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## The Use of Blog Activities to Promote Reflection in an ELT Practicum

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*Abstract: Informed by the theories of critical reflection and community of practice, this study aimed to explore the integration of blogs to promote reflection among eighteen pre-service English language teachers registered in a practicum course at a public university in Turkey. Fourteen blog activities were designed and implemented to guide the reflective process of student teachers. Data were collected through archival documents of participants' blog entries, two focus group interviews and two surveys. A total of 457 entries were analysed in terms of depth of reflection and the analysis revealed evidence of medium or high level reflection in most (61%) of the entries and highest level of reflection in 12% of the entries. The results indicated that the blog activities guided and systematically promoted reflectivity among pre-service teachers and thus have given them an opportunity to engage in deeper levels of reflection.*

### Introduction

Reflective teaching is an active, intentional and purposeful process of professional evaluation of one's teaching experiences. It is carried out in order to discover a way to better teachers' actions and attitudes in that context and is considered one of the critical assets of an effective teacher. Reflective teachers question their teaching experiences regularly; take action and reshape their understandings accordingly and cyclically, analyse these reshaped actions and reflect on them (Schön, 1983). Teachers can become reflective practitioners with some guidance and insight. Rodman (2010) claims that "it is a major responsibility of teacher education to facilitate a reflective, self-monitoring practice and to promote such a practice as a critical and active habit that improves the pre-service teachers' pedagogical ability" (p.20).

Practicum, an integral component of teacher education programs, provides pre-service teachers opportunities to have classroom experiences through observations and teaching presentations in K-12 schools under the supervision of cooperating teachers and faculty instructors. It, therefore, creates ideal prospects for teacher candidates to practice reflection-in-action while doing their classroom observations and reflection-on-action as they practice teaching presentations. However, overcrowded classrooms and limited face-to-face class time restrain the amount and depth of reflection student teachers can engage in.

Blog is a Web 2.0 tool that can be incorporated into teacher education programs to promote and enhance the skill of reflection. Blogs are significant for their potential contribution to the improvement of professional development in teacher training programs and the integration of technology into a class-based teacher training course. With built-in social networking opportunities, blogs can enable teacher candidates to virtually connect outside of the classroom as well and carry out participatory dialogue about their experiences. The present study aims to contribute to the understanding of promoting reflective thinking in pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education program through blogging.

It is important in its attempt to measure a complex phenomenon, reflection, and to determine the factors leading to a certain depth of reflection in pre-service teachers (hereafter PSTs) through the use of a Web 2.0 tool.

## **Literature Review**

### **Reflection in Teaching**

The roots of reflection go back to Dewey (1910), the founder of inquiry-oriented learning, according to whom reflection is an “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). Reflective thought is different as it is not only linear but also consecutive in that “reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas but a consequence – a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors” (pp. 2-3). This continuing process of reflection enables making more meaning out of experiences. Dewey also makes an important distinction between action that is routine and action that is reflective; while routine action is being guided by impulse, tradition, and authority, reflective action is guided by active, persistent and careful consideration of knowledge and beliefs.

The ability to assess and reflect on the outcomes of one’s own practice to gain new insights, to plan around these insights and appreciate new and multiple perspectives lie at the heart of development of reflective teachers. The place of reflection in the field of teaching has become more prominent after the emergence of Schön’s (1983) classification of reflection by focusing on the time of reflection, as *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The first is performed during action and emphasizes the interactive nature of teaching and the necessity for more sophisticated immediate interventions in the course of teaching while the latter one necessitates practitioners looking back after action; evaluating the outcomes of their actions considering alternative scenarios. Teachers are to engage in both kinds of reflective practice; however, according to Schön (1983), in order to be competent in reflection-in-action which requires on the spot reflection, one should first improve in reflection-on-action which can be performed after the fact.

Reflection has been categorized in terms of its depth or content. Depth of reflection is described as the level of thinking which ranges from description to higher order or critical thinking accomplished without necessarily proceeding in a linear fashion and critical reflection is attributed as the superior level of reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Ho & Richards, 1993; Jay & Johnson, 2002). Critical reflection has been described as “careful consideration of beliefs, practices, and outcomes and the intent to use this information to modify future teaching behaviours (Anderson & Matkins, 2011, p. 28). The development of critical reflection forms, however, has been a constant challenge for teacher educators. Research shows that most PSTs or novice teachers find it difficult to evaluate their practice efficiently and fail to reflect deeply about their performance; remaining at a descriptive level of reflection with a superficial understanding and examination of the factors influencing their lessons and their implications (Cohen-Sayag & Fischl, 2012)

Ways of increasing the quality of reflection and fostering critical inquiry in teacher education have been studied through varied approaches. Journal writing experiences, video recorded student teaching presentations, class discussions, peer observations, instructor, self or peer evaluations, and concept maps are among well-known techniques incorporated into teacher education programs to boost preservice teacher reflectors (Sackman & Sharma, 2008). Johns (2004) claims that guidance is essential if reflective progress is desired and one

way of achieving this is through systematic guidance and practice which may include series of activities that will lead practitioners to review the rationale for their actions.

