

Pre-Service EYL Teachers' Program Development During Practicum: A Narrative Inquiry in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers play a crucial role in improving the quality of English for Young Learners (EYL) instruction; however, limited research has examined how they experience the complete process of developing, implementing, and evaluating learning programs during teaching practicum. This study investigates how pre-service teachers develop EYL programs, the challenges they encounter, and how these experiences contribute to their professional growth. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, the study involved twenty sixth-semester students enrolled in a Teaching English to Young Learners practicum course, with five participants purposively selected for in-depth investigation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations and analyzed using Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework alongside thematic analysis. The findings indicate that lesson planning functioned as an adaptive and reflective process rather than a procedural task, while authentic classroom experiences fostered instructional flexibility, reflective practice, and collaborative learning. Participants developed strategies to address diverse learner needs, limited resources, and institutional constraints, which strengthened their self-efficacy, adaptive expertise, and professional identity. The narratives further reveal that professional growth emerged through continuous cycles of planning, implementation, reflection, and adaptation supported by interactions with mentors and peers. This study contributes to teacher education literature by demonstrating the interconnected development of pedagogical competence, self-efficacy, and professional identity during practicum. The findings suggest that teacher education programs should strengthen collaborative mentoring, structured reflection, and authentic practicum experiences to better prepare future EYL teachers for complex classroom environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has become a crucial subject in Indonesian primary schools because proficiency in the language increasingly determines students' access to global communication, information, and academic opportunities (Crystal, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Many countries introduce English at the

primary level to prepare young learners for the demands of globalization. In Indonesia, English has been part of the curriculum as a local content subject since the 1990s, reflecting national efforts to enhance students' global readiness from an early age (Zein, 2012; Sulistiyo, 2020).

Despite its importance, primary-level English teaching in Indonesia faces ongoing challenges. Policy implementation is often inconsistent, teaching resources remain limited, and many teachers lack specialized training for young learners (Zein, 2017; Musthafa, 2010). Research indicates that pre-service teachers often struggle to apply theoretical knowledge in classroom practice, and they have limited opportunities to develop skills in program design during their practicum (Borg, 2015; Farrell, 2012; Sulistiyo, 2020). Although previous studies have examined teacher readiness and pedagogical competence, few have explored the complete experience of pre-service teachers in program development, including planning, implementation, and evaluation, within the practicum context. This gap leaves unanswered questions about how pre-service teachers navigate challenges, adapt materials, manage classrooms, and reflect on their practice in real teaching settings.

Program development for young learners is a complex process that requires combining theory and classroom practice, adapting materials to developmental needs, managing classroom activities, and evaluating learning outcomes (Graves, 2000; Nation and Macalister, 2010; Cameron, 2019). Most research, however, focuses on isolated aspects such as lesson planning or classroom management rather than on the holistic experience of designing, implementing, and reflecting on a learning program. There is little evidence on how pre-service teachers make decisions, address challenges, and learn from the overall process.

To address this gap, this study adopts a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is suitable for this research because it captures the lived experiences of pre-service teachers and allows an understanding of how they make sense of their practicum experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Through their stories, the study examines not only what teachers do in practice but also how they think, feel, and reflect on their professional growth. This approach highlights teacher voices and provides insight into their decision-making and reflective processes, which are often overlooked in more structured research (Clandinin and Huber, 2010).

This study explores pre-service teachers' experiences in designing, implementing, and evaluating English learning programs for primary school students. It examines the challenges they face, the strategies they use to overcome them, and the lessons they gain from the process. The research questions are framed to be analytical and focus on these aspects. First, how do pre-service teachers navigate the process of developing English learning programs, and what strategies do they use to manage pedagogical and practical challenges? Second, what obstacles do pre-service teachers encounter during implementation and evaluation, and how do these challenges influence their professional growth? Third, how do pre-service teachers reflect on their experiences to improve their understanding of effective program design and teaching for young learners?

