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PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE VS. FACE-TO-FACE MICROTEACHING PRACTICES

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of pre-service English teachers (PSETs) regarding microteaching practices in the context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) courses, comparing their experiences in face-to-face and online classroom settings. The importance of online education has risen globally, propelled by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the need for preparing future teachers in both online and traditional classroom settings. 70 PSETs who have experienced both online and face-to-face education at a Turkish public university participated in this study. Data collection involved the self-reflective diaries of the participants, which were analyzed using Atlas.ti software for qualitative content analysis. Findings reveal the advantages of face-to-face microteaching in developing teaching skills in a safe environment, increasing social interaction with peers, building confidence, and receiving immediate feedback, but also highlight challenges such as lack of authenticity, time constraints, stress, and the cost of materials. In terms of online microteaching practice, PSETs emphasized the flexibility and convenience it provides to students and the importance of developing online teaching skills and collaboration, but underlined that technical problems, the lack of immediate feedback, limited non-verbal interaction, and limited social and affective elements all pose challenges for the participants. This research contributes insight into the evolving landscape of microteaching practices in TEYL, offering implications for teacher education in online and face-to-face classrooms.

Keywords: microteaching; young learners; teacher education; English teaching

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction the problem

Recent years have seen a rise in the importance attached to online education all across the world. Unexpected events like the COVID-19 epidemic, which began in 2019 and has significantly impacted our lives for more than two years, have altered how we view schools and education. The disastrous earthquakes that struck Turkey on February 6, 2023, have yet again compelled policymakers to introduce online education at the university level. These encounters have taught us the necessity of being prepared for online education at all times. This study looks into the experiences of pre-service English teachers (PSETs) who took the Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) I module in face-to-face class and the TEYL II module online (and partially hybrid) at a Turkish public university.

Educating PSETs to teach English in young learner classrooms has its unique challenges, especially when PSETs do not have the opportunity to practice their teaching skills in real classroom environments. To overcome these challenges, teacher educators have employed microteaching practices for decades. The importance of using practice-based teaching methods in order to increase the quality of teacher education has long been emphasized (see, for example, Amobi 2005; Amobi and Irwin 2009; Arsal, 2014; Benton-Kupper 2001; Fernández 2005; Kpanja 2001). When teacher education programs do not provide pre-service teachers with practical experience, pre-service teachers lack the necessary preparation and guidance to teach in real classroom environments as they are not able to make the connection between theory and practice (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Grossman, 2005; Ostrosky et al., 2013). Microteaching is one way of bridging the gap between theory-based teacher education and the practical skills associated with actual classroom teaching.

Despite being highly beneficial in teacher education, microteaching practices have also been challenged in the context of TEYL as previous studies highlighted some limitations with authenticity (Bekleyen, 2011; Ekşi & Aşık, 2015). In regular microteaching practices, PSETs pretend to be students in a classroom. In contrast, in TEYL classes, they also have to pretend to be young learners, which brings another angle to be considered in terms of authenticity. Online micro-teaching practices in TEYL classrooms pose even further problems for both teacher educators and PSETs. This study will investigate the perceptions of PSETs of online microteaching practices in TEYL modules compared to their perceptions of face-to-face microteaching practices.

1.2. English language teacher education for young learners

This paper uses the term ‘young learners’ to refer to children from the age of 3 up to 11 or 12 years old (Ellis, 2014). Teaching English to Young Learners has been a globally widespread phenomenon in the last two decades. Parents, policy-makers, material designers, and private institutions have placed the utmost importance on lowering the starting age for children to learn English as an additional language. As such, researchers in English Language

Teaching (ELT henceforth) and teacher education have also shown a growing interest in TEYL from various angles: characteristics of young language learners, how to teach different skills in young learner classrooms, etc. (Cameron, 2003; Johnstone, 2009). The growing interest in TEYL has led to a rapid increase in demand for English teachers who are specialized in TEYL (Copland & Garton, 2014).

