

Practicum Students' Perceptions In The Light Of COVID-19: Challenges & Opportunities

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Abstract

This study investigates practicum students' challenges and opportunities of online teaching and learning in the time of COVID-19 at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Al-rustaq, Oman. Utilizing a questionnaire containing quantitative and qualitative questions to 65 practicum students, the most prominent findings of the study were that online teaching helped practicum students to build confidence and equip them with the right skills and strategies to use online teaching platforms (Google Meet & Google Classroom). Also, the online teaching helped students to manage their pace, and use visual clues, affordable e-resources and teaching aids. However, the study found that internet connection and time management were the main challenges in the online teaching. Online teaching hinders them from getting students full attention, assisting them during the activities and promoting collaborative learning during the lesson. As a result, the study provided some recommendations such as providing practicum students with alternative and more interactive platforms and more training on how to utilize them as this strategy has a high potential of enhancing the impact of online teaching on practicum students' teaching performance.

Keywords: collaborative learning, COVID-19, interactive platforms, internet connection, practicum students

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has affected all sectors around the globe including education. As reported in Quezada, Talbot and Quezada-Parker's (2020) study, UNESCO declared that by 7 June 2020, 1.725 billion students in 193 countries were affected by school closure. In the Sultanate of Oman, since March 2020, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, following the advice of the Supreme Council, decided to suspend face to face instruction. Based on this decision, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al-rustaq had to find alternative ways to continue teaching and learning, including the supervision of practicum students. This was far from easy because there were suddenly no groups of students to teach and no lessons in real classrooms to be observed, discussed and assessed.

The change from face-to-face to online teaching resulted in the stakeholders of the practicum courses needing to incorporate web-conferencing tools/platforms through ZOOM or Google Meet whereby practicum students could practice teaching and be supervised virtually. Because this online practice was unprecedented to both practicum students and supervisors, in the first semester, from March till May 2020, practicum students were asked to plan their lessons and discuss them virtually with their supervisors. The supervisors listened to the students while they conveyed the lesson plans and frequently asked the students questions about the classroom implementation of such strategies and techniques in order to visualize the teaching process. The practicum students were required to undertake two virtual representations of their lesson plans and listened to their supervisors' feedback. Then, they submitted an e-portfolio which included their lesson plans, self-reflections, supervisor's feedback and any used materials.

To examine the effectiveness of this virtual practice, a study by Al-Malki and Al-Washahi (2020) at UTAS Al-rustaq was conducted to investigate the supervisors' experiences. The majority of supervisors were positive and described the experience as "*objective*", "*reliable*", "*enriching*", and "*helpful*", however a few were displeased and saw the virtual supervision as "*unsatisfying*" and acknowledged that they "*did not like*" it. Based on this research, the virtual supervision practice was modified. In the second semester, from October till November, the practicum students were asked to teach their peers online. This was done by creating a Google Classroom, inviting their peers to their lessons and sending materials beforehand so that their peers knew what exactly they would be learning.

The supervisors were involved in synchronous teaching where he/she attended the lesson, and observed the teaching process and practices. Then, the practicum student reflected on his/her lesson, his/her peers provided their feedback, and the supervisors provided his/her oral feedback followed by written feedback that was sent to the practicum students for reflection in order to improve his/her subsequent lessons.

To emphasize the importance of practicum in the teacher education program at Al-rustaq, the Practicum course, in comparison to other ELT courses, is offered twice in the first and second semester in the final year of students' programs. The two courses are called practicum 3 and practicum 4 where the practicum students are trained and acculturated within school and classroom environments twice a week. This study investigates practicum students' challenges and opportunities of Online teaching and learning in light of COVID-19 at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Al-rustaq Oman. It is of importance to listen to practicum students' voices as they play a vital role in the success of practicum processes and practices. In addition, practicum students are graduates of ELT teacher education programs, and hence their practicum experiences of during this unprecedented global pandemic event will allow them to reflect on their performance when teaching students at schools after graduation, especially if the pandemic continues.

