ORIGINAL ARTICLE

English Major Undergraduates' Unsatisfactory Practicum Experience:
A Case Study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
Practicum is an excellent chance for university students to apply their knowledge in a real-world professional setting. Unlike other majors, Vietnamese English major students are generally not trained to work in a particular area. Therefore, the causes of their unsatisfactory experiences during practicum are different from those of students with other majors. This current study was designed with a mixed-methods approach to enlist the causes of English-majored students' unsatisfactory experiences during their practicum. Two hundred twenty-two interns majoring in English studies/linguistics responded to an open-ended question. The results showed that students' low self-efficacy and short internship duration were the two leading causes of unsatisfactory experiences during the practicum. Based on the qualitative data analyses, the students were found struggling to complete their assigned tasks as well as expected. Additionally, the short duration prevented them from gaining more professional experience. As a result, some implications for improving the program's quality are discussed in this paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Practicum, undoubtedly, is an important event for university students. It is a good chance for them to reflect on the knowledge learned at university and apply it to reality. Besides, the practicum is a period in which students can broaden their practical professional experience (Hatcher et al., 2012). Such experiences will decide whether the student has the potential to become successful employers or not. The development of a company may be negatively affected without high-quality human resources and sufficient employability skills. The existing literature in this field primarily focuses on practicum for pre-service teachers. For instance, 114 studies on teaching practicum were systemized by Lawson et al. (2015). It also means the topic of teaching practicum seems to be well-explored. In the Vietnamese context, one undergraduate English major program is English studies/linguistics. In the internship program for students majoring in English studies/linguistics, some students can choose to work in English language centers as part-time English instructors while others can spend their practicum in companies requiring employees' sufficient English proficiency. Unlike other majors, Vietnamese English linguistics undergraduates can enjoy the advantages of possessing good English skills in the job market. However, rather than being trained to become tour guides, a businessman/woman, or an English teacher; they are trained to use English to guide a tour, do business, or teach English. In other words, although good at English, they are not trained to specialize in any specific areas. Therefore, the practicum is even more critical for them because it allows them to determine what areas or fields they should work in upon graduation. However, almost none of the previous studies were conducted to investigate the issues related to these students during their practicum at practicum sites. Accordingly, this study aimed to shed light

on the causes of English-majored students' unsatisfactory experiences during their practicum. Regarding the above mentioned aim, the study attempts to address the research question: "What made the English-majored students unsatisfied with their off-campus practicum programs?".

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Practicum

Practicum is a vital part of an academic curriculum in higher education. "Practicum" and "Industrial internship" are often used interchangeably. According to Renganathan et al. (2012), a practicum is an excellent chance for undergraduate students to enrich their work-related experience and professional knowledge by participating in supervised and assigned work in real-world working environments. In 2011, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a nonprofit organization established to provide human resources/staffing professionals with a solid foundation for their recruitment, defined *practicum* as a type of experiential learning outside formal education. It helps students integrate knowledge and theory gained in school into practical activities in a professional workplace. Besides, it allows students to connect their learning and their dream job. Also, it affords employers an excellent opportunity to guide and evaluate their potential employees.

Recently, there has been an increasing number of reports on unemployed graduates. The primary reason is the mismatch between the quality of university graduates and employers' expectations (Renganathan et al., 2012). According to Gault et al. (2010), many undergraduates lack the employability skills to be full-time employees. As a result, the practicum provides both sides, the higher education institution and employers, a great chance to communicate with each other about what should be changed and done to help undergraduates meet the requirements of real-world professional settings after graduation.

Most bachelor's degree programs in English Studies in the context of Vietnam share the same goal: to train learners with a university degree (Level 6 according to the Vietnamese National Qualifications Framework) in the field of Languages. The learner is expected to have solid professional knowledge, great adaptability skills in different working and learning environments, and the qualities of a global citizen to serve the cause of socio-economic development of the country and the region after graduation. This study referenced the objectives of the training program in the above major at a university in Southwest Vietnam. With such a goal in mind, the off-campus internship for these students plays a vital role in helping them meet the requirements of real-world professional settings after graduation. A brief description from the off-campus internship module in the sample program reads: "Students gain experience and practice in agencies, units, and companies mainly located in the Mekong Delta and in provinces across the country. Students will learn and practise more skills through the off-campus internship and consolidate their English language knowledge. In addition, students are more aware of different working styles in real-world settings, such as translation companies, television stations, press agencies, foreign affairs departments, import-export companies, travel agencies, hotels, etc., to ensure their success in the future". As can be seen, English Studies majors can work in all areas related to using English in their internship program.