This study is important for several reasons. It addresses a gap in teacher education research by examining the entire process of program development rather than individual teaching activities. It highlights the voices of pre-service teachers and provides insight into how their professional understanding develops through practicum experiences. The findings can also inform teacher education programs and offer practical guidance for improving the preparation of future English teachers at the primary level. By focusing on planning, implementation, and evaluation as an integrated process, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of pre-service teacher development and its implications for enhancing the quality of English teaching in Indonesian primary schools.

2. METHODS

This study uses a narrative inquiry approach to explore the experiences of pre-service teachers implementing the Funtastic English program, from designing to teaching English for children as part of the Practicum of English for Children course. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it allows a detailed understanding of human experiences through stories, capturing not only what the students do

in the classroom but also how they think, feel, and make decisions throughout the practicum (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The study focuses on three main goals: to understand students' experiences in designing English language programs, to examine the challenges they face, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

The program involved twenty students in semester six with a concentration in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). For interviews, five students were purposively selected to provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences. Participants included both male and female students. The practicum lasted for two months, with eight teaching sessions in total. Each student taught four sessions as the main teacher and assisted in four others, giving them experience in both leading and supporting classroom activities.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations. Interviews allowed students to share their experiences and reflections in their own words, while journals offered insight into their decision-making and thought processes during program design. Classroom observations helped to confirm and complement the findings from interviews and journals. The researcher, who also served as an instructor for the course, maintained reflexivity by keeping a journal and discussing interpretations with peers to reduce bias and ensure trustworthiness.

Data were analyzed using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative framework, which considers temporality (how experiences develop over time), sociality (interpersonal and contextual factors), and place (the setting in which the program occurs). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted by first reading the data multiple times to become familiar with it, then coding meaningful units line by line. Codes were grouped into preliminary themes, which were refined until final themes emerged that reflected the students' experiences. These themes were then interpreted in connection with the research questions.

Trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies. Credibility was strengthened by member checking, where participants reviewed the researcher's interpretations. Dependability was supported through detailed documentation of the research process, including coding and reflective notes. Confirmability was maintained through audit trails and peer review, and triangulation of interviews, journals, and observations helped to strengthen the findings. Ethical procedures were followed, with informed consent obtained from all participants, confidentiality maintained, and the right to withdraw respected.

The study was conducted in four stages: preparation, including proposal development, ethical approval, and recruitment; data collection through interviews, journals, and observations; data analysis, including coding, theme development, and validation; and reporting, with findings written and confirmed with participants. The study aims to provide a clear understanding of pre-service TEYL teachers' experiences, contribute to the literature on teacher education, and offer practical insights for improving pre-service teacher training programs.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Theme 1: Lesson Planning as the Foundation of Teaching

All participants highlighted that lesson planning was the most essential foundation for teaching practice. P1 shared, *"I always begin with the curriculum goals, but then I adjust the tasks to match what the children can actually do. I also prepare backup activities in case something does not go as planned."* P2 added, *"I usually discuss my lesson drafts with my supervising teacher and classmates to make sure the activities are engaging and appropriate."* P3 emphasized selecting materials that relate to children's daily lives: *"I try to choose content that they can relate to and understand easily, so learning feels meaningful."*

The accounts show that participants view lesson planning not merely as a formal task, but as a reflective and adaptive process. They consciously anticipate challenges, prepare alternatives, and seek feedback, indicating awareness that planning is both a pedagogical strategy and a tool for managing

classroom uncertainty. This suggests that the ability to design flexible, context-sensitive lesson plans is a key competence developing during the practicum.

3.1.2 Theme 2: Challenges in Teaching Implementation

Maintaining students' attention and responding to classroom dynamics were frequently reported challenges. P1 stated, *"The children get distracted easily, so I have to use icebreakers and short interactive games to keep them engaged."* P3 added, *"Students' English levels vary widely, which forces me to repeat instructions or modify assignments."* P4 and P5 mentioned the need to adapt lesson plans due to schedule changes or unexpected student behavior.