Interaction is crucial for gaining multiple perspectives. Many researchers consider reflection as a social activity rather than an individual one (Greene & Magliaro, 2004; Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Hernández-Ramos, 2004; Von Wright, 1992; West et. al., 2005) since reflection carried out in a community, may offer its practitioners different points of views (Alterio, 2004; Storch, 2005), helping them to discover their potentials as reflective practitioners (Vygotsky, 1978). As Nelson and Slavit (2008) suggest for professional development experiences to be effective “they should involve the creation of opportunities for teachers to engage as learners, build pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge, and co-construct and enact new visions of practice in context” (p.100).

### **Use of Blogs to Foster Reflection**

Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, twitter and social networking sites are used increasingly more often in educational settings to overcome the constraints of time and space of the traditional classroom. This proliferation has been leading to major changes in the dissemination of information, sharing of knowledge and interactions among learners.

Blogs differ from other social media tools as they allow users a lengthy space for writing and discussion through comments. Therefore, they can offer a preferable alternative or supplementary environment with rich opportunities where student teachers can share their experiences with one another using different media forms and reflect on their experiences with opportunities of receiving peer-feedback in a social setting. This additional space can also help developing an online community of practice (CoP) within a blog (Yang, 2009) where PSTs can exchange ideas and discuss concerns regarding their teaching experiences. CoP is a group of people attached by sharing similar purposes or goals and a common practice (Wenger & Synder, 2000) and help participants develop professional skills. According to Dewey (1960) and Schön (1983) an interactive community is a must for the development of reflective thinking.

Research shows successful use of blogs to support reflection in in-service and pre-service teaching (Garza & Smith, 2015; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Krutka et al., 2014; Shoffner, 2008; Too, 2013; Wopereis et al., 2010; Yang, 2009). Schoffner's (2008) qualitative study which examined the integration of blogs in a teaching practicum course at a large US university revealed that flexibility, personalization and informality of blogs help fostering reflective exchanges among for PSTs. In another study, Ciampa and Gallagher (2015) incorporated blogging into a collaborative inquiry project conducted with elementary and secondary in-service school teachers. Teachers in the study engaged in online dialogue with each other and reflected on their professional learning by posting responses to the questions that the lead facilitator ask on the platform which centred on teacher collaborative inquiry model. Although, the perceived usefulness of the blog was found to be fairly low; functional features of blogs served as a convenient mean for teachers to share information and receive feedback. Especially, shy, introverted and reflective teachers benefited most from the blog. While the asynchronous discussions gave an opportunity to the teachers to think through their responses, lack of immediate interactivity frustrated them and it was reported as a drawback. In Roberts, Maor and Herrington (2016)'s study, PSTs used blogs to submit their course assignments guided by the online prompts that scaffolded action research. Findings supported the effectiveness of e-portfolios and the prompts in promoting PSTs' reflective thinking. Additionally, Novakovich (2016) carried out an experimental study to measure the effectiveness of peer feedback provided by blogging on reflection and critical thinking in an

undergraduate composition course and the results revealed that blog-mediated collaboration stimulated higher numbers of critical feedback and deeper revision of the work.

The review of related literature demonstrates that the affordances of blogs may present new opportunities for PSTs for further reflective practices but it also calls for a systematic guidance and practice if deeper levels of reflection is desired (Johns, 2004; West et.al., 2006). In Yang's (2009) study, forty-three EFL student teachers in Taiwan used blogs to actively discuss teaching theories and their implications; however, descriptive reflections outnumbered critical reflections and at times, teacher trainers felt the urge to ask further questions to raise participants' critical reflection. Participants reported that they felt more comfortable critiquing themselves than others; and yet, the absence of time and place limitations in the blog facilitated exchange of ideas and reflection. Similarly, Too (2013), after analysing 286 blog entries using a five-level framework in order to understand the extent of reflection of the PSTs on literary texts, observed that 77% of the reflective entries yielded third, fourth and fifth (highest) levels of reflection. Despite this positive outcome, the highest level of reflection was detected only in 27% of the entries. Krutka et al. (2014)'s study with skills-centre-all@lists.bath.ac.uk77 middle/secondary school PSTs at an American university confirmed that Edmodo, a social networking site which served like a blog, was a promising platform for collaborative reflections for. However, it did not necessarily lead to a deeper reflection all by itself. When students' posts were analysed according to their nature and type, it was found that 67% of the posts included basic descriptions of what happened, 39% included an interpretation of experiences and only 13% application of educational ideas. After an early analysis of posts, researchers needed to intervene and instruct students to go beyond mere description in their exchanges.

Oner and Adadan (2016) guided 30 PSTs in a practicum course to construct their e-portfolios on a digital platform by completing specific tasks such as posting a lesson plan, revising it based on the feedback from their peers, implementing the plan, videotaping the lesson and reflecting through guiding prompts on their own teaching experience as well as their peers'. Data collected from the e-portfolio entries were coded using a high- and low-level reflective thinking indicator system developed by Oner and Adadan (2011) and a statistically significant increase in the number of high-level reflective thinking indicators from the first teaching experience to the second was found.

## Research Questions

The two central questions addressed in this study are

1. To what extent do the blog entries by the PSTs demonstrate reflection?
2. Which affordances of blogs might have influenced the extent of the reflection demonstrated by the PSTs?