2.2. Causes of Students' Practicum Disappointments

Unlike previous studies focusing explicitly on the challenges of pre-service teachers or other majors' students during their practicum, this study addressed the causes of negative experiences that English-major students could encounter during practicum. Therefore, the study employed the following self-developed framework (Figure 1).

According to Figure 1, there are three areas of challenges that English majors can encounter when they participate in the practicum.

Intern-related Causes

To gain positive practicum experiences, students have to be aware of what they should do before, during, and after the practicum. There are many internal factors affecting their practicum experiences, such as their professional knowledge, physical and mental health, employability skills, attitudes, characteristics, etc. (Maidment & Crisp, 2011; Esposito et al., 2015; Grant-Smith & Gillet-Swan, 2017; Tran, 2013). For instance, if students fail to maintain their physical and mental well-being, they will be more likely to get into trouble because they cannot complete the assigned tasks effectively or on time (Grant-Smith & Gillet-Swan, 2017).
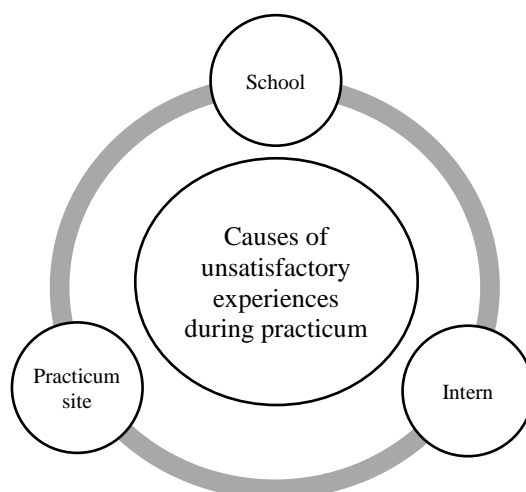
School-related Causes

Figure 1. Framework of the current study

School/university coordinators of the program seem to be the main factor affecting students' practicum experiences. According to Allen et al. (2013), school/university coordinators are the academic staff members in charge of liaising with the internship sites and monitoring the stages of the practicum. In other words, they play a vital role in determining whether the students work well in their practicum, what they should do to complete the program successfully, and what kinds of support they need to maximize the effects of practicum on their school-to-work transition. The coordinator, accordingly, would become the cause of students' disappointing practicum experiences if they do not play that role successfully.

In addition, the practicum duration stated in the academic curriculum is another factor affecting interns' experiences. Gujjar et al. (2010) claimed that the longer students spend in real-world professional settings, the more they can gain from the practicum. In contrast, the students may find the time spent on the practicum not beneficial for their future jobs.

Practicum Site-related Causes

During the practicum, students no longer see themselves as students but as full-time employees. Therefore, students' experiences during the practicum can be affected by their mentors, employers, as well as the organizational culture, coworkers, or other trainees at the practicum site (Bencsik et al., 2016; Gilstrap & Collins, 2012). For example, the differences between the students' expected work culture and the practiced organizational culture where they carry out their practicum can entail some disappointments.

In a nutshell, given the major, the causes of English-major students' unsatisfactory practicum experiences are varied from the challenges of preservice English teachers to those of other professions with English language requirements. The causes are divided into three groups: Intern-related, school/university-related, and practicum site-related causes.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Design

This study was designed with a mixed-methods approach. While quantitative studies are designed to answer the "how many" or "how much" question, qualitative ones aim to address the "hows" and "whys" (Tenny et al., 2021). The research team would like to know the most common causes of students' negative practicum experiences (quantitative data) and how they were affected by these causes (qualitative data). Therefore, a mixed method was, without a doubt, of great help given the aims and scope of this current study.

3.2. Participants

This study was carried out after an off-campus internship program for English Studies majors was completed. The research team contacted the program coordinator to inform the students about the research and collect data of their contact information. Then, the team directly sent invitations to the students via their emails. After one month, there were a total of 221 respondents.

The participants included 175 females, 44 males, and two who would prefer not to be stated. All 221 participants were senior students who accumulated a certain number of required credits upon participating in the practicum. The participants' information was only reviewed by the researchers in order to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, they could withdraw if they felt the article was inappropriate or negatively affected them.