In Turkey, two modules—Teaching English to Young Learners I and II—are compulsory for pre-service English teachers in their third year of undergraduate studies. Students in ELT departments at the state university where the data for this study were gathered, as at other universities in Turkey, are required to take the TEYL I module during the first semester of their third year and the TEYL II module during the second semester. The TEYL I module covers issues such as cognitive and affective characteristics of young learners, language learning theories, learning styles, and adapting and evaluating materials, activities, and audio-visual aids to teach vocabulary. The second semester's module mostly consists of different syllabus types, the use of literature to teach English to YLs, and the use of video recordings of YL classrooms to provide pre-service teachers with an understanding of a real classroom environment (Yuksekk Ogretim Kurumu, course description). As can be seen in the course descriptions, PSETs are not given any opportunities to practice teaching in real classrooms or observe real classrooms, which causes a gap between their theoretical knowledge and practical teaching skills (Bekleyen, 2011; Büyükyavuz, 2014; Gürsoy et al., 2013; Haznedar, 2012; and Tütüniş, 2014).

1.3. Microteaching

Microteaching was first developed in the early 1960s at Stanford University to provide PSETs with opportunities to practice their teaching skills while recognizing the complexities of the teaching process (Brent & Thomson, 1996; Görden, 2003; Pringle, Dawson, & Adams, 2003). Allan and Eve (1968) define microteaching as a system of controlled practice which enables pre-service teachers to focus on specified teaching behaviors and practice teaching under controlled conditions. Microteaching involves teaching small groups (5–10), generally of peers, for relatively short periods (5–20 minutes) (Cruickshank & Metcalf, 1990; Gorssman, 2005; Fernandez, 2010). It can be used in the professional development of both pre-service and in-service teachers (Allen and Ryan, 1969). The original microteaching model developed by Alan and Ryan in the early 1960s involves six stages: Plan, Teach, Observe, Re-plan, Re-teach, and Re-observe. More recent research identifies three essential components of an effective microteaching practice: 1. being able to implement theory into practice which is videotaped; 2. giving and receiving both oral and written feedback; and 3. self-reflection (Benton-Kupper, 2001; Crumley & James, 2009; Courneya, Pratt, & Collins, 2008; Kpanja, 2001; Osborne, 1998; Honigsfeld & Schiering, 2004; Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002; McAlpine & Weston, 2002; Mann and Walsh, 2017). Previous studies also emphasize additional criteria for microteaching to be effective, including informing pre-service teachers about the reasons for doing a microteaching practice and providing them with some clear

criteria to help them understand how they can connect theory with practice (Benton-Kupper, 2001; Fernandez & Robinson, 2006; Subramaniam, 2006).

While many studies have identified and emphasized the benefits of microteaching practices in teacher education, some studies have pointed out the possible limitations of this practice. It has been found that some pre-service teachers regard microteaching as a complex and, at times, strange and even threatening experience (Bell, 2007; Costello, Pateman, Pusey, & Longshaw, 2001; Courneya et al., 2008). Richards & Farrell (2011) criticized microteaching for being mainly based on corrective feedback, which might subsequently reproduce teaching norms. Lee & Wu (2006), on the other hand, pointed out that microteaching fails to provide pre-service teachers with sufficient opportunities to reflect on their teaching. In her study with pre-service teachers, Bell (2007) stated that for some pre-service teachers, episodes of microteaching do not reflect the real teaching experience as it is still more like a performance (Kloet & Chugh, 2012). Meanwhile, in their study at a Turkish university, Ekşi & Aşık (2015) asked 71 PSTs to do a microteaching session and then conduct an actual class with appropriately-aged pupils. Following that class, PSTs completed a self-reflective questionnaire. The findings identified several disadvantages to using microteaching in preparing PSTs to teach in real classroom environments. These drawbacks include: 1. not knowing what children are capable of practically; 2. deciding on the appropriateness of the activities; and 3. providing appropriate feedback. Bekleyen (2011) also carried out a study to identify PSTs' attitudes toward microteaching and actual teaching experiences in Turkey. For this purpose, PSTs were interviewed following their actual teaching practice in young learner classrooms. The findings suggest that PSTs' attitudes towards TEYL changed considerably after the real teaching practice, as they stated that only after the actual teaching experience could they understand the differences between adult and young learners.