Thus, this study investigates the practicum students' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities in the light of COVID-19. In particular, it examines students' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities of using online platforms to enact full lessons to school students. It is guided by the question, what are the practicum students' perceptions of the school-based practicum in the light of COVID-19? The study into the challenges and opportunities of online teaching and learning in light of COVID-19 from practicum students' perspectives is reported by firstly reviewing the literature around online teaching and learning in Higher Education. Then, the practicum students' challenges and opportunities in the ELT context are presented. Following this, the research methods used to collect and analyse the data is described. The research findings are outlined and discussed. The article concludes by examining how the results of the study can inform improvements to the practicum course in light of COVID-19 in Oman and ELT context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there had already been relentless attempts to introduce e-learning and teaching in higher education institutions. According to Woodcock Woodcock, Sisco, & Eady (2015), Australia has been considered a world leader in online education for a decade. It's initiatives have also been modelled by Canada. However, the pandemic has led to world-wide changes to the traditional delivery of teaching and learning in school site classrooms and the transition to online teaching while learners are at home. The online teaching and learning environment has become increasingly embedded in all teacher education programs around the globe and it has become imperative to train pre-service teachers to effectively learn and teach with technology. Woodcock et al. (2015) conducted research similar to the current Omani study to examine the effectiveness of an online synchronous platform used to train pre-service teachers. Through qualitative and quantitative data, the findings revealed that pre-service teachers deemed the online synchronous platform as an effective learning tool in terms of enhancing their competency in their subject matter and in the technology skill. Moreover, the study revealed four conditions for pre-service teacher's e-learning competency which were ease of use, psychologically safe environment, e-learning self-efficacy and competency. However, the study concluded by recommending future research to further investigate how institutions can prepare pre-service teachers to teach using synchronous online platforms.

One of the biggest challenges for teacher education institutions in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic is related to practicum. As mentioned, practicum students in Omani teacher education programs had to cancel their visits to schools and instead, undertook virtual alternatives. Similarly, other institutions around the world were forced to implement alternative strategies to complete their practicum. For example, at an institution in Portugal, the interaction between cooperating teachers and supervisors remained online and there was an intention of intervention in practicum students' virtual classes (Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020). The institution stipulated that the planning of educational processes including pedagogical practicum materials should be reviewed in case the online teaching activities could not be carried out. Not only the teaching and planning process, but also the assessment scheme and criteria needed to be adjusted to align with the online teaching and learning process. In Zimbabwe, the abrupt closure of schools also created assessment practicum conundrums for teacher educators in one of its teacher education institutions. Thus, they reviewed their policies and strengthened their collaboration with cooperating teachers to assess their practicum students in conjunction with university supervisors (Moyo, 2020).

Most of the states in the USA also had to close all schools, thus practicum courses had to discontinue teaching in schools and found alternative ways to student teaching (Kim, 2020). For instance, the college of Education in California collaborated with schools to continue practicum with some adjustments including ‘instructional methods, technologies, [and] tools used to ensure that the teacher candidates developed the expected knowledge, skills and dispositions’ (Quezada et al., 2020, p. 474). In an early childhood course in the USA, practicum students were asked to observe videos of early childhood courses and presented lessons to their colleagues online. In addition to this alternative, there was a high tendency to encourage practicum students to teach children online as they ‘would learn more from teaching and interacting directly with children’ (Kim, 2020, p. 147).

2.2 Practicum Students’ Challenges and Opportunities with Virtual Teaching

As practicum students have started teaching synchronously and asynchronously in the era of the pandemic, some constraints and opportunities arose during their virtual teaching. The literature shows some of these (e.g., Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020; Kim, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). For instance, the study conducted by Assunção Flores and Gago (2020) indicated constraints such as lack of internet access, lack of equipment and digital literacy deficits. These constraints have been spelled out clearly in the research by stating that:

Pupils did not possess the required equipment either because they did not have a laptop or tablet or they had to share the same equipment with other family members. In other cases, there was no internet access or there were technical problems. In addition, some pupils found it difficult to navigate in the online platforms to communicate and to find the tasks to be solved (p. 512).

