because during this time, they feel involved, challenged and even empowered. A contextualized understanding of the intricacies of teaching and an opportunity to foster competencies across a range of tasks basically needed for a teacher such as classroom management skills and lesson planning strategies, which then enhance their personal teaching awareness, and interpersonal relationships are among the professional values that the teaching practicum offers to pre-service teachers (Richards & Crookes, 1988; Farrell, 2001). The success of the teaching practicum, however, depends on many contextual and individual factors among which the relationship between schools and teacher education providers has always been emphasised as a key determinant influencing the overall quality of the practicum effectiveness.

In fact, the existing literature has shown that to support pre-service teachers in performing effectively in the practicum, teacher educators at the university and in the school settings deserve equal respect for the responsibilities they have taken (Odell & Huling, 2000; Portner, 2005). There need to be collaborative efforts in areas such as model teaching, observation, guidance, discussion, feedback and reflection (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Timperley, 2008), with the expertise drawn from both the university and the school sites. However, the traditional way that schools and universities work together in the practicum arrangement has also been under criticism for reducing the capability of prospective teachers and diminishing the pre-service program's relevance to both the trainee

teacher and the host school (Smith, 2000; Tom, 1997). According to Lynch and Smith (2012), such differences occur because of three main reasons. Firstly, teacher education programs falsely assume that trainee teachers will be able to automatically translate what they have learnt at the university into smooth action once they are in a classroom. Secondly, most programs are developed in isolation from the real teaching needs with different focus and priorities. Thirdly, the mismatch between theory and practice is exacerbated when trainee teachers are left for the most part under the supervision of the school mentors alone with very little intervention from the university mentors.

In addition, the lack of support from university and school mentors, which arises from the weak school-university partnership and hinders trainee teachers' practicum performance, has also emerged as an important issue in pre-service EFL teacher education research. In a word, most practicum issues related to mentoring and pedagogical concerns were found to emerge from poor partnering between schools and universities in training and helping trainee teachers learn how to teach. For instance, Farrell (2001) investigated the socialisation of one English language trainee teacher during a teaching practicum in Singapore and found that ambiguous messages in mentoring communication and poor practicum support at the school inhibited the participation of the trainee teacher both inside and outside the classroom. Nguyen and Hudson (2010) conducted research on ninety-seven Vietnamese pre-service teachers to investigate their perceptions of potential difficulties related to learning about teaching EFL writing in their practicum. The study showed that nearly half of the pre-service EFL teachers were concerned about their inadequate confidence and insufficient knowledge for teaching writing at secondary schools because of the gap between the pre-service teachers' knowledge of classroom practices and the reality of the classroom. In another study carried out by Le (2013) with nineteen EFL student teachers and ten teacher educators at three different English language teacher education institutions in Vietnam, the findings showed inconsistency among school mentors in giving comments and feedback. Some were not adequately trained to undertake the supervising roles, which subsequently put the trainee teachers in the dilemma of trying to build up good relationships with the mentors rather than learning to teach. Therefore, a common theme running through these studies is the need to create favourable conditions for shaping the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and professional development of pre-service English language teachers through closer collaboration between schools and universities.

In this vein, the idea of school-university partnership goes beyond the "technical" cooperation between schools and universities outlined in the practicum handbook to reposition the role that each individual member in the two institutions contributes to the interrelationship. This is because the main aim of creating university-school partnerships in teacher education is to generate an environment conducive for all of the parties involved in helping trainee teachers to learn to teach. It requires that all the key school leaders, university academic staff, teacher educators, trainee teachers and anyone interested in teacher education voluntarily play a role in "a joint strategy to prepare teachers and to contribute to the ongoing professional development of the teaching profession" (Lynch & Smith, 2012, p. 134). This model of partnership gives rise to the concept of the "professional learning community," which is based on the notion that effective sharing and collaboration between members in the community can encourage effective communication through (i) shared values and vision, (ii) mutual trust, respect and support, and (iii) openness, networks and partnerships (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), leading to a more positive feeling about the profession (Darling-Hammond, 1996), reducing members' isolation (Lieberman, 2000) and encouraging them to stay in the profession (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001).

This paper, which argues that the school-university partnership can be created if a professional learning community is to be realised between the practicum triad of school mentors, university mentors and trainee teachers, who are engaged in regular meetings to develop a common set of teaching and learning visions. It particularly explores the idea of professional learning community through the extent to which schools and universities collaborate to support trainee teachers' learning during the teaching practicum. The university-school partnership explored in this study is the

collaboration between universities and schools in educating pre-service English language teachers so as to provide the prospective teachers with opportunities to engage and excel in teaching English.