Previous research on microteaching practices across the world has focused extensively on pre-service teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards microteaching (see, for example, Baecher, 2011; Bekleyen, 2011; Bell, 2007; Benton-Kupper, 2001; Ekşi & Aşık, 2015; Fernandez and Robinson, 2006; Mergler & Tangen, 2010; Orlova, 2009; Savaş, 2012). This study will contribute to the existing literature on microteaching practice by offering another angle: online microteaching practices in TEYL modules. Some recent studies have investigated the perceptions of online microteaching in various contexts. Kokkinos (2022) carried out a study with 21 PSTs at a Greek University to examine the participants' experiences with online microteaching. His study demonstrated that the main challenges that the students encountered concerned technical difficulties and anxiety. In contrast, the main advantage of online microteaching practices was found to be collaboration with peers. Ersin et al.'s (2020) demonstrated that the participants in their study found their online microteaching experience beneficial in terms of developing their teaching proficiency despite some problems with classroom management and technical problems.

According to Bodis et al. (2020), online microteaching improved the participants' "feedback literacy" and ICT skills. Also, they showed that the feeling of community and autonomy

increased after online microteaching practices. Kirby & Hulan (2016) have demonstrated that online microteaching, specifically a platform called VoiceThread, improves participant engagement more than the conventional text-based discussion forum, boosts learning, and facilitates deeper understanding. In a study on Vietnamese students' perspectives of online micro-teaching, Pham (2021) focused on (1) the learning outcomes of online microteaching, (2) the challenges faced, and (3) the recommendations to make online microteaching more effective. The challenges they identified include: (1) checking students' learning progress/attention/concentration; (2) promoting students' participation, engagement, and collaboration; and (3) technical problems. This study will bring together online microteaching and TEYL contexts to shed light on the perceptions of PSETs in this specific context.

2. Method

2.1. Research Context

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) is offered in both the fall and spring terms of the 3rd year of ELT departments in Turkey. In this specific research context, the TEYL I course has started by covering more theoretical issues relevant to TEYL, such as the characteristics of young learners, learning theories, and different learning styles. Then, the theoretical underpinnings of vocabulary teaching, teaching listening, and teaching speaking in young learner classrooms were covered. The PSETs had two micro-teaching practices (15 minutes each), one of which was on vocabulary teaching and the other on teaching listening and speaking skills. At the end of the term, PSETs wrote self-reflection diaries on their microteaching experiences.

On the 6th of February, 2023, several cities were hit by two disastrous earthquakes in Turkey, and the universities were instructed to offer online education. Even though hybrid education was permitted a few months later, very few students attended face-to-face classes, which led to the continuation of online education. For these reasons, the TEYL II course was carried out online during the spring term. Instead of microteaching practices, the students were assigned weekly tasks that included (1) reflection questions, (2) lesson plan preparation, and (3) an online microteaching practice. At the end of the term, PSETs were requested to submit a self-reflection diary that provided their perceptions of the online TEYL II course and their experiences of online microteaching.

2.2. Participants

70 participants took part in this study. The participants were 3rd-grade students of an English Language Teaching Department at a state university in Turkey. The participants took the Teaching English to Young Learners I course in the fall term and the TEYL II course during the spring term. The course took place weekly, and it lasted for 3 hours every week.