## Methodology

### Context of the Study

The study was set up in a 16-week practicum course offered to senior students at the Foreign Language Education Department of a Turkish state university in Istanbul. The course was comprised of in-class sessions, practicum work in cooperating schools and blogging. Practicum required ten to fifteen hours of class observation of PSTs in cooperating K-12 public and private schools under the supervision of the practicum instructors and teachers of cooperating schools, three supervised student teaching presentations and three peer observations. In-class sessions covered the presentation of the weekly topics such as teacher

beliefs, instructional technology, reflective teaching practice and they usually continued with discussions related to school experiences of PSTs in their cooperating schools. The blog component was designed to expand the discussion among students. In-class work comprised 25% of the overall course grade and included one reaction paper on an article related to field of teaching, an in-class presentation of a topic assigned from the course syllabus, and a report on participation in professional development activity such as a workshop or seminar. Online work in blogs comprised 75% of the overall course grade and included completion of fourteen reflective blog activities and participation through the comments feature.

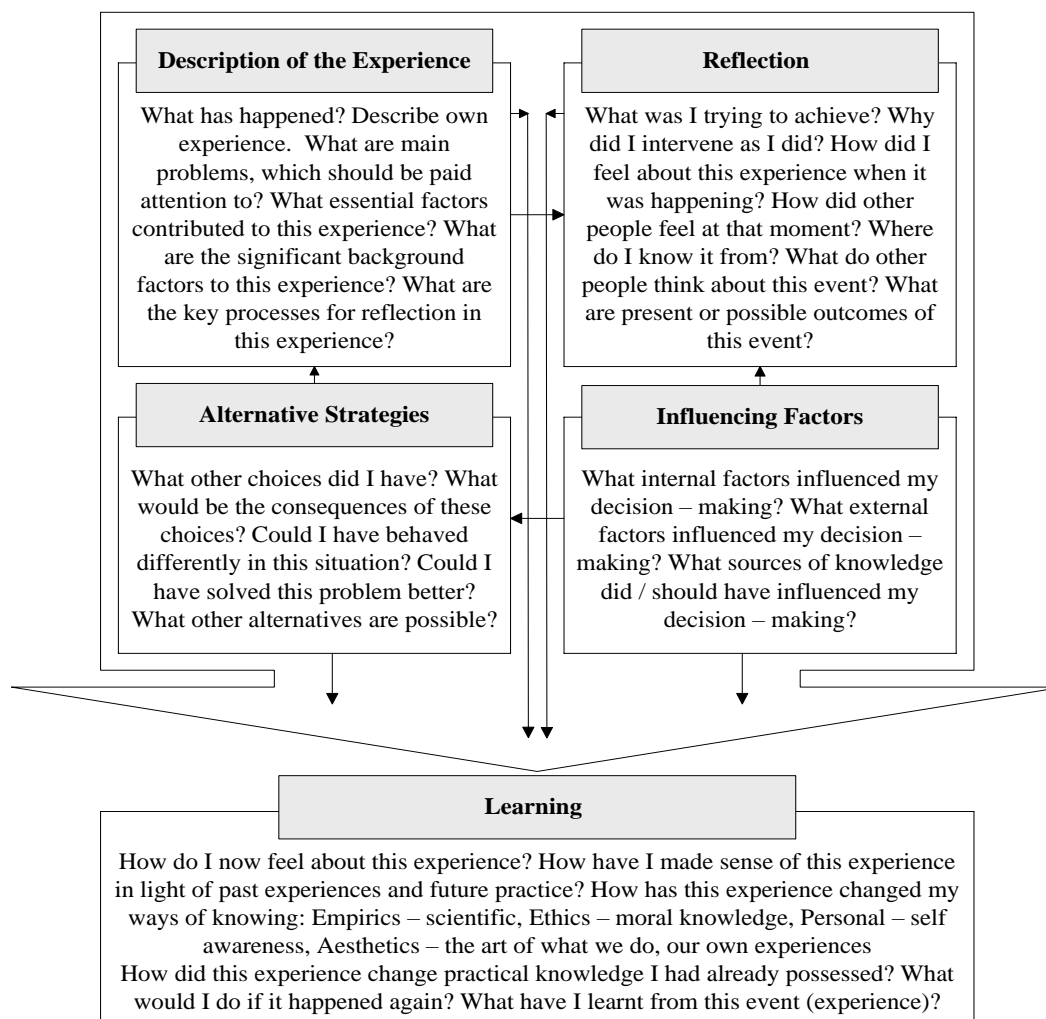
### **Participants**

Participants were 18 (17 female and one male) senior level pre-service English language teachers whose ages ranged between 21 and 24. English was a foreign language for all participants but they had passed their university's English proficiency exam before they started studying in their departments where the language of instruction was English. All participants had already taken at least two educational technology courses before and they were in their second term of practice teaching and doing their practicum in private K–12 schools in Istanbul, Turkey.