3   Study

3.1   Research methodology

The research methodology was based around case studies (Yin, 2009) of three higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh (HCM) City where EFL teacher education is offered by the English Language Department. Purposive sampling, in which the selection of certain units or cases based on a specific purpose rather than a random decision, was employed to select the three university cases. To maintain the anonymity of the universities, they will be referred to as University One (U1), University Two (U2) and University Three (U3) in this report. The trainee teachers from U1, U2 and U3 undertake their teaching practicum at more than 30 approved high schools in HCM City where English is taught as a compulsory foreign language.

Table 1 highlights the main characteristics of the three institutions and their teaching practicum for English language trainee teachers at U1, U2 and U3. The two public universities have two practicums, the first of four weeks in the third year and the second of seven or eight weeks in the final year, while the private university has only one practicum in the final fourth year of its EFL teacher training program.

Table 1. Three participating institutions

Institutions	Type	Teaching Practicum			
		Number of practicums	Total length	Year of practicum	Placement locations
U1	Private (multi-disciplinary)	1	7 weeks	4	HCM City
U2	Public (teacher training)	2	4 + 7 weeks	3+4	HCM City
U3	Public (multi-disciplinary)	2	4 + 8 weeks	3+4	HCM City

3.2   Research participants

There were two groups of participants in this study including 18 teacher educators and 141 EFL trainee teachers. First of all, the 18 teacher educators, consisting of two groups, academic personnel and practicum mentors, were recruited for gathering qualitative data through interviews. The academic personnel were the dean and the practicum coordinator from each institution, whereas the practicum mentors involved both university mentors and school mentors. Each practicum coordinator was recommended by the dean, while each practicum mentor was suggested by the trainee teacher. Once the trainee teachers knew their host school, school mentors and university mentors, they forwarded the contact details of their mentors to the researcher.

Regarding trainee teacher participants, all 141 fourth-year EFL trainee teachers from the aforementioned three universities were invited to participate in the survey phase while twelve of them were selected for interviews. "Maximum variation sampling" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was followed in order to ensure that the participants chosen for the case studies are representative of the sample of trainee teachers from the three institutions. Moreover, an attempt was also made to ease the data collection process by choosing those as potential participants who would go to the same host school for the practicum. This purposive sampling process resulted in having twelve trainee teachers going to six different host schools in HCM City for their placement.

3.3 Data collection procedure

Within the case study approach, mixed methods data collection with an emphasis on qualitative data was employed because "the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 5).

Firstly, qualitative data were drawn from interviews with two groups of participants:
- The university academic staff including the three deans of the English language departments and the three practicum coordinators
- Practicum triads including twelve English language trainee teachers, their six school mentors and six university mentors

The focus of the interviews was on their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the current teaching practicum organised for pre-service English language teachers. All the interviews were semi-structured in that the questions to be asked were flexible and new questions might be brought up during the interview although the topics and issues to be covered were detailed in advance (Patton, 2002). The length of interviews varied between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. Some interviews were in English, some were in Vietnamese, some in a mixture of both languages. The interviewer kept notes during the interviews and during the last ten minutes of the interview, the contents of the notes were reviewed verbally with the interviewee, for clarity and accuracy.

In addition to interviews, documents related to EFL teacher training programs and the teaching practicum from the three institutions, including EFL teacher training objectives and graduate outcomes, practicum handbooks and practicum guidelines also provided a rich source of qualitative data for the study because "documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (Merriam, 1988, p. 118).

Secondly, the quantitative data were gathered from a researcher-generated practicum questionnaire administered to 141 final year English language trainee teachers from the three participating institutions shortly after the teaching practicum with dominantly closed-ended questions on five-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The questionnaire consisted of four sections; each was to collect different information from or about the trainee teachers: Section I demographic information, Section II general reflections on the teaching practicum, Section III perceptions of the learning-to-teach process, and Section IV concerns about the teaching practicum's effectiveness. A total of 106 validly completed questionnaires were collected. This paper only reported on questionnaire items related to the school-university partnership as reflected in each party's support for trainee teachers' learning.