3.3. Research Instruments

The students were surveyed online through Google Forms. The survey had only one open-ended question to explore what caused students' unsatisfactory experiences in their practicum. Specifically, the question reads as follows: "*After completing the internship program, what makes you unsatisfied with the program, yourself, the internship unit, and/or about the department/school in charge of monitoring the training program?*" Before delivering this question to the target participants, the question was written in English and Vietnamese. It was piloted with 20 former English major students who had experienced their practicum a year before. After reviewing the piloted students' answers and comments, it could be convincing to say the question was suitable for the actual study as no misunderstanding was found. Therefore, no further adjustment was made to the question. Before the practicum began, a Zalo group was created to help the school coordinators communicate with the students. Subsequently, this questionnaire was sent to the actual participants via Zalo and their email addresses.

3.4. Procedures

The study followed these steps. First, the research question, driving the study, was piloted with the participation of 20 former students of the research site, as stated in the previous section. Whilst the survey link remained unchanged, the data collected from the pilot participants were excluded from the data set. After the students had completed their practicum, the research team sent them an invitation letter to inform them about the aims and scope of the current study and ask for their agreement to participate. The question link was then sent to the participants via Zalo and their email addresses. As shown in the pilot, some students responded by a bullet list, which somehow did not draw a complete picture of their experiences in practicum. Thus, the students in the actual study were encouraged to elaborate more thoroughly the causes of their negative practicum experiences and how they were negatively affected by these causes. The students were not obligated to respond to the questionnaire. Also, if the students encountered any inconvenience regarding their responses, they could withdraw immediately. All research team members read and analyzed the students' responses. Thematic analysis was the only data analysis approach in this current study. The researchers read through the data to familiarize themselves before classifying them into themes, including internal and external factors influencing the participants' experiences during the practicum. They highlighted and categorized the themes using different colors. The themes with counted appearances in the students' responses were then imported to a table and ranked in descending order (*See Table 1*). Subsequently, each research team member compared their analyses to those of others and discussed what should be kept, recounted, or deleted.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated, the frequency of the factors appearing to negatively affect the students' practicum experiences is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of the factors negatively affecting the students' practicum experiences

Rank	Causes	Clusters	Frequency
1	Nothing	-	88
2	Low self-efficacy	Intern-related	59
3	Short duration	School-related	34
4	Heavy work schedule	Practicum site-related	20
5	Salary issue	Practicum site-related	10
6	Unrelated works to students' major	Practicum site-related	9
7	Uncooperative/messy coworkers	Practicum site-related	7
8	Lack of communication skills	Intern-related	6

9	Unhealthy organizational culture	Practicum site-related	5
9	Bad health	Intern-related	5
11	Mentor	Practicum site-related	2
12	Lacking sense of belonging	Intern-related	1
12	Employer's mistrust	Practicum site-related	1
12	Coordinator	School-related	1

According to Table 1, 88 students wrote that they had not experienced any problems or regrets during their practicum. Respondents 26 and 36, respectively, claimed "Maybe I did not have anything that made me feel regretful and sad during the practicum" and "I had no problem making me sad". The excerpts somewhat highlighted the success of the practicum since it provided most of the students with positive experiences in the actual workplaces. These experiences were expected to provide the students with insights about the organizational culture and prepare them for their future (Renganathan et al., 2012; NACE, 2011).

While 88 students stated they had not experienced disappointing incidents in their practicum, 133 others mentioned 14 reasons for their "below-expectation" experiences when working as an intern. Notably, the most outstanding reason was their low self-efficacy (No. of Respondents – NoR=88), followed by short duration (NoR=34), heavy work schedule (NoR =20), unrelated work to students' major (NoR=9), uncooperative/messy coworker (NoR=7), students' lack of communication skills (NoR=6), unhealthy organizational culture (NoR=5), students' bad health (NoR=5), mentor (NoR=2), lacking a sense of belonging (NoR=1), employer's mistrust (NoR=1) and coordinator (NoR=1). The following sections presented the results by theme, including intern-related causes, school-related causes, and practicum site-related causes.