### **Blog Tool and Activities**

The study necessitated a blogging tool which would allow all participants and the course assistant free individual online spaces. One of the most well-known blog hosting sites, Blogger®, was chosen due to being convenient, practical, free and easily compatible with Google® e-mail accounts that most of the participants already had. Each participant was guided to set up an individual blog and they used this space to share their reflections and make comments on their peers' posts regarding practicum. In order to protect the privacy of the PSTs, the teachers and students in cooperating K-12 schools, all blogs were password protected. Furthermore, participants were informed that their personal information including real names would never be disclosed and thus each participant and cooperating school was given a pseudonym.

One way of achieving reflective progress in PSTs is through systematic guidance and practice (West et al., 2006). This may include a series of activities that would lead practitioners to review their rationale for their actions. To achieve this, a total of fourteen blog activities were prepared by the researchers in line with Johns' (2004) model of systematic reflection (see Figure 1). The questions in the model inspired the core prompts within the activities implemented in the current study and the activities were organised in a similar way to this model. As a result, at cognitive level, participants were asked to describe their experiences with influencing factors and at metacognitive level, they were to think back on their experiences, make evaluations, discuss alternative strategies, dwell on their learning, plan for the future and give feedback to their peers.



Source: [Johns (2004), as presented by Bubnys and Žydzūnaitė (2010)]

**Figure 1. Model of structured reflection by Johns, 2004.**

Blog activity types	# of related activities	Explanations of the blog activities	# of expected individual posts	% in the grading system of the course
Thematic activities	4	<p>1. Critical incident analysis: Reflecting on an outstanding incident from practicum experiences and analyzing it by following these steps: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan.</p> <p>2. Video-critique: Evaluating one of the two experienced teachers' teaching videos uploaded on the course blog</p> <p>3. Reflection on the classroom</p>	12 (4 entries and 8 comments)	25% of the total score

		management tool: Preparing a classroom management tool, using it in student teaching presentations and reflecting on their experience		
		4. Reflection on the designed activity: Designing a language teaching activity, applying it in a classroom and reflecting on the experience on individual blogs		
Peer- related activities	6	5. Student teaching video upload: Planning a lesson plan, doing a student teaching presentation, shooting the video of the presentation, editing and uploading the video on one's blog	8 (6 entries and 2 comments)	30% of the total score
		6-10. Writing peer evaluation of five different peers' student teaching presentations uploaded as videos on individual blogs		
Self- related activities	4	11-12. Self-evaluation: Doing two student teaching presentations in cooperating schools at different grades, writing two self-evaluation entries of these teaching experiences and posting them on individual blogs.	6 (4 entries and 2 comments)	20% of the total score
		13-14. Two reflective journal entries: Observing practicum classes or student teaching and writing two journal entries regarding these observations or experiences		

**Table 1. Blog Activities and Their Distribution**

The blog activities were organised in three different categories according to their content: thematic activities were related to foreign language teaching practices in general, peer-related activities were focused on reflecting on and assessing peers' practices and self-related activities were geared towards self-reflection and self-assessment (see Table 1).



## Data Collection and Analysis

In order to provide a rich description and a complete picture of the findings as much as possible, different data sources were utilized. Data were collected through an initial survey, archival documents of participants' blog entries, two focus group interviews, and a final survey.

### Initial Survey

Participants were given an initial survey that aimed to collect demographic data of the participants such as English language level, use of computer and internet, experience with educational technology, videotaping resources and participation in blended courses. Finally, participants were asked to give a short description of the activities that can help them better evaluate and utilize their teaching experience as PSTs.

### Blog Entries

The online posting flow started with the first week of the semester and continued until the end of it for sixteen weeks. Blog activities were completed step by step throughout the study. First, blogging was introduced and guidelines for blogging were announced. Blog activities were explained and modelled; and they were labelled and organised according to due-dates, and prompts. All blogs were protected with the same password and students had access to each other's blogs using this password. The participants were assigned to complete a total of fourteen online activities in their individual blogs; furthermore, they were expected to write at least one or two comments on the activities completed in other participants' blogs of their choice. While completing the activities, participants were asked to describe their experiences at a cognitive level, along with the factors that influenced these experiences. Then, at a metacognitive level, they were asked to think back on their experiences, make evaluations, discuss alternative strategies, dwell on their learning, plan for the future and give feedback to their peers. At the end of the semester, posts in each participant's individual blog were collected and saved.

Data from the blogs were grouped under three headings in order to make a systematic content analysis: a) required entries, those written by the participants as replies to all assigned blog activities; b) comments or commentaries, those made by using the comment function and c) optional blog entries, rest of the entries related to field of teaching. Entries non-related to teaching were labelled as irrelevant. Blog entries were analysed through content analysis of qualitative research. Owing to the evaluative nature of the study, a framework approach was adopted. Frameworks which focus on the depth of reflection stem from the work of Dewey (1933) and Schön (1987). Because of the essential role of the framework in the trustworthiness of the results, many reflective frameworks proposed in the literature to measure reflectivity were inspected in a meticulous way (Bain et al., 1999; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Ho & Richards, 1993; Sparks-Langer et al., 1990; Ward & McCotter, 2004). Consequently, the framework developed by Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, and Mills (1999) which focused on depth of reflection was selected for this study since it was specifically designed to evaluate PST reflection. This framework was in accordance with the conceptual framework of the current study because it was grounded on Dewey's (1910) reflective procedure (i.e., problem-setting, means/end analysis, and generalization), Schön's reflective practice and Vygotsky's constructivist approaches to reflective practice in teaching. In the framework, depth of reflection was divided into five