Thematic analysis, which looked for common themes and patterns across the data set based on content, was employed for interpreting the quantitative data, while descriptive statistics including means, percentages, and frequencies were used to analyse the survey data. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed as an inferential parametric statistics technique to compare the responses of trainee teachers from the three institutions.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 EFL teacher education: Different places, different spaces

Document analysis and interviews with the deans and practicum coordinators from the three institutions highlighted the main features of the current practicum within EFL teacher education at the three universities. The undergraduate English language teacher training offered at each university is a four-year program with requirements to complete 210 academic units (1.5 academic unit is equal to 1 credit point in the current credit-based education system) with seven major groups of

subjects based on MOET's drafted framework for constructing a pre-service English language teacher curriculum (MOET, 2010) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of the four-year English language teacher education program (MOET, 2010)

Subject groups	Example of subjects	Academic units	Main language of instruction
General education	Basic Principles of Marxist Leninism, Ho Chi Minh's Ideology, Information Technology, Psychology, Educational Theories, Vietnamese Language, Second Foreign Language	80	Vietnamese
English language skills	Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar	110	English
Linguistics	Morphology, Syntax, Semantics, Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics		
Literature-Culture	English Literature, American Literature, Cross-cultural Communication		
Teaching methodology	English Language Teaching Methodology, Microteaching		
School placement	Practicum	10	English/ Vietnamese
Thesis writing / Graduation test	Completion of research writing or graduation tests	10	English

On successful completion of the course, students are awarded the degree "Bachelor of Arts in Teaching English" and are qualified to teach at various types of schools within Vietnam. Typically, they teach at high schools but some go and teach English at lower levels of the education system such as in kindergarten, primary or junior secondary schools. The English department and its umbrella institution may support them to find jobs related to English language education after the completion of the program by posting recruitment news, providing letters of reference or communicating directly with the schools when necessary. The prerequisite and number of credits for completing each subject vary slightly among institutions.

As can be inferred from the data obtained, the curriculum of undergraduate EFL teacher programs stipulated by MOET's framework comprises two main components: general education taught in Vietnamese and specialised English language teaching knowledge taught in English. The general education makes up more than one third of the four-year program. In terms of English language teacher knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and contextual knowledge (English language teaching methodology) are much outweighed by the domains of English language proficiency and subject matter knowledge (language skills, linguistics, literature and culture) but little by contextual knowledge, pedagogical reasoning and decision-making, and school placement. In other words, the EFL teacher education is heavily reliant on linguistics and literature and deals very little with teaching practice (Pham, 2001), which supports Pham's (1998) claim that teacher training in Vietnam emphasises subject-matter content knowledge and the philosophy of Ho Chi Minh, with little attention given to "teaching methods."

The imbalance between theory and practice is also evident in the fact that the teaching practicum components account for only 10 of the total 210 academic units of the training program. Although there is still no clear consensus about how much time trainee teachers should spend on their placement, or how the time between practical teaching in school and the theoretical learning at the university should be distributed, the literature suggests that the length of time spent by pre-service teachers in the practicum affects their confidence and capacity to apply theory to practice (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Therefore, according to the studies, to improve teacher candidates' capacity to apply learning to practice, more attention needs to be paid to developing trainee teachers' pedagogical and contextual knowledge, such as classroom management, school culture and expectations, the English curriculum in schools, testing factors, and students' backgrounds and learning needs through university courses, and more time on authentic teaching practice in school

because this knowledge enables the teacher to function effectively in the real teaching context (Johnson, 1996; Kwo, 1996; Richards, 1998; Yuan & Lee, 2014).

The practicum arrangements at the three institutions show that learning to become an English language teacher consists of two separate phases happening in two settings: coursework at the university and practical teaching in the school. This reflects a conventional teacher education approach where learning to teach is viewed "as a two-step process of knowledge acquisition and application or transfer" (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996, p. 79). The practicum model, however, leads to a growing concern about the lack of collaboration between universities and schools when teacher training is conducted at two different places, each with a different focus. The concerns lie in the weak communication in the training process, insufficient shared responsibilities in the practicum, and the unsatisfactory monitoring and assessment of trainee teachers.