These experiences indicate that effective teaching requires continuous adaptation and real-time problem-solving. Participants recognized that classroom conditions are unpredictable, and their strategies reveal emerging professional judgment: knowing when to adjust tasks, when to repeat instructions, and how to maintain engagement. This demonstrates that the practicum cultivates situational awareness and responsiveness as essential aspects of teaching.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Evaluation and Reflective Practice

Evaluation was conducted not only by observing student outcomes but also by considering classroom atmosphere and mentor feedback. P2 said, *"I look at how enthusiastic the students are, whether they answer questions, and how they try to use new words. Peer feedback sessions help me see where I can improve."* P5 noted, *"Reflecting after each lesson allows me to consider what worked and what did not, and it helps me plan better for the next session."*

This indicates that participants are developing a multi-dimensional understanding of effectiveness, where success is not measured solely by learning outcomes but also by engagement, participation, and the quality of interaction. Reflective practice helps them identify areas for improvement and reinforces self-directed professional growth.

3.1.4 Theme 4: Challenges and Coping Strategies

Participants reported challenges arising from diverse student abilities, time constraints, and institutional factors. P1 reflected, *"It is hard to keep the lesson pace when students have very different abilities."* P4 described administrative and coordination difficulties: *"Sometimes schedules change suddenly, or the school's expectations are unclear, which makes planning difficult."* P3 explained how these challenges fostered growth: *"I learned how important good communication and coordination are, and I also had to be patient and responsible when problems arose."*

These experiences illustrate that challenges serve as learning opportunities, promoting skill development in problem-solving, patience, and leadership. Participants' reflections suggest that encountering real-world constraints is crucial for developing resilience and professional judgment, which cannot be fully simulated in classroom-based courses.

3.1.5 Theme 5: Professional Growth and Opportunities

Despite the challenges, all participants recognized the practicum as a key avenue for professional growth. P2 reflected, *"This experience helped me test my teaching strategies and understand my strengths and weaknesses."* P5 shared, *"Collaborating with mentor teachers and peers shaped how I think about teaching and influenced my pedagogical philosophy."* P1 and P3 emphasized that the practicum strengthened their confidence and professional identity.

The findings indicate that the practicum contributes not only to skill acquisition but also to the formation of professional identity. Participants' reflections show that engagement in real teaching situations allows them to consolidate theoretical knowledge, develop confidence in decision-making, and refine their approach to teaching young learners.

The findings suggest several implications for strengthening English teacher education, particularly in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) programs. First, teacher education institutions should emphasize lesson planning as a reflective and adaptive process rather than merely a procedural

requirement. Coursework should encourage pre-service teachers to design flexible lesson plans that anticipate diverse learner needs, classroom unpredictability, and contextual constraints. Integrating authentic case-based learning and simulated classroom scenarios into methodology courses may help prospective teachers develop adaptive pedagogical decision-making before entering the practicum.

Second, structured mentoring should become a central component of the teaching practicum. The narratives indicate that interactions with supervising teachers, university lecturers, and peers significantly contributed to participants' instructional improvement and professional confidence. Therefore, practicum programs should establish systematic mentoring frameworks that include regular observation, constructive feedback, collaborative lesson planning, and reflective dialogue. Such collaborative learning environments can facilitate not only instructional competence but also the development of professional identity.

Third, reflective practice should be incorporated as a continuous rather than post-lesson activity. Teacher education programs are encouraged to employ reflective journals, guided reflection prompts, peer discussions, and mentoring conferences throughout the practicum. Continuous reflection enables pre-service teachers to critically examine their instructional decisions, recognize areas for improvement, and strengthen their self-efficacy through informed pedagogical adaptation.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of exposing pre-service teachers to authentic classroom complexity. Rather than attempting to minimize classroom challenges, teacher education programs should deliberately provide opportunities for prospective teachers to experience diverse learner characteristics, limited instructional resources, and changing classroom conditions. Such experiences cultivate resilience, adaptive expertise, and problem-solving skills that are essential for effective teaching in real educational settings.