levels moving from the lowest level (one) to the highest (five). Zero reflection level was not included since the framework did not accept the total absence of reflection. Level 1(reporting) includes mere descriptions without insight or transformation. Level 2(responding) contains data with little transformation; an observation or a judgement made without stating its reasons or alternatives. At level 3(relating), identification of participants' strengths, weaknesses and aspects they need to improve are observed. At this level, participants' entries connect new information with previous experiences and have superficial explanations for the actions or thoughts. A level 4(reasoning) reflection connects theory with practice to a certain extent, exhibits high level of reasoning, analysing, questioning and consideration of alternatives. At level 5(reconstructing), the highest level, participants extract conclusions, generalizations, future learning goals from their reflections; they use these to form and improve their own teaching principles or theories of teaching. Table 2 shows the selected framework which illustrates the reflective transformation expected from PSTs. The data was coded by two separate raters and the inter-rater agreement was found to be 0.79 according to Cohen's kappa and Spearman's rho was measured as 0.91 which indicated a statistically significant agreement between the two raters.

Reflection Levels	Level Descriptors
Level 1 Reporting	The student describes, reports or re-tells with minimal transformation, no added observations or insights
Level 2 Responding	The student uses the source data in some way, but with little transformation or conceptualization. The student makes an observation or judgment without making any further inferences or detailing the reasons for the judgment. The student asks a 'rhetorical' question without attempting to answer it or consider alternatives. The student reports a feeling such as relief, anxiety, happiness, etc..
Level 3 Relating	The student identifies aspects of the data which have personal meaning or which connect with their prior or current experience. The student seeks a superficial understanding of relationships. The student identifies something they are good at, something that they need to improve, a mistake they have made, or an area in which they have learned from their practical experience. The student gives a superficial explanation of the reason why something has happened or identifies something they need or plan to do or change.
Level 4 Reasoning	<p>The student integrates the data into an appropriate relationship, e.g. with theoretical concepts, personal experience, involving a high level of transformation and conceptualization.</p> <p>The student seeks a deep understanding of why something has happened.</p> <p>The student explores or analyses a concept, event or experience, asks questions and looks for answers, considers alternatives, speculates or hypothesizes about why something is happening.</p> <p>The student attempts to explain their own or others' behaviour or feelings using their own insight, inferences, experiences or previous learning, with some depth of understanding.</p> <p>The student explores the relationship between theory and practice in some depth.</p>

Level 5 Reconstructing	The student displays a high level of abstract thinking to generalize and/or apply learning.
	The student draws an original conclusion from their reflections, generalizes from their experience, extracts general principles, formulates a personal theory of teaching or takes a position on an issue.
	The student extracts and internalizes the personal significance of their learning and/or plans their own further learning on the basis of their reflections.

Source: [Bain et al., 1999, p. 60]

**Table 2. Reflective Framework**

Total number of the entries gathered during the sixteen-week semester from the individual blogs of the eighteen participants was 514 which included 221 required, 33 optional entries and 260 comments. Two participants did not complete required entries. Eleven percent of all the entries (n=57) posted by the participants were discarded during the data analysis phase; because while some of them only included a photo or video with no accompanying text, others were non-related to teaching, such as greetings or questions regarding the use of the blog tool.

### Interviews

Data were collected through two focus group interviews to create an interactive dialogue. All participants were sent e-mail requests to participate in the interviews. A total of ten PSTs participated in the group interview sessions. They were conveniently divided into two groups and separate sessions were held with each group. The interviews were carried out in English on the eleventh week of the study during which the participants had completed half of the assignments on their blogs. The main aims of the interviews were to examine the participants' experiences regarding the use of blogging for reflective purposes and to identify the features of blogs that might have an influence on the depth of PST reflection. To this end, the semi-structured questions asked in the focus group interviews were gathered around five basic topics: reflection, practicum, peer feedback, blog activities, and blended learning.

### Final Survey

A survey comprised of ten open-ended questions was administered in English via email correspondence at the end of the semester to examine the participants' experiences regarding the use of blogging for reflective purposes and to identify the features of blogs that might have had an influence on the depth of PST reflection.

While analysing the interview and survey data, qualitative content analysis method was used. At first, data were read and reread by the two researchers individually. Next, an independent analysis was conducted by the two coders (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The emerging themes were compared and related evidence was reorganised. The results were consulted with a third expert party. The coding process was completed once a consensus on the emerging categories was reached.

## Results and Discussion

### Levels of Reflection in Blog Entries

The depth of reflection differed from level one to level five according to the reflective framework adopted by the current study (Bain et al., 1999). The blog entries of PSTs' were

categorized into one of these levels of the current framework based on the criteria focusing on the capabilities of a reflector at a specific level. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of blog entries.