First, all the teacher educators agreed that representatives of schools, employers and universities had limited opportunities to communicate about the education of prospective EFL teachers. This resulted in the potential mismatch between training objectives, graduate outcomes and recruitment. In some instances, said one dean, organisational structures were based on rigid personnel and financial arrangements that undermined collaboration,

> We need to wait for approval from this university if we would like to contact the school or employer regarding our training programs. We are dependent on the university's financial and human support. We generally do not want to attempt something beyond our role because the more we are involved, the less we get. (Interview, D3)

Time constraints were the main contributor to this lack of collaboration. Both university educators and school teachers said that heavy workloads left little time for them to think about collaborative initiatives outside teaching. Each school teacher typically needed to teach about 20 periods (forty-five minutes each) a week and to be engaged in other duties such as tutoring, attending staff meetings and joining professional development workshops, while each university mentor was required to spend forty hours per week lecturing, researching and engaging in other professional responsibilities. As such, the collaboration that does occur comes more from concerns on the part of some individuals than from structural co-operative arrangements.

Secondly, the shared responsibilities between schools and universities in arranging the practicum for trainee teachers were found to be insufficient, particularly in terms of engaging the English language department in the process. The teaching practicum boards at U2 and U3, which consist of the university administrative staff rather than EFL teacher educators, coordinate directly with the school teaching practicum boards of various high schools in HCM City to make initial preparation for student placement because at U2 and U3, there are many groups of student teachers in various disciplines attending the teaching practicum at the same time. Thinking about the involvement of the English language department in the teaching practicum, the deans and practicum coordinators from U2 and U3 agreed that their role was not as important as the university in coordinating with the host schools because

> Once our students are on the placement, they will be under the guidance of the university practicum board. What they do at the host schools will be reported in the documents and sent back to the University. The English Language Department has no direct connection with the host schools no matter what happens. (Interview, D3)

Unlike U2 and U3, at U1 there was basically no involvement from the university in organising the teaching practicum. Hence, the English language department works directly with the host schools for the arrangement of the teaching practicum. While this gives much autonomy to the department, the dean and practicum coordinator from U1 recognised the disadvantages of working directly with the host schools. "Our trainee teachers often feel that they are not welcome at the host schools as those coming from bigger universities where trainee teachers of English are grouped with those from other disciplines" (Interview, D1) and "we must think about building

partnerships with schools as well as supporting our students on our own. The university is not involved in the teaching practicum" (Interview, PC1).

In either case, where the university works directly with the participating school like U2 and U3 or where the English language department takes over the communication with the host school like U1 for making the organisational logistics of the practicum, all the university academic staff believed that this collaboration did not accentuate the shared responsibilities they should have in educating the trainee teachers, resulting in the three parties (school-university-English language department) attempting to do their tasks according to the practicum handbook rather than trying to solve problems arising from real situations (see Table 3).

Table 3. Main features of university-school partnerships from three institutions
(based on the practicum documents from the three institutions)

University-school partnerships	U1	U2	U3
Partnership with schools	Department of English	University Practicum Board Department of English	University Practicum Board Department of English
Number of visits from each university mentor	4 times during practicum	1 or 2 during practicum	1 or 2 during practicum

The allocation of host schools for trainee teachers further showed the lack of university-school collaboration. The current practice is that a list of participating schools is forwarded to the trainee teachers from the English department. The choice of schools is then often left to trainee teachers themselves and recorded by the class monitors before submitting it back to the English department, which will finalise the trainee teacher-school list and either send it to the university practicum board as in the case of U2 and U3 or directly forward it to the host schools as with U1. The trainee teachers expressed the belief that they had few opportunities to be heard about the host schools and the teaching environment they were going to be placed at in advance, resulting in their tendency to select the schools based on personal reasons such as distance to schools, school reputation or school community rather than factors influencing their professional development as EFL teachers such as the school's English curriculum and the school's English priorities. "The lack of information about the prospective schools made me believe that there were few differences between them. But the truth is different. Some schools focused on student achievement, while others put communicative language teaching first" (Interview, Nga).

Thirdly, the absence of university engagement in monitoring and evaluating trainee teachers' performance was a clear indicator of insubstantial university-school partnership. Each university mentor from U2 and U3 is required to visit the trainee teachers only once or twice during the whole teaching practicum (seven or eight weeks), while one visit per fortnight is the norm for U1 mentors. There was dissatisfaction among all the twelve trainee teachers about the infrequent visits of the university mentor and the amount of time given to each visit. The following comments illustrate these concerns.

> The visit of the university lecturer is very short. She has only seen a tiny little thing of what my teaching practicum is actually about. She has no voice in the assessment. (Interview, Nga).