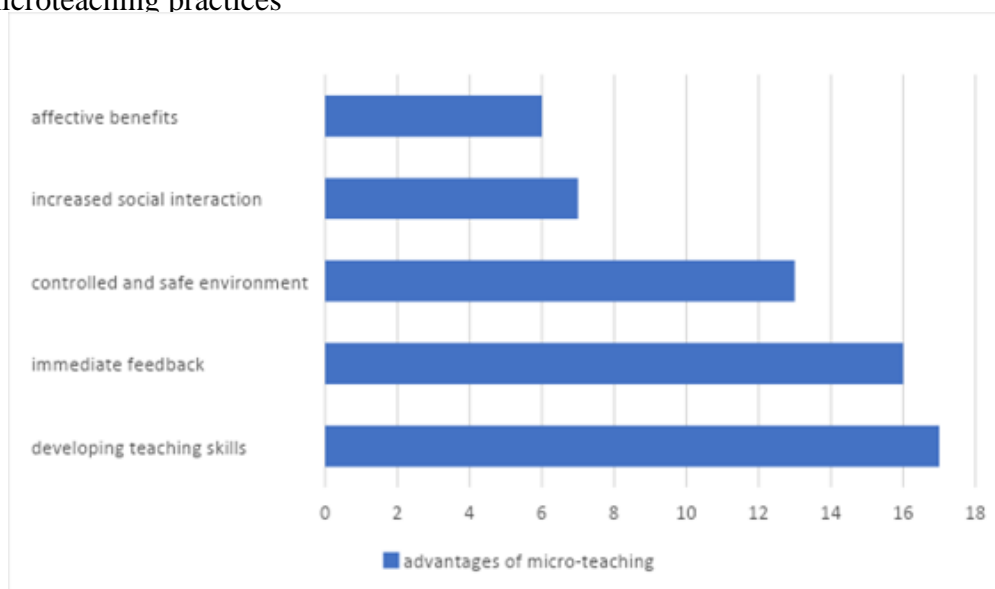
2.3. Instruments

The PSETs were given a self-reflective diary, which encouraged them to reflect on their experiences of TEYL classes in both online and face-to-face classrooms. The PSETs submitted self-reflective diaries at the end of each term, so two diaries were collected from each PSET. The self-reflective diaries of the PSETs were analyzed by adopting qualitative content analysis using Atlas.ti software. To ensure reliability, two researchers were also asked to carry out a sample analysis of the data. The themes and categories that emerged in the analyses done by three different researchers were compared and discussed. The ethical committee of the institution approved the study. Then, the researcher informed the participants about the study, and the participants gave their consent by signing a consent form. Their names are kept anonymous.

3. Results

3.1. Pre-Service English Teachers' Perceptions of In-Class Microteaching Practices

Table 1. Reflections of Pre-Service EFL Teachers on the advantages of face-to-face microteaching practices



“microteaching helps build student teachers' confidence by providing them with opportunities to practice. With microteaching practices, they gain confidence in their abilities and become more comfortable in front of a class.”

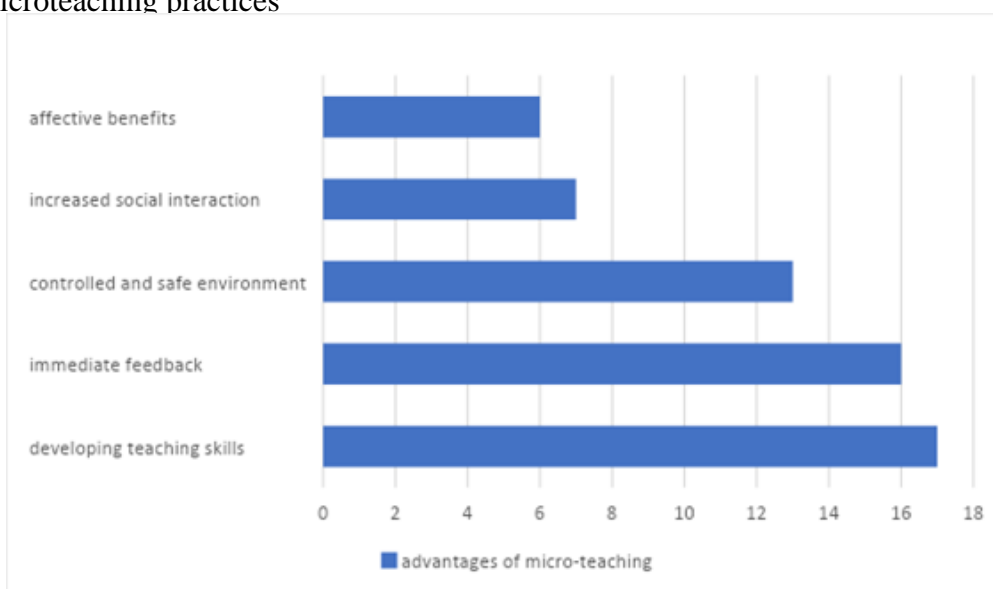
“I found that face-to-face classes offer the advantage of in-person interaction with teachers and classmates, which can enhance the learning experience.”

“Microteaching practices allow teachers to practice their teaching skills in a safe environment and receive feedback from peers and instructors.”

“microteaching provides a controlled environment for teachers to practice and develop specific teaching skills, such as lesson planning, classroom management, questioning techniques, and instructional delivery.”