Not only were students at schools found to have ICT deficiencies but practicum students did as well. Kim (2020) showed that some of the limitations of an online practicum are practicum students’ limited experiences using ICT. Thus, Kim (2020) recommended that teacher preparation programs provide extensive ICT courses so practicum students’ technology skill could be developed. In contrast, twenty-seven Chilean English language teacher candidates acknowledged that this online practicum experience allowed them to learn how to work with different online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Google Meet-Google Classroom (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). As a response to the requirements of delivering virtual classes, these English language teacher candidates mentioned that they had to investigate new ideas and strategies to actively engage with their learners. In addition, this learning experience enabled them to promote their autonomy and accountability as well as their deep reflection on learners’ socio-cultural contexts during this pandemic. In order to execute their virtual lessons, they emphasised that they had to understand the difficulties learners they were facing which could affect the learning process.

Another limitation of online practicum that has emerged from this pandemic, as reported in Kim’s study (2020), is practicum students’ undeveloped presentation skills using online tools. Practicum students had to develop interaction skills with students, build a rapport with them, listen and question and encourage students, as well as keep their attention. Similarly, some challenges emerged in Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison’s (2020) study. The study findings showed three factors that hindered English language teacher candidates’ teaching experiences, namely lack of direct interaction and connection with students, lack of ‘live’ teaching experience and difficulties of working remotely from home including distractions from their households and inaccessible means and materials to do online classes.

Despite the challenges pre-service teachers have encountered in the era of the pandemic, they have also gained a number of benefits which have shaped their technological, social and professional skills and development. The study conducted by Sepulveda-Escobar et al. (2020) emphasized that pre-service teachers’ technological skills were enhanced as they became familiar with the technology. In addition, they not only learnt and utilized various platforms in teaching, but also discovered how to use these platforms to the maximum so that they had successful and effective lessons. Furthermore, pre-service teachers can become more concerned and empathetic about students learning experiences thus, they consider students’ socioeconomic background when preparing for and delivering their lessons (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Also, their interaction and communication with their supervisors was strengthened as the online platform enabled them to communicate directly and with ease. This strong communication and continuous support assisted them to receive immediate and constructive feedback from supervisors which were conducive to improving their lesson plan accordingly (Nel & Marais, 2020). Moreover, another practice enhanced during the era of the pandemic has been virtual peer observation (Kim, 2020). In the virtual environment, as indicated in Kim’s (2020) study, pre-service teachers have the chance to attend their peers’ lessons, and observe and provide feedback to each other. However, this practice was enacted in UTAS, Al-rustaq before the pandemic. Pre-service teachers are required to submit a portfolio, including peer-observation

forms, which require them to attend each others' classes at schools, and observe and write their feedback accordingly.

Although the above-mentioned studies have examined the online practicum in the ELT context during the era of pandemic, there is a gap to fully investigate this phenomenon from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This study is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature through investigating ELT practicum students' challenges and opportunities of online teaching and learning in the time of COVID-19 at University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS)- AL-rusraq, Oman. This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods and the following paragraphs describe in detail the research methodology and method.

3. Methodology and Method

This study investigated the challenges and the opportunities of using online platforms to enact full lessons instead of the face-to-face classroom teaching practicum students used to do before the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19. This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a thorough and precise analysis for the obtained responses. Combining methods has been viewed as an express route to comprehensive and broader understanding of the issues under investigation (Almalki, 2016).

3.1 Instruments & Data Analysis

An online survey using *Google forms* was sent to 69 practicum students enrolled in the Practicum 3 and Practicum 4 courses, 41 of which responded. The survey included 10 closed-ended questions and seven open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were deployed in the form of 5-point Likert scale statements ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The statements cover different aspects related to teaching practices. The data from the closed-ended questions were analyzed statistically via *SPSS 22* software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). To test the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach Alpha (α), named as coefficient alpha, was computed. Cronbach alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 standing for unreliable data sets and values close to one indicating higher internal reliability. A value of Cronbach's alpha with a coefficient of 0.70–0.90 indicates adequate reliability (DeVellis, 2012; Taber, 2018). In this study, a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.726 proved the internal consistency and reliability of the data (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability Statistics for the data