Finally, policymakers and teacher education institutions should consider redesigning practicum programs to integrate lesson planning, classroom implementation, collaborative mentoring, and reflective practice as interconnected components of professional learning. A holistic practicum model would better support the simultaneous development of pedagogical competence, professional identity, adaptive expertise, and teacher self-efficacy, thereby preparing future English for Young Learners teachers to respond effectively to increasingly complex educational environments.

3.2 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that lesson planning functions as far more than a procedural requirement during the teaching practicum; rather, it serves as an important site for professional learning in which pre-service teachers negotiate pedagogical decisions, anticipate classroom realities, and gradually construct their identities as teachers. Participants described lesson planning as an iterative process involving curriculum alignment, adaptation to learners' characteristics, and preparation for unpredictable classroom situations. This finding extends previous studies on lesson planning in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), which have generally emphasized instructional preparation and curriculum alignment (Nguyen, 2021; Richards, 2011). The narratives generated in this study suggest that planning also represents an intellectual process through which pre-service teachers learn to exercise pedagogical judgment under authentic classroom conditions. Rather than simply implementing prescribed lesson plans, participants continuously revised instructional decisions based on anticipated student responses and contextual constraints. Such experiences illustrate the emergence of adaptive expertise, whereby beginning teachers learn to balance theoretical knowledge with contextual responsiveness (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Korthagen, 2010). Consequently, lesson planning becomes a mechanism through which pedagogical knowledge is transformed into situated professional competence.

An equally significant finding concerns the central role of collaboration in facilitating professional learning. Throughout the practicum, participants consistently described interactions with mentor teachers, supervising lecturers, and peers as essential resources for refining instructional decisions and strengthening confidence. These collaborative experiences extend beyond technical feedback on

teaching performance. Instead, they provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to negotiate meanings, validate professional beliefs, and reconstruct their emerging identities through social interaction. This finding supports sociocultural perspectives of teacher learning, which conceptualize professional development as a socially mediated process rather than an individual cognitive achievement (Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). Similarly, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that teacher identity develops through continuous interaction between personal beliefs and professional communities. The present study further demonstrates that collaborative reflection enables pre-service teachers not only to improve instructional quality but also to gain greater confidence in their pedagogical decisions. Therefore, collaboration should be understood as a mechanism that simultaneously promotes instructional competence, reflective thinking, and identity formation.

The narratives also reveal that classroom implementation constituted a transformative stage in participants' professional development because it exposed them to the complexity and unpredictability of authentic teaching. Maintaining learners' engagement, addressing varying English proficiency levels, and responding to unexpected classroom situations required participants to modify instructional strategies in real time. Rather than perceiving these challenges as obstacles alone, participants gradually interpreted them as opportunities to develop practical teaching expertise. This finding aligns with Pinter (2021), who argues that teaching young learners requires flexibility, responsiveness, and continuous adaptation to children's developmental characteristics. More importantly, the present study demonstrates that adaptive decision-making contributes directly to the development of teacher self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), mastery experiences represent the strongest source of efficacy beliefs because successful task accomplishment reinforces individuals' confidence in their professional capabilities. Participants reported increased confidence after successfully modifying activities, sustaining classroom participation, and overcoming instructional difficulties. These findings therefore suggest that authentic classroom experiences provide repeated mastery opportunities through which self-efficacy is progressively strengthened, supporting recent evidence from teacher education research (Narayanan et al., 2023).

Reflective practice emerged as another critical dimension of professional learning throughout the practicum. Participants did not limit the evaluation to students' academic achievement but also reflected upon classroom atmosphere, learner engagement, communication effectiveness, and mentor feedback. Such multidimensional reflection enabled participants to critically evaluate their instructional decisions and identify areas requiring improvement. Farrell (2022) emphasizes that reflective practice enables teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice by systematically examining their professional experiences. However, the present findings suggest that reflection performs an even broader developmental function. Participants' narratives indicate that reflection facilitates the reinterpretation of teaching experiences, allowing them to construct more coherent understandings of themselves as future teachers. In other words, reflective practice contributes simultaneously to pedagogical improvement and professional identity construction. This interpretation is consistent with Beijaard et al. (2004), who argue that teacher identity evolves through continuous reflection on classroom experiences and professional responsibilities. Therefore, reflection should not merely be viewed as a post-teaching evaluation technique but as a transformative process through which pre-service teachers develop greater agency, confidence, and professional awareness.