# of total blog entries	# of total included blog entries	# of total discarded blog entries	# of total required blog entries	# of total optional blog entries	# of total blog comments
514	457	57	221	33	260

**Table 3. Number of Blog Entries**

The entries per participant ranged between 8 to 49. The average number of all the included entries of the participants was 25. Although there was a discrepancy among the amount of blog presence by the participants, more than half of the PSTs ( $n=10$ ) posted equal to or more than the average ( $n=25$ ) number of entries during the sixteen week semester. A comprehensive distribution of the number of included blog entries by all participants is shown in Table 4.

Reflective levels	Total frequency of the included blog entries ( $n = 457$ )	Percentage of the included blog entries ( $n = 457$ )	Frequency of optional blog entries ( $n = 27$ )	Frequency of required blog entries ( $n = 221$ )	Frequency of blog comments ( $n = 209$ )
Level 1 reporting	23	5%	7	4	12
Level 2 responding	100	21.8%	7	9	84
Level 3 relating	162	35.4%	13	69	80
Level 4 reasoning	119	26%	0	87	32
Level 5 reconstructing	53	11.5%	0	52	1

**Table 4. Overall Frequency and Percentage of Reflection Levels**

### ***Required Entries***

All participants, except for two, completed at least 80% of the fourteen required blog activities. All of the produced required entries ( $n=221$ ) were evaluated in terms of their level of reflectivity according to the selected framework. Out of all the 221 included required entries, 5% ( $n=11$ ) of them showed low levels (level 1 and 2) of reflection and 32% ( $n=69$ ) of them showed medium level (level 3) reflection. High level reflection (level 4) was observed in 39% ( $n=87$ ) of all the required entries. Highest level reflection (level 5) was detected in 24% ( $n=52$ ) of the entries. Based on these results, entries related to the required activities yielded mostly (39%) high reflection whereas low level reflection was rare (5%).

### ***Optional Entries***

The entries which were posted by the participants without any requirements by the practice teaching course were considered as optional entries. These optional entries were comprised of suggestions of seminars or workshops, suggestions of language teaching activities, useful links, and photos taken at practice teaching schools. The number of the

optional entries included in the study ranged from 0 to 4 per participant. Five of the eighteen participants did not post any optional entries. The average number of optional entries included in the study was 1.5 which indicated that the participants rarely posted optional entries. All of the included optional entries (n=27) were evaluated in terms of their level of reflectivity. The analysis revealed that 52% (n=14) of them showed low levels (level 1 and 2) of reflection, and 48% (n=13) showed medium level (level 3) reflection. High or highest levels of reflection (level 4 or level 5) were not observed in any of the optional entries. The average reflection level of all the optional entries was calculated as 2.2 (low level reflection). The lack of high or highest levels of reflection was presumably due to the absence of structured guidance of reflection through tasks.

### ***Comments***

A total number of 260 comments were gathered at the end of the sixteen-week period and 51 of these 260 comments were excluded. As a result, 209 comments were analysed and labelled according to the selected reflective framework. Out of the 209 comments, 46% (n=96) showed low levels (level 1 and level 2) of reflection and 39% (n=80) showed medium level (level 3) reflection. High reflection (level 4) was observed in 19% (n=32) of the optional entries. Highest level reflection (level 5) was detected in only one comment. The average reflection level of all the comments was calculated as almost medium level reflection (2.6). Based on these results, it could be stated that comments yielded mostly low level reflection (46%) or medium level reflection (39%).

### ***The Extent of Overall Reflection***

Out of 457 entries, 35% (n=162) contained medium level reflection. Low levels of reflection (level 1 and 2) were observed in 27% (n=123) of all the included entries. 26% (n=119) yielded high (level 4) level reflection. Highest level reflection (level 5) was observed in 12% (n=53). Considering all the included blog entries (n=457), the average reflection level was 3.17 which corresponded to medium level reflection according to the selected framework.

### **Affordances of Blogs Influencing the Extent of Reflection**

The affordances of blogs which might have influenced the depth of reflection were identified through a careful examination of all blog posts including comments, interview and final survey responses by two separate raters. As a result of this examination, certain themes emerged and were categorized based on an inductive approach within content analysis of qualitative research. These themes mentioned by a majority of the participants (at least 80%) included ability to have individualized space with time and place independence, peer feedback, and establishment of sense of community.

### ***Personal Space with Time and Place Independence***

Participants reported that blogs provided them with a personal space and easy access to others' personal spaces. Having this individual space might have added to the participants' sense of ownership since students named their blogs and personalized them by using various emoticons, different colours, and different themes and layouts while writing their posts.

*Blog was an appropriate platform because we had to write relatively long reflections on what we experienced in our practice schools, so if we had been using a platform like forums or wikis or a group page on Facebook®, there would be a chaos, everyone's entry would jumble, and it wouldn't be organised, nice and clean and easy to follow. Besides, it would be a collaborative voice rather than our own voice if we had been using such platforms. With blogs, we have our own voice in our own area. I think it is better than the other tools we used before (wikis and canvas). I think it is useful. (Gül, Final Survey)*

As was seen in Ciampa and Gallagher (2015)'s study, the asynchronous nature of blogs provided students with enough time to process their thoughts and have reflective thinking. When looked at the time stamps of the threaded entries, it could be observed that participants did not have a synchronous discussion and this asynchronous feature of blogs allocated students the time they needed to think on their messages. They could post their assignments and read peers' assignments anytime and anywhere within the given dates. This flexibility could have a role in increasing the depth of reflective thinking in the entries.