The codes that emerged from the data analysis and the quotes mentioned above collectively illustrate how the advantages of face-to-face microteaching practices are perceived by PSETs. The codes highlight several key themes, such as building confidence and social relations, enhancing teaching skills, practicing teaching skills in a safe environment, and receiving immediate feedback, as advantages of face-to-face microteaching practices. The analysis shows that developing teaching skills is seen as the most widely acknowledged benefit of face-to-face microteaching practices. These themes highlight the holistic impact of microteaching practices on the professional growth of future English teachers.

Table 2. Reflections of Pre-Service EFL Teachers on the disadvantages of face-to-face microteaching practices



“Micro-teaching practices can be stressful for students no matter what, but most students get over the stress as they gain more experience and do more micro-teaching practices.”

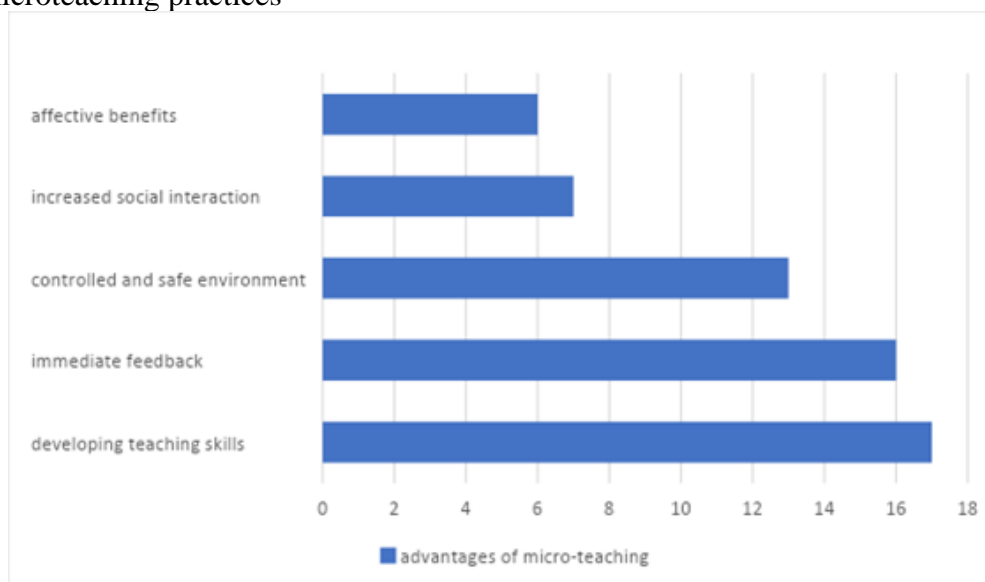
“Sometimes it costs expensive to find materials but I am very glad to have micro-teachings.”

“ One challenge is the limited time of microlearning sessions, which does not fully reflect the intensity and dynamic nature of the actual classroom.”

“ Lack of Authenticity: Microteaching may not fully replicate the complexities of real classroom situations, as it typically involves working with peers instead of actual students. In TEYL classes, it doesn't work because of this reason. We are adults, not young learners. “

Table 2 summarizes the perceptions of PSETs on the disadvantages of face-to-face microteaching practices. Lack of authenticity has been the main concern for the participants. As the quote above highlights, the PSETs believe that not having real young learners in the classroom has a huge effect on the authenticity of microteaching practices. Another disadvantage is time constraints. Having limited time to put their lesson plans into practice is perceived as a disadvantage of face-to-face microteaching practices. Only three PSETs mentioned the stress factor involved in microteaching, and three PSETs perceived the cost of preparing materials as a disadvantage of face-to-face microteaching practices. These diverse viewpoints contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits and limitations of microteaching as a pedagogical tool.

Table 3. Reflections of Pre-Service EFL Teachers on the on the advantages of online microteaching practices



“Firstly, the advantages include flexibility and technology integration. These advantages can enhance the learning experience and provide teachers with diverse tools and perspectives.”

“online classes often provide access to a wide range of resources and materials, making it easier for students to explore different teaching approaches and methods.”