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	
	0.726	11	
Cases		N	%
Valid		41	100.0
Excluded ^a		0	.0
Total		41	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

The same survey also included six open-ended questions to explore the practicum students' perspectives regarding the experiences that they found challenging and promising while teaching online. The practicum students were then given a space to list the issues that they believed would optimize the benefits of this online teaching and avoid its barriers. The response dataset for the open-ended questions was imported into *Nvivo (R-1)* and analysed thematically. Braun and Clarke's (2006) strategy for thematic analysis was used to identify initial codes and themes from the responses.

3.2 Quantitative Results

As previously mentioned, the respondents were practicum students enrolled in the two courses: Practicum 3 and Practicum 4. As is evident from Table 2, 51.2% of practicum students participated in Practicum 3 and 48.8% in Practicum 4. Thus, both courses had almost the same number of respondents.

Table 2. Distribution of students in practicum

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
PRACTICUM 3 student	21	51.2	51.2
PRACTICUM 4 student	20	48.8	100.0
Total	41	100.0	

In the present survey, the respondents were asked to comment on the item “It is easy for me to get students' attention when I teach online” (Table 3). In response, only 34.2 % respondents agreed (both strongly agree and agree) to the statement and 36.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of students' attention while teaching online

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	5	12.2	12.2
Agree	9	22	34.1
Neutral	12	29.3	63.4
Disagree	13	31.7	95.1
Strongly disagree	2	4.9	100
Total	41	100	

In response to “I can manage my class easily when I teach online” only 29.3% of practicum students agreed that they managed their classes easily when they taught online (see Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency distribution of class management during online teaching

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	3	7.3	7.3
Agree	9	22	29.3
Neutral	17	41.5	70.7
Disagree	10	24.4	95.1
Strongly disagree	2	4.9	100
Total	41	100	

It is hypothesized that online teaching promotes students' collaborative learning in classrooms (Yan & Wang, 2022). Regarding this, a vast majority of the respondents disagreed (56.1%, disagree and strongly disagree) that online teaching promoted students' collaborative learning and 17% agreed with the statement (Table 5).

Table 5. Frequency distribution of students' collaborative learning during online teaching

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Agree	7	17.1	17.1
Neutral	11	26.8	43.9
Disagree	17	41.5	85.4
Strongly disagree	6	14.6	100
Total	41	100	

Likewise, a huge number of respondents (65.9%, responded disagree and strongly disagree) did not believe that student-student interaction was maximized in online teaching (Table 6).

Table 6. Frequency distribution of student-student interaction in online teaching

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Agree	5	12.2	12.2
Neutral	9	22	34.1
Disagree	18	43.9	78
Strongly disagree	9	22	100
Total	41	100	

However, when compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching environment, almost half the respondents (43.9% strongly agree and agree) approved that visual clues were clearer, easier, and more affordable when teaching online (Table 7).

Table 7. Frequency distribution of teaching online, compared to a traditional teaching environment

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	6	14.6	14.6
Agree	12	29.3	43.9
Neutral	16	39	82.9
Disagree	6	14.6	97.6
Strongly disagree	1	2.4	100
	41	100	

Furthermore more than half the respondents (51.2%) approved that they were able to track their pace and managed their lessons easily when they taught online (Table 8).

Table 8. Frequency distribution of tracking pace and management during online teaching

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	1	2.4	2.4
Agree	21	51.2	53.7
Neutral	13	31.7	85.4
Disagree	4	9.8	95.1
Strongly disagree	2	4.9	100
Total	41	100	

Table 9 illustrates whether the practicum students found it easy to assist the learners during the activities when teaching them online. Almost 22% of the respondents agreed that they easily assisted students during the activities in a virtual class. However, 41.5% said that they could not easily assist students during the virtual classes.