4.1. Intern-Related Causes

Low Self-Efficacy

According to the respondents, low self-efficacy seemed to be the most predominant cause of their unsatisfactory practicum experiences. Respondent 17 said, "I lacked many skills, and consequently failed to complete the assigned tasks". Being unable to complete the work assigned by the students' mentors deeply disappointed them. Respondent 29, "The job was not completed as expected because there were still many shortcomings that needed to be changed for the better", confirmed that the failure to meet the set expectations reduced the students' self-confidence. The results were in line with the findings of Spooner-Lane et al. (2007), which indicated that the differences between what has been learned in school/university and what actually happens would cause a rude shock to the interns. Moreover, it seems convincing that the full-time working environment was insufficient to help students recognize the potential difficulties before the practicum. Students need practical knowledge to succeed in their future jobs (Setiya, 2008), but the current learning and teaching curriculum requires some readjustments.

Interns' Lack of Communication Skills

Another cause of students' unsatisfactory experiences was their lack of communication skills, admitted by six respondents. Specifically, the students wrote, "I did not take the initiative to talk to the seniors" and "I could not communicate with other trainees" in Response 20 and 137. Similar to teamwork skills, Vietnamese students' communication skills are often not highly valued in the training program (Tran, 2013). Therefore, Vietnamese graduates usually face certain challenges after graduation (Hoi, 2020). The program was displayed in this current study. Without sufficient communication skills, the students failed to fully enjoy their practicum. The results were similar to the study by Al-Momani (2016), which found that students' poor communication skills caused numerous challenges when they participated in the off-campus practicum.

Students' Bad Health

Before the practicum, five students seemed to get into some health problems. As a result, they failed to complete their assigned tasks or fully satisfy with their experiences during the practicum. For instance, Respondents 79 and 109 shared, "Because my health was not good, it affected my internship experience a little", and "I had a little problem with my health". Physical and mental wellbeing must be maintained for employees to succeed (Branscum et al., 2016). Similarly, participating in the practicum meant that the students had to be aware of how vital their physical and mental health were.

Nonetheless, their health was not taken with good care before the practicum. Consequently, ending up with dissatisfaction with the practicum was inevitable. The findings were aligned with the study by Edwards (1993), which highlighted the impact of mental and physical health on interns' experience in the practicum program. Specifically, the lack of mental and physical preparation before participating in the practicum prevented the students from enjoying the time at the internship unit and learning from their first real-world working environment.

Lacking Sense of Belonging

Even though the students in the practicum benefited from the practical experiences, they were not full-time employees of the internment unit. As a result, they were upset due to the lack of a sense of belonging. One student wrote, "Integrating into the community of working with new people was not easy for me, and I felt like I was left out and did not belong to that community". This finding was similar to a case in the study by Dewhurst et al. (2020), which showed that lacking a sense of belonging caused some stress to the students. Da Beer et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of students' sense of social belonging in their academic performance. Remarkably, they will learn more effectively if they are recognized as a member of a group/community. As stated above, the absence of recognition from the hosting organization as a full-time employee undermined the students' satisfaction with their practicum experiences.

4.2. School-Related Causes

Short Duration

The duration of the practicum, which was claimed to be too short, was another cause of unsatisfactory experiences during their practicum. There were 34 respondents mentioning that factor, two of whom, Respondents 87 and 107, respectively, stated that "The thing that I found most disappointing about was probably the relatively short internship time, as I still could not get more experience from the working environment" and "I regret that the practicum period was too short; I wanted to experience it longer to realize my strengths and weaknesses". The study by Gujjar et al. (2010) indicated that the duration of the practicum should be long enough to help the interns recognize the program's values and better their experiences. Nonetheless, a five-week period seems relatively short for a practicum program. Regarding the current duration of the practicum, the students had only few opportunities to understand the organizational cultures and experience themselves as full-time workers, which are expected to be the program's outcomes (Hansen, 1965). Similar results were found in the study by Linh et al. (2020), as the students complained that the practicum was too short in order to thoroughly understand its values as described in the course description.

School Coordinator

During the practicum, one student was disappointed with the support from the school coordinator. In particular, Respondent 157 wrote, "The school coordinators were still a bit rigid; submitting documents in a narrow time frame could be tricky for distant students". The very factor was once mentioned by another student in the study by Kroon and Franco (2022). Specifically, Kroon and Franco (2022) found that the program coordinator, who could not meet the students' expectations, failed to provide the students with sufficient support. As a result, the students could not learn much in their practicum. In the current study, even though the number of students who complained about this was small, the importance of coordinators for a successful practicum program was undoubted. Le Cornu (2012) indicated that school-based professional coordinators are essential in students' teaching practicum. Moreover, this study highlighted the impact of the school coordinator on English major students' experiences during their practicum. The quality of the experience depends on the coordinators' capacities in planning and running the program. Without compelling work by the coordinators, the students found it difficult to enjoy their practicum.