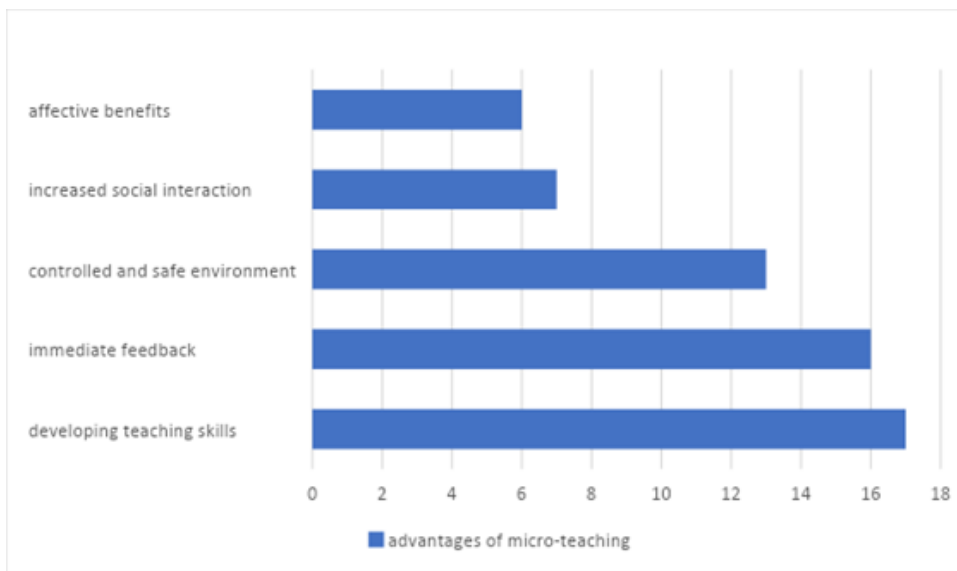
“Online TEYL classes often provide opportunities for collaboration and networking with teachers and learners from different locations. This can lead to a diverse and enriching learning environment where participants can share ideas and experiences.”

“It gives teachers the opportunity to develop digital teaching skills and adapt to online learning methods.”

“online classes provide flexibility, allowing individuals to attend sessions from anywhere with an internet connection.”

The quotes and the table above highlight the multiple advantages of online microteaching practices from PSETs' perspectives. These advantages include flexibility, resource accessibility, collaboration, and the development of digital skills for online education. It is important to note that the majority of the advantages mentioned by the PSETs are regarding the flexibility and convenience that online microteaching provides to students. Only six PSETs perceive online microteaching as a valuable tool for pre-service teachers to enhance their teaching skills which can be better explained by the analysis of the disadvantages of online microteaching practices.

Table 4. Reflections of Pre-Service EFL Teachers on the Disadvantages of the Online Microteaching Practices



“In terms of my own experience, especially group work and interactive activities are very hard to implement.”

“online learning takes a big portion of socializing and interactivity away from the lectures, further damaging the engagement of the students.”

“online TEYL classes have more disadvantages. They lack the face-to-face interaction that comes with traditional classroom settings. This limits spontaneous interactions, and immediate feedback, which are valuable in TEYL contexts.”

“In online classes, my attention span gets a little low, so it becomes hard for me to focus on what is being said. I get distracted easily around my surroundings.”

“One major challenge is the lack of face-to-face interaction with both the instructor and fellow classmates. I think this hinders the development of interpersonal skills.”

“Another challenge is the reduced visibility of non-verbal cues in online classes. Facial expressions and body language, which are important for communication and understanding, may be less apparent or easily missed.”

“Technical issues such as internet connectivity, hardware problems, and software compatibility can hinder the learning experience.”

The quotes highlight the various difficulties that come with online microteaching practices, particularly in TEYL contexts. These difficulties include the implementation of interactive activities being difficult, the loss of socialization and engagement, the absence of social interactions, issues with attention span, the impediment to the development of interpersonal skills, the diminished visibility of non-verbal cues, and various technical difficulties. Designing efficient and interesting online microteaching experiences requires recognizing and addressing these issues.

4. Discussion

This study investigated pre-service English teachers' (PSETs) perceptions of microteaching practices by comparing their experiences in online and face-to-face settings in the context of TEYL courses. The findings provide valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of microteaching practices in both environments. This section will present the interpretation and analysis of the findings within the context of language teacher education, online education, and the unique challenges posed by TEYL.