Table 9. Frequency distribution of assistance to the students during the online teaching

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	3	7.3	7.3
Agree	8	19.5	26.8
Neutral	13	31.7	58.5
Disagree	13	31.7	90.2
Strongly disagree	4	9.8	100
Total	41	100	

When it came to the delivery mode and the convenience of e-textbooks and electronic slides instead of using the conventional board, 39% were in agreement with the statement “I feel more comfortable using the e-book and PPT slides than using the real whiteboard” as evident from the data given in Table 10.

Table 10. Frequency distribution of comfortability using the e-book and PPT slides than using the real whiteboard

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	3	7.3	7.3
Agree	13	31.7	39
Neutral	14	34.1	73.2
Disagree	8	19.5	92.7
Strongly disagree	3	7.3	100
Total	41	100	

Similarly, in terms of the required skills of enacting a virtual lesson, a good number of respondents (48.8%, agreed; 4.9% strongly favored) showed that they had the required skills to teach in a real online class (Table 11).

Table 11. Frequency distribution of about the required skills to teach in a real online class

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	2	4.9	4.9
Agree	20	48.8	53.7
Neutral	12	29.3	82.9
Disagree	6	14.6	97.6
Strongly disagree	1	2.4	100
Total	41	100	

Finally, and unsurprisingly, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (51.2%) complained about the internet connection (Table 12).

Table 12. Frequency distribution of experience to connection issues

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	4	9.8	9.8
Agree	5	12.2	22
Neutral	11	26.8	48.8
Disagree	13	31.7	80.5
Strongly disagree	8	19.5	100
Total	41	100	

3.3 Qualitative Results

3.3.1 Benefits of Online Teaching

Analysis of the data revealed the benefits of experiencing online teaching that could potentially develop practicum students' teaching competencies. These benefits include enhancing the ability of the practicum teachers to utilize various applications and platforms to deliver lessons. When the respondents were teaching online, they were able to develop their skills to use various online applications and tools. One of the respondents stated, *"It was a great experience that helped us to improve our abilities in using various applications."* Respondents also declared that online teaching helped them build their confidence and develop their lesson planning skills as they directly communicated with their supervisors.

Regarding other benefits, the respondents also stated that online teaching increased their familiarity with using language teaching technology and new online learning programs. In addition, respondents stated that while teaching online, they learned multiple teaching methods as part of teaching practice competencies, leading to the use of online assessment techniques and receiving support through online resources, as mentioned by one of the pre-service teachers, *"But it is very helpful in teaching using creative materials and technology."*

3.3.2 Challenges of Online Teaching

The data analysis revealed a number of challenges for online teaching that are related to classroom, time management, unreliable internet connection, and practicum students' digital literacy skill. It appears that the most frequent theme was related to unstable internet connection, which is the most dominant barrier to online practicum found in this study.

Classroom management and monitoring students was another issue that the respondents found challenging. Six respondents revealed how challenging it was to manage their classes, especially during virtual group work with one pre-service teacher highlighting; *"I couldn't manage students in groups, couldn't see their real performance, their problems, no monitoring"*. Another respondent stated that it was difficult to maintain the students' attention and interaction in the classroom. Moreover, some respondents complained about how difficult it was to manage the online lessons time as one of the practicum students mentioned; *"classroom management is a challenge as we need more time to do the tasks online"*. The main issue that affects time management has to do with internet connection. The majority of respondents confirmed they faced problems with the internet, for instance *'delaying, slow internet and its connection'* was a big issue as stated by one of the pre-service teachers.

Furthermore, the pre-service teachers lacked experience using technology and employing it effectively in teaching. One respondent stated: *"I have faced technical problems with my computer which shortened the practice"*

time” and another respondent stated that *‘designing a collaborative learning via Google classroom was a challenge’*.

Due to the internet connection, pre-service teachers perceived the online assessment processes as a challenge as they could not have an easy interview with their supervisors. Yet, the majority of them were satisfied about the way their assessment processes and practices run. More details are described in the following paragraphs.