4.3. Host Organisation-Related Causes

Heavy Work Schedule

With 20 respondents, a heavy work schedule took the place of a common cause behind the students' unsatisfactory experiences during the practicum. Respondent 43, "I had a lot of assigned work", and Respondent 109, "I was assigned with many tasks, and the deadlines were often very short, about 2-3 days, so I had to stay up late to finish them on time", were the representatives of this cause. This problem was mentioned in the study by Umyati et al. (2022). The students seemed unprepared for a full-time job due to the significant school and work difference (Spooner-Lane et al., 2007). Unlike the learning period at university or high school, full-time jobs require employees to work beyond their majors. Even though the students could be aware of the above difference, they would be shocked because it was much more significant than expected.

Salary Issues

In the practicum, the students worked as full-time employees; however, they did not receive any money or just little monetary support. Accordingly, ten respondents seemed to be a bit upset. For example, two out of ten respondents mentioned this factor, Respondents 145 and 205, wrote "The intensity of work completely mismatched the practicum allowance" and "I felt that the work, without any payments, had to be done non-stop". Practicum is a time for enriching work experience to prepare for a school-to-work transmission, not for earning money (Fung, 2005). However, some host organizations are willing to offer some financial support to motivate their interns. That inconsistency, hence, evoked negative feelings among the students who were confused about why their friends, who were in the same practicum period, earned some money. Still, they did not get it insignificantly (Kickul, 2001).

Works Unrelated to Students' Major

Similar to the heavy work schedule, the interns were shocked because they did not have many opportunities to apply what they had learned or their professional knowledge to the assigned work. There were nine respondents complaining about assigned tasks which were unrelated to their majors. Respondents 3 and 167, respectively, wrote "I had to do things that were not suitable for me" and "I could not fully apply the professional knowledge I had learned in the university to my assigned works during the practicum". The English major students in this study mostly learned about linguistics, translation, interpretation, and language skills. Unlike other students who study other majors and are trained to do a particular job, such as tourism majors for tour guides, teaching English as a foreign language teacher for student teachers, or business courses for future businessmen and women, the surveyed students' knowledge of other jobs were not sufficient, even though the students were competent in English skills and language knowledge. That is why the practicum is essential for them as an opportunity for their exposure to an authentic workplace and the determination of their appropriate future jobs (Engstorm et al., 2009).

Uncooperative/Messy Coworkers

The next cause of the students' unsatisfactory practicum experiences was uncooperative/messy coworkers. Seven students mentioned their temporary colleagues with some complaints. Specifically, Respondent 190 claimed that, "There were a few "not-very-friendly" colleagues in the host company, which made me quite intimidated to start a conversation or ask for instruction when I had a question". Deocampo (2020) indicated that the relationship between the mentors and interns was one of the main issues around practicum in his study. It is understandable if not everyone is sociable, open, or friendly; the interns would not be the employees' long-term colleagues. One's openness to others needs time to be well-built (Spezio et al., 2019). Moreover, the above respondent also stated that the students were not brave enough to ask for help or were passive. Students' passiveness is often a problem in English classrooms in Vietnam, and it is not simple to solve because it is an unavoidable component of this culture (Nguyen, 2011).

While Respondent 190 was in trouble with the full-time employees at the host organization, Respondent 48 stated a problem related to other interns. The respondent shared, "The saddest thing during the practicum was the lack of the sense of responsibility in the group work; not everyone was the same; some tried very hard to bring the group up, whereas some worked carelessly". According to the respondent, the students' skills for working in a team seemed to be not as good as expected. Tran (2013) pointed out a list of skills that Vietnamese students are not well-trained during their university time, and teamwork skills are at the top. Therefore, the finding that some students failed to work in a team is not surprising.