4.1. Face-to-Face Microteaching Practices: Advantages and Challenges

The study's findings align with previous research revealing the advantages of microteaching in building PSETs' confidence, self-efficacy, and teaching skills. The participants highlighted the safe and controlled environment provided by microteaching, which enables PSETs to put their theoretical knowledge into practice regarding teaching skills such as lesson planning and classroom management. This aligns with the main purpose of microteaching, which aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher education.

PSETs perceived the role of social interaction in face-to-face classrooms as a valuable component of microteaching practices as it allows for in-person communication with instructors and their peers. Immediate feedback was also regarded as a valuable component of face-to-face microteaching practices, as the spontaneous and immediate feedback following their microteaching enhanced their learning experience. Another benefit of face-to-face microteaching practice was listed as the affective aspects, such as building confidence, fostering a sense of community, and enabling PSETs to develop interpersonal skills. Despite the advantages it provides, face-to-face microteaching still raises several challenges. Authenticity emerged as the main concern, especially in TEYL contexts. PSETs not only had to simulate student roles but also had to embody younger learner roles, adding complexity to

the authenticity challenge. This aligns with previous research highlighting authenticity issues in TEYL microteaching (Beklyen, 2011; Ekşi & Aşık, 2015). The study's findings underscore the need for innovative approaches to replicate the complexities of real TEYL classrooms in microteaching, both in face-to-face and online environments.

4.2. Online Microteaching Practice: Advantages and Challenges

The most commonly stated advantage of online microteaching practices is the flexibility that they offer students. Participants mentioned the convenience of being able to participate in the lesson from anywhere in the world. Collaborative opportunities and networking with peers from different locations were perceived as enriching their learning experience. Participants also highlighted the valuable contributions of online microteaching practices in preparing them for any possible encounter with online education settings and technology integration in the future. PSETs expressed their concerns about the lack of immediate feedback, as with the time constraints, they could not receive feedback immediately, which hindered the development of their teaching skills. Participants highlighted the negative impacts of the reduced visibility of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, on communication and understanding, which play a significant role in the learning process. Technical problems, such as internet connectivity and hardware problems, also emerged as important barriers to the effectiveness of online microteaching practices. These problems disrupt the learning experience and may negatively impact student motivation. These findings align with the wider challenges of online education, which can be exacerbated by the lack of technical support and familiarity with online platforms. Attention problems also emerged as a challenge in online microteaching, as participants emphasized that it was very difficult for them to keep their attention as the technical problems and the distractions in their home setting made it difficult for them to focus on the class.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has illuminated PSETs' perceptions of microteaching practices in TEYL modules by contrasting face-to-face and online classroom contexts. The results emphasize the advantages of microteaching in enhancing confidence and teaching abilities while also addressing difficulties like concerns about authenticity and technical difficulties. The study's findings have important implications for teacher education in both face-to-face and online/hybrid settings, as well as for the developing field of microteaching practices in TEYL contexts. The findings show that teacher educators should continue to include microteaching practices to build PSETs' teaching skills and self-efficacy. However, there are some issues to be addressed to increase the effectiveness of microteaching practices. To address authenticity concerns, more authentic experiences or scenarios might be incorporated into microteaching sessions. Providing clear criteria and guidance for both the PSET who carries out the microteaching and those pretending to be the young learners can enhance its effectiveness. In

online education, teacher educators must ensure that online microteaching practices are designed to maintain engagement, foster collaboration, and replicate real classroom interactions. Utilizing interactive tools, prompting peer-to-peer interaction and group work, providing immediate feedback, and addressing technical problems are essential for successful online microteaching practices. The findings suggest that when these issues are addressed, microteaching practices in face-to-face and online settings will be more efficient in developing PSETs' teaching skills.

It's important to recognize the limitations of this study, which include its narrow focus on a single university and reliance on self-reflective journals as the main source of data. Future studies might broaden their focus to cover a wider array of schools and programs offering teacher preparation as well as use different techniques for gathering data, like observations and interviews. Furthermore, investigating the long-term effects of these microteaching experiences on PSETs' teaching methods and student outcomes may yield insightful information.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests and Ethics

The ethical committee of the institution approved the study. Then, the researcher informed the participants about the study, and the participants gave their consent by signing a consent form. Their names are kept anonymous.

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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