Institutional and contextual constraints also played an influential role in shaping participants' learning experiences. Time limitations, administrative responsibilities, schedule changes, limited teaching resources, and diverse learner characteristics frequently required participants to reconsider and redesign instructional plans. Although these contextual challenges initially generated uncertainty, participants gradually developed coping strategies involving instructional flexibility, effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, and emotional regulation. These findings reinforce previous research highlighting resilience as an essential characteristic of beginning teachers (Sheridan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that resilience should not be conceptualized as an inherent personal trait but rather as a developmental capability emerging through repeated engagement with authentic professional challenges. Through negotiating

institutional realities, participants gradually strengthened their adaptive capacity while maintaining commitment to students' learning. Such experiences support recent findings suggesting that resilience develops through the interaction between individual agency and contextual support during teaching practicum (Krisdianata & Mbato, 2022; Liu & Zhang, 2023).

Perhaps the most important contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that professional identity, self-efficacy, and adaptive expertise evolve as interconnected developmental processes rather than isolated outcomes of teaching practicum. Participants' narratives collectively illustrate a progressive trajectory beginning with lesson planning, followed by classroom implementation, reflective evaluation, adaptation to contextual challenges, and ultimately the consolidation of professional identity. Rather than representing separate competencies, these stages constitute mutually reinforcing dimensions of teacher development. Authentic teaching experiences encourage participants to transform theoretical knowledge into practical action, while reflection enables them to reinterpret those experiences as meaningful professional learning. As confidence increases through repeated mastery experiences, participants become increasingly capable of making autonomous pedagogical decisions and responding effectively to classroom complexity. This developmental trajectory supports Darling-Hammond (2017), who argues that effective teacher education must integrate coursework, authentic practice, and structured reflection to foster professional competence. However, the present study extends this perspective by illustrating how these interconnected experiences simultaneously cultivate adaptive expertise and professional identity within the specific context of Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on teacher education by providing a holistic understanding of how pre-service teachers experience program development during teaching practicum. Previous studies have frequently examined lesson planning, classroom management, reflective practice, or teacher identity as separate phenomena (Farrell, 2022; Setyaningrum et al., 2022). In contrast, the present findings demonstrate that these dimensions are inseparable components of a dynamic developmental process. The narrative accounts reveal that authentic practicum experiences enable pre-service teachers to negotiate pedagogical challenges, construct professional identities, strengthen self-efficacy, and develop adaptive expertise through continuous cycles of planning, implementation, reflection, and revision. These findings suggest that teacher education programs should design practicum experiences that deliberately integrate collaborative mentoring, structured reflection, and authentic classroom responsibilities, thereby enabling pre-service teachers to develop not only instructional competence but also the professional dispositions required for sustainable career development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of pre-service teachers in developing English for Young Learners programs through a narrative inquiry approach. The findings indicate that lesson planning is the foundation of effective teaching, requiring alignment with curriculum objectives and adaptation to students' diverse abilities. Participants demonstrated creativity and adaptability in addressing classroom challenges, while reflective practice and evaluation supported professional growth, confidence, and the development of professional identity. These findings contribute to understanding how teacher identity and self-efficacy emerge through authentic teaching experiences, highlighting the dynamic relationship between practical engagement, reflection, and professional development in TEYL contexts.

The study has limitations due to its small sample size and the context-specific nature of the practicum, which may limit generalizability. Practically, the findings suggest that teacher education programs should provide structured guidance, collaborative lesson planning opportunities, and systematic reflective practices to better prepare pre-service teachers for classroom realities. Future research could involve larger, more diverse samples across multiple institutions and regions, and

examine the long-term effects of reflective practice, mentorship, and collaborative planning on the professional growth of pre-service teachers. Overall, authentic practicum experiences are essential for fostering professional competence, confidence, and identity formation in future TEYL teachers.

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