3.3.3 Assessment Processes Offered on Online Teaching

The analyzed dataset depicts that the majority of respondents were happy with the assessment process (supervisors’ feedback, peer observation) offered during online teaching. They stated that the way their performance was assessed—giving and taking feedback—helped them perform better and revise their teaching practices and improve it accordingly. One of the respondents said, *“supervisors are giving us effective feedback which help us to make future improvements.”* Moreover, respondents also stated that they received fair and detailed feedback from supervisors, and they found online assessments useful because they were provided with recorded lectures and feedback for school students to access and watch the lessons anytime. Respondents, also, stated that the assessment process offered on online teaching was more organized and clear and encompassed precise objectives of the school practicum course. This point will be emphasized in the following paragraph.

3.3.4 Achieving the Learning Outcomes of Practicum 3 & Practicum 4 Courses

Analysis of the respondents’ views on the extent to which online teaching helped achieve the learning outcomes of the practicum 3 and practicum 4 courses showed that two major themes emerged from the data. The first theme represented why online teaching did not help the pre-service teachers achieve the learning outcomes of the practicum 3 and practicum 4 courses. Some of the respondents stated that online teaching could not help them achieve the learning outcomes because making sure that the students did the work themselves was difficult when teaching online. One respondent mentioned, *“Yes, self-learning is good for learners, but for the teacher, what guarantee that learners do the activities by themselves?”* Similarly, another reason mentioned by the respondents was learners did not pay attention, making it challenging for the teachers to gain learners’ attention during the online classes. Moreover, the pre-service teachers also stated that online teaching could be compared with real-life teaching in terms of achieving the practicum course’s learning outcomes, for it was easier to be done when teaching conventionally. Another reason was the poor internet connection that the practicum students experienced during their virtual sessions. One respondent stated that *“Most of learning outcomes are not achieved because of the Internet issues.”*

The second theme represents the role of online teaching in achieving the practicum course’s learning outcomes.

Apart from the difficulties and challenges mentioned by the respondents, more than half of the respondents stated that teaching online has the potential to achieve learning outcomes. They stated that they were able to experience *new ways* to teach in the online environment and identified the need to *launch more online programs* and activities for the learners. It was also mentioned that learning outcomes could be achieved if the number of learners in the online classes could be reduced to a more manageable number. As one of the respondents stated, *“The limited number of learners in each group makes it easy for the teacher to do activities and practices in order to achieve the goals intended.”* They also mentioned that using various online applications, visual aids and the use of technology in language teaching generally helped them achieve the learning outcomes, *“To a greater degree, the outcomes were achieved because of the varied applications and visual aids that teacher can use in online teaching”*, stated one of the pre-service teachers.

3.3.5 Is Online Teaching a Powerful Tool that Could Replace Face-To-Face Sessions

Analysis of the respondents’ perceptions about whether online teaching could replace face-to-face sessions or not showed that the respondents’ views revolved around three main themes.

The first theme is that *online teaching is an alternative way of teaching*. Respondents did not consider it a replacement to the face-to-face sessions but as an alternative way to teach until the circumstances of the pandemic improved; as one of the respondents mentioned, *“Not at all. It will always remain as an alternative way of teaching in such circumstance.”* Moreover, it was also revealed that online teaching could be a powerful tool if a good internet connection was available for both teachers and students, with students having access to basic resources and needs to establish a proper virtual environment when they were learning from home. One of the respondents mentioned that *“It could be a powerful tool if all learners have the technological requirements and abilities.”* Respondents also stated various reasons for not considering online teaching as a powerful tool to replace face-to-face sessions. The first reason is the difficulty of observing the learners’ performance in online teaching. Second, the lack of resources and the absence of a conducive learning environment for both the

learners and the teachers was an issue. The third identified reason is learners' lack of social interaction, showing that online teaching could not replace face-to-face teaching sessions. As one of the respondents mentioned, *"I don't think so. Most of the teachers, students and parents prefer the traditional way of learning where the teacher is able to follow students' progress in learning easily and students are able to interact with their classmates in a real position as well as for the parents who used to guarantee that their children are receiving good learning in schools"*.