Unhealthy Organizational Culture

As mentioned by five respondents, unhealthy organizational culture was another cause leading to students' unhappy practicum experiences. For instance, Respondent 101 said "There was an underlying competition between departments, which made me feel very uncomfortable", and Respondent 122, "Sometimes there was a situation where old employees bully new employees". Unhealthy organizational culture undoubtedly causes many problems for an organization. Neither observing nor working in an unhealthy culture during the time of practicum was an excellent chance for the students to recognize what an authentic workplace looks like. However, the transition from school to work involves a set of changes in students' work habits, beliefs, or interests (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999). Therefore, the beautiful picture of a workplace where everyone continuously supports and encourages each other to improve was somewhat different from their imagined one due to their observations during the practicum. As a consequence, they experienced a negative feeling about their time there.

Mentor

Another problem was related to the mentoring process. Respondent 76 stated that, "There was a generation gap between my mentor and me". Stolarski et al. (2020) found the same results as the mentors found it challenging to meet their mentees' needs due to the generation gaps and other issues. Professional identities are formed by work experience (Bruss & Kopala, 1993). Therefore, the mentors sometimes made decisions based on their experience. However, the differences between the two generations are significant because of the rapid changes in modern life (Bencsik et al., 2016; Wilson & Huynh, 2020). Mentor-mentee conflicts, therefore, were not avoidable, and these experiences negatively affected the students' experiences during the practicum. From another perspective, it was a good chance for the students to increase their awareness of organizational conflict and its circumstances to prepare for future jobs.

Employer's Mistrust

The employer's mistrust of the interns' capacities was a cause of one student's disappointment during the practicum. The students would not be assigned a significantly challenging task in their practicum since they still lacked work experience or their superiors' trust. Respondent 193 shared "I felt like I did not receive much of the credibility that I had expected because my experience was not rich enough", confirming the researchers' interpretation. According to Gilstrap and Collins (2012), a positive correlation exists between a leader's trust and employees' satisfaction. Although the students were not full-time employees, they had some experiences as an employee and what an employee would do in a particular situation at the workplace. Therefore, placing themselves in a role like that might increase the students' expectations of being in charge of a significant project. However, it was difficult for employers to assign important work to the students. Failing to do that, accordingly, disappointed the students.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study was conducted with a mixed-methods approach to identify the causes of students' unsatisfactory practicum experiences in real-world professional settings. Through the students' responses, several students, on the one hand, found nothing affecting their positive memories of the practicum, while some causes of disappointment were mentioned by some others. These causes were categorized into three themes, including intern-related causes, school-related causes, and host organization-related causes. For intern-related causes, the students were disappointed with their self-efficacy, communication skills, and health. Also, the students were upset since they felt like they were not a part of the company; and lacked a sense of belonging there.

Regarding school-related causes, the practicum was too short for the students to sufficiently experience a professional workplace. In addition, school coordinators failed to set a reasonable plan for the procedures the students should follow. Regarding the final cluster, the host organization-related causes included a heavy work schedule, lack of monetary support, tasks irrelevant to their major, unhealthy organizational culture, cooperative/messy coworkers, mentors, and employer mistrust. Therefore, there should be some changes regarding plans for the practicum, students' preparation before the practicum, and the school-host organization partnerships.

As stated, some changes need to be made to help increase the positive impact of practicum on English major students' readiness for the school-to-work transition. First and foremost, the students must be aware of the challenges they will encounter during their practicum. During the period of study at schools/universities, students must try to equip themselves with enough knowledge and employability skills for the job they want to do in the future. Additionally, they should be well-prepared for their physical and mental health. To avoid culture shock during the practicum, schools/universities must visualize the differences between school and work before the program.

Additionally, the duration of the practicum should be lengthened because five weeks seem too short for students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses fully. The connection between students' schools/universities and practicum sites needs to be stronger. Consequently, choosing suitable school/university coordinators who can establish strong partnerships with practicum sites is crucial. As so, the progress of students' maturity during practicum will be kept on close track. Practicum sites also play an essential role in students' future preparation. Accordingly, choosing appropriate practicum sites should be done effectively to provide students with options.

Even though the study successfully determined the causes of English-majored students' unsatisfactory experiences during their practicum, it also had limitations. The lack of observations prevented the research team from exploring clearly how the students experienced their practicum, what work they had to do, and what factors affected their experiences during the practicum. Consequently, observations should be considered one of the data collection instruments. Moreover, future research should include other stakeholders' reports, such as those from school and practicum site coordinators. Furthermore, the topic of coordinators' challenges during students' practicum is worth

studying. Additionally, practicum site coordinators' evaluations of students' employability skills during practicum should be considered more thoroughly for further studies.

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