*It was nice to have such a platform to share our ideas because even though we discuss things in class, we do not have the opportunity to think broadly while speaking whereas in the blog we could have plenty of time to organise our thoughts and express ourselves more freely and effectively in writing. (Sıla, Final Survey)*

### **Peer Feedback**

In the blog component of the course, participants were assigned to read at least two peer participants' posts and write two comments. Judging from the high number of comments produced, comment feature seems to offer a way to increase the amount of feedback a pre-service teacher can get on their practice teaching activities. The following interview response supports this claim:

*I think, a cooperating teacher may not have the chance to give feedback for each and every student and presentation under normal circumstances but blogging made our blogs open to our peers, and through their feedbacks and our own reflections, I started to think critically about my own teaching. (Serap, interview)*

The current study aimed to guide the participants to provide particularly constructive feedback for their peers by designing the blog activities accordingly after carefully examining the results of Xie, Ke and Sharma (2008)'s study regarding the effect of the nature of feedback on promoting reflectivity. The participants often wrote wordy comments which were to the topic. While some feedback was merely descriptive; mostly participants wrote constructive feedback to their peers. Additionally, similar to the findings of Samuels and Betts (2007) and Novakovich (2016), participants recognised the facilitative and motivating effects of peer feedback on their reflective progress:

*When people commented on my posts which included information about practicum experiences, I could check myself if I was doing the right thing in a real class environment or not. Sometimes, my friends shared their suggestions, and those suggestions were really helpful for me. (Elif, Final Survey,)*

Online interaction provided an opportunity to increase communication and understanding among the participants as previously observed in the study by Krutka et al. (2014). The comment feature gave the participants the opportunity to ask questions to each other about the ideas or examples shared in their posts. While answering others' questions,

they engaged in more reflection and critical thinking as can be seen in the comment thread below:

*Gül, I really enjoyed reading your post and it is really informative as usual! I think I will use this tool in the future with my real students and I am sure it can be effective if we know how to use it properly. I also liked your comment about the possible problems that may arise and I totally agree with possible solutions that you have mentioned about. I think the students will be motivated if they know that there is a surprise fun activity at the end but the teacher should take their learning performance into consideration while using the tool. And again as you said the teacher should not use it every day because it is like reinforcement and the reinforcements should be used at certain intervals. There is a point which I am not clear about. Even saying "thank you" or "smiling" is a reinforcement taking educational issues into consideration and reinforcements are vital most of the time. So why are the teachers not allowed to use reinforcement tools in the classroom? (Sare, Blog comment)*

*Thank you for your comment, Sare. I am glad that you find it useful to read my post ;). I want to use this tool in my future classes, too. And you are right in saying that reinforcements should be used at intervals rather than continuously. And about the question that you asked, I don't really know the exact answer, but they are very strict about this rule. My mentor specifically warned me not to provide any reinforcement during the lesson. I can only guess that it stems from the school's philosophy of education. Their main goal is to raise "happy children", so they might fear that some children might feel alienated or unworthy if some other children receive reinforcement. (Gül, Blog comment)*

The limited in-class hours may not be enough for everyone to open up to their peers about a classroom management problem or an unsuccessful student teaching experience whereas blog gave them opportunity to witness the struggles of their peers and give each other support. To sum up, as asserted by previous studies (Hall & Davison, 2007; Novakovich, 2016; Samuels & Betts, 2007), the participants of the current study acknowledged the contributions of peer feedback to gaining multiple perspectives, opportunities for academic discussions, and emotional support during the practicum. Online peer feedback was a factor which might have encouraged deeper levels of reflective thinking by PSTs. The participants posted over two hundred comments on blogs which were beneficial for reflective thinking since within these comments there was evidence of critical thinking and self-evaluation, emotional support, engagement in an academic discussion, and learning from each other.

### *Sense of Community*

Blogging performed as an online sharing platform for participants to engage in academic discussions related to their professional development. As Ciampa and Gallagher (2015) observed in their study, the selected tool can facilitate exchange of teaching strategies, materials and activities among the PSTs. Participants of this study wrote in their blogs about various teaching experiences or observations to provide support for other PSTs; shared many photos and some videos of their cooperating schools along with their comments as in the following examples:

*Shrek 3! Ratatouille! And many others! Use of up-to-date films attracts all learners, but to have a video book parallel to what is being watched in the classroom, to watch them with some linguistic purposes and similarly to have some activities that motivate learners to listen more carefully must be amazing.*

*Fourth graders have been watching these films with subtitles at school, and then at home they do the activities eagerly. The amazing thing about these videos is learners make their comments in English and in a natural way while watching. (Büşra, Optional blog entry)*

*As a teacher trainee, I did not expect to be so welcomed by the cooperative teachers and students. On my first day, I was introduced to classes; from then on, they addressed me as Ms. Gaye, they asked me questions, sometimes I collected their homework and helped class teacher throughout the first semester. I appreciate the way teachers improve themselves: If they are not sure or do not have any idea about something, honestly they tell their students that they would search. If they cannot handle any problems related to technology, they ask for help and they keep learning sometimes from the learners. Due to the fact that they are not arrogant or do not have problems with their egos, they can establish good relationships with the learners, with us, PSTs, and with anybody in the school. So, you can feel as if you are part of this sincere and welcoming environment. (Gaye, Optional blog entry)*