4. Discussion

It is observable from the quantitative and qualitative results that the pre-service teachers at the university of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al-rustaq have gained some benefits and encountered some challenges in relation to online learning and teaching. The most beneficial findings based on the pre-service teachers' perceptions was related to developing their technological skills and gaining opportunities to utilize various applications and platforms when delivering their virtual lessons. Such applications and platforms, like Google classroom and Google Meet, were affordable and easily accessible for pre-service teachers. This acquired new skill enabled them to use visual clues, manage their pace and most importantly build their confidence in a virtual classroom. Furthermore, during this online teaching, the pre-service teachers were satisfied about the way they were assessed in terms of receiving constructive feedback from their supervisors. These findings resonate with a number of studies mentioned in the literature (e.g., Nel & Marais, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar et al., 2020).

These benefits that the pre-service teachers gained during this unprecedented pandemic situation enhanced their digital literacy skill which empowered them to gain confident access to the digital world. This is an important finding because increased digital literacy has been highlighted in Oman's vision 2040. The first cluster in Oman's vision (2040) is "comprehensive education, scientific research leading to a knowledge society and competitive national talents" (p. 10, Oman 2040 vision future Pack, 2018). In order to achieve this plan and improve educational quality in all contexts, developing students' digital literacy is essential.

On the other hand, online teaching and learning has its challenges as perceived by the pre-service teachers. The most challenging factors that pre-service teachers encountered, which also resonated with the literature (for instance, Kim, 2020), were the issues with internet connection. This factor, as perceived by the pre-service teachers, was a barrier to achieving the practicum 3 and practicum 4 learning objectives but was also behind the respondents' consideration that online teaching was a powerful tool but could not replace face-to-face sessions. Moreover, this factor disabled pre-service teachers from receiving students' full attention and interaction in the classroom and prevented the pre-service teachers from effectively assisting students during the activities and promoting collaborative learning during lessons. However, this finding is surprising as infrastructural readiness in e-learning has been a concerning issue which was deeply investigated in the Sultanate of Oman a long time ago when IT business parks and Information Technology institutions were established throughout Oman's regions. In addition, there has been an embracement of IT in educational institutions across the Sultanate (Al Musawi & Akinyemi, 2002). Also, as mentioned in Al Musawi & Akinyemi (2002) study, there is a level of digital literacy among Omani citizens as they are "using the email facilities and surfing the Web for needed information on a daily basis" (p. 1). However, it seems an ongoing issue that rigorous and quick solutions and policies are inevitably needed as well as more training should be offered.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the challenges and opportunities of online teaching and learning in the light of COVID-19 from the perspectives of practicum students at UTAS-AL-rustaq. The gathered data revealed that practicum students gained a number of benefits from teaching via online platforms, for instance, enhancing their ability to utilize various applications and platforms to deliver lessons; developing and making them familiar with using technology for language teaching and learning the skills of new online learning programs. On the contrary, there were several challenges practicum students encountered, with the most challenging one being unreliable internet connection

Thus, this study draws a number of recommendations to higher education institutions either locally or internationally in order to improve online teaching-learning. Firstly, free access to online learning applications should be awarded to practicum students so they can enhance their understanding and skills and be creative in their teaching. Secondly, the institution should provide a conducive and supportive environment that facilitates and augments online teaching-learning process/practice. For instance, it can conduct series of training sessions on how to utilize online learning applications as this strategy has a high potential of enhancing the impact of practicum students' online teaching performance. Furthermore, the institution needs to provide facilities and accessibilities to students in terms of electronic books and resources and most importantly high-speed internet. Finally, the institution should provide technical support to resolve practicum students' technology support-related issues.

6. Limitation

There are some limitations to the study. First, the focus was on the practicum students whose major is English. Secondly, the study depended thoroughly on the questionnaire, thus future research could utilize other methodological tool such as interviews with a range number of practicum students from different majors to represent their views and perceptions regarding the discussed topic. Having said so, the study contributed to the literature through including Omani practicum students' voices to the unprecedented event about the online teaching/learning as there are few studies examined the issue in the ELT context. Also, the study contributed to the field of teacher education in relation to the importance of school-based practicum and how can the challenges and opportunities which were highlighted by practicum students should be raised in order to enhance the current and future practices in case this pandemic continues/ occurs again.

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