> The university lecturer came to the school, observed one of my teaching periods, giving brief comments but no assessment. She was unsure how the evaluation criteria looked like, adding that it would be beneficial if she could observe more. (Interview, Tam).

According to the trainee teachers, the lack of involvement from the university lecturer, school English coordinator, fellow trainee teachers and even students in the process of evaluating the teaching of trainee teachers resulted in a certain degree of bias and subjectivity in the assessment,

as the school teaching mentor was almost solely responsible for marking trainee teachers' performance.

> I am not very happy because the final result is solely dependent on the teaching. Although the educational mentor gives one evaluation about being a form teacher, the school teaching mentor is more influential in giving the final grade" (Interview, Yen).

The quantitative data arising from analysis of the questionnaire further confirmed the gap between the university's and the school's efforts in helping trainee teachers learn to teach, in areas such as arrangement of the practicum as well as support from school, university, and practicum mentors (see Table 4). The results present a mixed picture about the participants' responses but broadly indicate that they were mostly uncertain about the practicum arrangement and support with an exception of peer assistance. For example, only around half the trainee teachers reported having sufficient time to discuss matters with the practicum mentors (either the university mentor or the school mentor) while one-third of them felt unsure about this issue and the rest were in disagreement. In comparison, trainee teachers felt they had more chances to discuss and learn from the practicum peers, with an overwhelming number of them (74.6%) selecting the positive responses. A comparison of the obtained means of the two items showed that peer support was highly appreciated among the trainee teachers (*M=3.91, SD=0.91*), who reported more opportunities to learn with fellow trainees than with their practicum mentors (*M=3.42, SD=0.94*).

Table 4. Response rates regarding practicum arrangement and support (N=106)

Content	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (%)	M	SD
I have had adequate opportunities to discuss things with my practicum mentors.	9.4	43.4	30.2	14.2	2.8	100	3.42	0.94
I have had adequate opportunities to discuss and learn from my peers.	25.5	49.1	17.9	5.7	1.9	100	3.91	0.91
I have received adequate support from my university.	0	16.0	68.9	12.3	2.8	100	2.98	0.63
I have received adequate support from the host school.	0	22.6	63.2	11.3	2.8	100	3.06	0.67
The allocation of host schools for trainee teachers is well organised.	1.9	17.9	58.5	19.8	1.9	100	2.98	0.73
The matching of trainee teachers and school mentors is carefully done.	0	17.9	69.8	12.3	0	100	3.06	0.54

Trainee teachers also questioned whether the support they received from schools and universities was sufficient, with around two-thirds feeling "uncertain" about this issue (69.8% for university and 63.2% for school). Similarly, a majority of the answers were geared towards "uncertain" when commenting on the arrangement of the practicum in terms of school allocation (58.5%) and mentor-trainee matching (69.8%), a robust indicator of respondents' ambivalence toward issues affecting practicum effectiveness. One-fifth of the participants particularly showed their disagreement about the allocation of host schools for the teaching practicum whereas negative responses

for other items accounted for more than 10% of the answers: opportunities to discuss things with the practicum mentors (17%), the support from university (15.1%), support from the host school (14.1%), and the matching of trainee teachers and school mentors (12.3%).

On the basis of the data, there seemed to be weak collaboration between universities and schools in organising the EFL teaching practicum, which was mirrored in the unplanned allocation of host schools, infrequent visits of the university lecturers to the host school as well as the sole authority vested in the school mentors in assessing trainee teachers. This finding contradicts the picture of an ideal teacher education program where "the teacher educators and the schools will be involved in a partnership and have a shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching and good teacher education" (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2003, p. 39). When collaboration is not sufficiently strong, schools and universities may stress different aspects of the placement (Townsend & Bates, 2007), resulting in conflicting information for trainee teachers (Meyer & Land, 2005). Therefore, a strong partnership should be promoted throughout the training program, which will assist the effective organisation of the practicum. One example of the close school-university collaboration is in the allocation of host schools and matching of mentor-trainee teachers. Allocation of host schools for trainee teachers should not be random, but should be conducted in consultation with practicum coordinators and academic advisors from both the school and the university in order to make sure that each trainee teacher is placed in an environment that can best support his or her learning-to-teach process. The trainee teachers' profiles should be reviewed to enable this allocation of school procedure as well as the selection of practicum mentors.