Participants reported that they could learn from each other through this exchange of experiences and as discussed in the literature review (Greene & Magliaro, 2004; Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Hernández-Ramos, 2004; Von Wright, 1992; West et al., 2005) peer teaching and learning in a community are among significant practices of SCT. Below are related excerpts:

*When you write something, you start to think about it again and reanalyse the process. It is a level beyond just sitting and observing a given classroom. And also I feel like I have observed fifteen or more classes thanks to the posts of my friends, and equipped myself with new strategies and methods, as well. (İpek, Interview)*

*Almost every teacher candidate in my class had a different classroom environment. We all had different schools, different grades and different student profiles. With the help of sharing our experiences online and reading them, we all could have different perspectives about those different classes even if we hadn't attended in one before. I think that was the best side of this course. (Seda, Final Survey)*

As emphasized by Deng and Yuen (2013), in the current study, in-class meetings where class discussions took place contributed to the sense of community without denying the fact that sense of community, to some extent, was probably already present among the participants since they had known each other as class-mates for several years. However, the blogs that had no time and place boundaries might have allowed them to exchange ideas and information with each other more, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Additionally, similar to the findings of Garza and Smith (2015), PSTs supported and encouraged each other whenever they expressed that they did something wrong or felt inadequate as a pre-service teacher in their entries.

*It got us closer as class-mates, it increased our interaction, it helped us somewhat be prepared before coming to class, it created an environment where we could share what we experienced in our practice schools. (Melisa, Interview)*  
*Blogging along with in class sessions might have been helpful in adding to the sense of community as a group of PSTs as they shared ideas and experiences about teaching, keeping their minds busy with teacher reflection. Similar to the findings in the literature, the blended-design of the current practice teaching*



*course added to the promotion of reflective thinking among the PSTs (Eutsler & Curcio 2019; Sharma, 2010; Too, 2013; Wopereis et al., 2010).*

## Conclusion

The current study aimed to promote reflection on teaching practice among eighteen pre-service English language teachers by means of integrating blog activities into an undergraduate level practicum. The current practice teaching course required face-to-face in-class sessions, observations, student teaching in cooperating K–12 schools and blogging. Observation and student teaching in cooperating schools were indispensable parts of practicum for the participants as it allowed them experience teaching in its real context and conduct reflection-in action. However, as Schön (1983) argues, opportunity for reflection-on-action is critical in becoming competent in taking more successful decisions during teaching. In class discussion sessions which were held during and after the student presentations regarding their teaching in schools, and the blog component of the course helped the PSTs develop an efficient reflection-on action skill. As the researchers observed, there was a nurturing atmosphere where students could express themselves which provided them a chance of reflecting on their practicum as a class. However, the short duration of the sessions was a limitation which was attempted to be compensated with the addition of a time and place independent online platform to enhance opportunities for reflection.

The framework analysis to detect the depth of reflection in a sum of 457 blog entries of the participants revealed evidence of medium or high level reflection in most (61%) of the entries and highest level of reflection in 12% of the entries. On average, blog activities promoted high level reflection (3.9) among the participants. The comments made ( $n = 209$ ) had an average level of 2.6 which matched a medium level according to the selected framework. The results revealed that students were able to extend their academic participation in this online platform and the blog activities promoted reflectivity among PSTs and thus might have given them an opportunity to engage in deeper levels of reflection.

The results of the content analyses of interviews and survey showed that affordances of blogs which allow users a personal space with time and place independence, and provide a platform for peer feedback and a sense of community among users might have influenced the extent of reflection demonstrated by the participants. Informed by previous research (Krutka et al., 2014; Roberts, Maor & Herrington, 2016; Sharma, 2010; West et al., 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005; Yang, 2009), the current study adopted a structured way to promote reflection. Results showed that PSTs engaged in regular and reflective blogging when they were assigned meaningful posting requirements with a degree of freedom. This was achieved with thoughtfully-organised blog activities respecting personal preferences and having reasonable due-dates with comment requirements. One feature of these activities was the fact that they were designed with the underlying idea that reflection could be learned and promoted in systematic and guided ways (Dewey, 1933; Samuels & Betts, 2007; Sockman & Sharma, 2008).

Research also indicates that the quality of reflective thinking increases when PSTs come across multiple perspectives in a learning community (Bain et al., 1999; Ciampa & Gallagher, 2015; McConnell, 2006; Yost et al., 2000) and blogs make it easier to present different viewpoints. The current blog activities encouraged the participants to share their practice teaching experiences in a learning community, read other participants' posts which allowed them to have exposure to their peers' perspectives and write at least two comments for two peers per activity which encouraged them to reflect on others' views. Consistent with the results of several other studies (Eutsler & Curcio, 2019; Too, 2013; Yang, 2009), the

current findings indicated the potential of integrating blog activities into a practice teaching course to provide systematic opportunities to practice teacher reflection for the participants who were PSTs with a careful design and guidance.

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