4.2   *The teaching practicum: A lack of professional learning community characteristics*

Responses from the triads of the teaching practicum also revealed that they were hardly engaged in shared dialogues to establish common goals for trainee teachers' learning. There were two main reasons reported for this lack of exchange including the different mentoring responsibilities assumed by the school mentor and the university mentor and the presence of another school mentor in supervising the trainee teachers.

To start with, the time and availability to support trainee teachers varied between university mentors and school mentors, which manifested the imbalanced sharing of responsibilities between universities and participating schools. The university mentors from the three institutions usually initiated contact with the trainee teachers either at the start or in the middle of the placement to arrange a suitable time for a visit to the school. The communication was often done via phone, email or sometimes face-to-face. During the visit, the university mentors would observe one or two teaching periods, give their feedback, comment about the teaching and listen to some of the trainee teachers' concerns. After that, there was virtually no communication between university mentors and trainee teachers. For the whole teaching practicum, it took each university mentor from U2 and U3 about two to three hours for contacting, visiting, observing and giving feedback to the trainee teachers. For U1 mentors, they might need to spend a little bit more time than their U2 and U2 counterparts because it was the only practicum for their trainee teachers.

In comparison, the communication between school mentors and English language trainee teachers was a continuous process, as perceived by both the school mentors and the trainee teachers. On average, each school mentor spent around one to two hours per week working with one trainee teacher, totalling to an approximate eight to sixteen hours of mentoring for the whole practicum round. Those with more than one trainee teacher needed to spend more time because

> […] each trainee teacher is different. I can talk with them in groups but an individual meeting is still necessary" (Interview, SM3).

The time was spent on reviewing lesson plans, observing teaching, giving feedback, making assessments and completing reports. Some school mentors scheduled meeting timetable with trainee teachers on a specific time of the week but others did not. One mentor explained:

> Because all of my trainee teachers are given my teaching schedule, they are welcome to catch up with me during the break of any day when I have teaching periods. No prior appointment is essential. I prefer face-to-face communication, as it is easier for both of us to discuss and solve a problem. However, they can still make a phone call or send me an email when they have unexpected difficulties. (Interview, SM5)

Nevertheless, some school mentors confessed that due to the lack of time, instead of observing trainee teachers while they were teaching in class, they used this as valuable time to grade the students' papers or do other things not related to giving feedback and comments on the trainees' teaching. In fact, the heavy workload for English teachers at both higher institutions and high schools in the Vietnam EFL contexts, which hindered the mentoring practice of the university mentors and school mentors to a considerable extent, has been highlighted in research by Utsumi and Doan (2010) as well as Pham (2001).

Moreover, there is a general agreement among trainee teachers that the school mentors offered more influential pedagogical and emotional support because of the close interaction with them during the teaching practicum, as mirrored in the research literature (Huling-Austin, 1990; Smithey & Evertson, 2003). The results have confirmed that school mentors' role is more important in the learning process of trainee teachers than university mentors' (Calderhead, 1988; Watts, 1987). All the trainee teachers, irrespective of their institution, age, gender, and self-rated English proficiency, wanted the school mentors and university mentors to have a more specific role and that more structured support came from the university during the teaching practicum, a finding that resonates with a number of studies in the field (Gratch, 2001; Merseth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008). The current practice is that the trainee teachers do their placement in schools for extended periods of seven or eight weeks, but barely before or during that time does the university become involved in an in-depth conversation with schools. Neither the school's role in the practicum nor the university's expectations of the school in assisting trainee teachers to learn how to teach is made known responsively to the school mentors, university mentors and trainee teachers.

Another important finding was that across the three institutions, each trainee teacher was not only supervised by the school mentor and the university mentor but also under the guidance of an experienced practising teacher in school who was known as "the school educational mentor," who could be a teacher of any subject. The main role of the school educational mentor is to help trainee teachers learn about the school culture and classroom management. They have the right to evaluate trainee teachers on two criteria of learning about educational realities and being a form teacher. However, according to the trainee teachers, they often experienced conflicting expectations from the school mentor who emphasised the classroom pragmatics of English language teaching with those of the school educational mentor who stressed the general classroom management skills and even with those of the university mentor who was concerned about the application of university learning content to the school teacher. One trainee teacher's comment conveyed such a sentiment.

> It is hard to listen to three voices at the same time. They (the school mentor, the school educational mentor and the university mentor) all have experience and expertise in teaching but mentoring is another matter. I feel stressed to follow their advice because they focus on different aspects of the learning to teach process. (Interview, Minh)

4.3 Supportive learning environment

A professional learning community in this perspective, if it is to be realised, should be expanded to include the school educational mentor in the conventional triad comprising the trainee teacher, the school mentor and the university mentor. Each member in the community needs to clarify his/her role as well as understand others' responsibilities in supporting the trainee teachers during the teaching practicum. Hence, there needs to be a strong collaboration between the school and the university to foster professional links between the two school mentors and the university mentor so

that they can share common values and expectations and have a mutual focus on trainee teacher learning.

With few exceptions, there was little evidence of a shared understanding between university mentors and school mentors even with U1 participants where the university mentors were more engaged in the one and only practicum. The trainee teachers in the study believed that the university mentors were only peripherally involved in the teaching practicum and most were not concerned about any relationship with the student. Likewise, school mentors were very critical of university mentors, who spent insufficient time to observe trainee teachers' teaching and gain a sense of the classroom dynamics, were rushed in their visits and made frequent changes to their visiting schedules. The weakness was partly due to the fact that the institutions had not provided a forum to brief the university mentors of their responsibilities in supporting the professional development of the trainee teacher during the practicum, resulting in the unpreparedness of most university mentors in their supervisory roles. Had transparent expectations of roles been part of required staff support prior to the commencement of the practicum, the results might have been different. In addition, although practicum circumstances vary for the different universities, constraints limiting the time availability for individual university mentor supervision during the practicum are almost similar. Hence, if the two mentoring practices of schools and universities were equally robust, opportunities of observation, feedback, and guidance to trainee teachers might be expanded. A general match between the beliefs of university mentors and school mentors could better support the development of trainee teachers through the consistent messages they receive from both their courses at university and their practicum experience in school (He & Levin, 2008).

5   Implications and conclusion

The study shows that the effectiveness of the teaching practicum depends on the collaboration between universities and schools regarding their roles and responsibilities in assisting trainee teachers' learning. Firstly, the teaching at the university should help trainee teachers gain a sense of coherence among courses and between courses and field experiences. It is necessary to review the relevance and appropriateness of the current courses offered at university to investigate if these sufficiently meet the needs of trainee teachers, since the quality of teacher education programs can be improved "only if the teacher educators help student teachers identify the gap between teaching and theory, and continually facilitate them in connecting their learnt theory and practice" (Cheng, Cheng, & Tang, 2010, p. 102). If teacher education wants to effectively resolve the problem of linking theory to practice, knowledge should be presented and constructed in practice rather than being divorced from the reality of schools and teaching.

Secondly, during the practicum, trainee teachers should be encouraged to work with their practicum mentors in ways that move them beyond a focus on improving instant knowledge, skills and dispositions, towards assuming the larger role of teachers as knowers and agents of change. They need to be provided with consistent guidance and support from both the school mentors and university mentors (Key, 1998). It is necessary to bridge the gap between the experienced and the novice by emphasising a shift in role of the practicum mentors. Experienced teachers can provide trainee teachers with the wisdom of their knowledge and practice, while trainee teachers, in turn, are encouraged to recommend new ideas and make additional insights into a pedagogical concern. Such guidance and support should be extended to trainee teachers beyond the teaching practicum into the initial years of their teaching career. In light of this, mentoring should become a core component of EFL teacher education rather than merely a practice during the teaching practicum.

To this end, universities and schools should work together to develop a planned and scheduled activity to support both the university mentors and the school mentors to supervise trainee teachers. More communication will result in less divergence in mentoring practices espoused by the university mentors and the school mentors, facilitating the induction of trainee teachers into the ethos of the training program. Then collaborative and cooperative activities that happen inside the school context including team-teaching, peer observation, peer coaching, support groups and development discourses, and those taking place beyond the school such as a non-judgemental collaborative in-

quiry group and computer-mediated communication can contribute to facilitating the process of reflection, exploration, and development of language teachers (Mann, 2005).

Despite some contribution to EFL teacher education research, the study was limited by the nature of case study design. The employment of interviews as one of the main research instruments could lead to a certain degree of subjectivity, giving too much scope to the researcher's own interpretations. The purposive sampling technique employed to select the sites and participants decreased the transferability of the findings to other settings. One should be careful in generalising the results to other English language teacher training programs in other contexts. Nonetheless, the findings do represent the views of key stakeholders involved in the teaching practicum from different types of institution in Vietnam that would be useful for future research.

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