

Challenges and Coping Strategies of EFL Trainee Teachers in International Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

The international teaching practicum plays a crucial role in enhancing global educational quality. Numerous institutions deploy trainee teachers internationally to augment educational standards and foster professional development. During these practicums, trainee teachers encounter various challenges that significantly contribute to shaping their professional identities and teaching methods. Recognizing the importance of these experiences, the researchers in this research delves into the coping strategies adopted by trainee teachers when faced with challenges and how these experiences influence their learning perceptions. This qualitative study aims to offer valuable insights and practical approaches for trainee teachers navigating difficulties in their practicums. Data was gathered through observations and interviews with three trainee teachers who participated in an international teaching practicum in Malaysia. The findings reveal that the challenges encountered by trainee teachers can be grouped into several key themes: student behavior, school facilities, managing mixed-ability classrooms, adapting to the school curriculum, and effective time management. To address these challenges, the trainee teachers employed various strategies, including anticipatory planning, incorporating 'learning through play', effective student grouping, utilizing school modules for adapting to variable curricula, and prioritizing tasks.

Keywords: Challenges, coping strategies, EFL trainee teachers, international teaching practicum

INTRODUCTION

English has long been recognized as a global language, serving as a key medium of communication and societal interaction (Chasanah & Sumardi, 2022; Wahyudin et al., 2021). This evolution underscores the importance of English communication as a vital competency in the twenty-first century, a point emphasized by Luo et al. (2015). English has become a key language in various aspects of life, including politics, economics, culture, society, and education, as noted by Aisyah (2017) and Pertiwi (2022). Zhang (2019) further

underscores the essential role of English in education. Reflecting this importance, [Anwar et al. \(2020\)](#) found that most students recognize the value of studying English, not just for linguistic competence but also for understanding diverse cultures, traditions, literature, and communication. English has established itself as a global lingua franca, effectively bridging regions such as the East and West and the North and South, especially in commercial contexts, as [Rao \(2019\)](#) observes. This expanded role globally signifies a growing need for educators proficient in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, as [Sutcher et al. \(2019\)](#) report, thirty-two countries have experienced a shortage of teachers in bilingual education or English language teaching. This shortage underlines the high demand for English teachers in the contemporary educational landscape.

Several institutions have taken significant steps by deploying ESL/EFL teachers to various countries, a strategy underscored by [Genç \(2018\)](#). Among these initiatives, the International Teaching Practicum (ITP) stands out as a key component of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program, as noted by [Kodrat \(2021\)](#). The MBKM program is designed to address complex challenges within the educational system and improve student preparedness for real-world situations, offering practical activities to develop both soft and hard skills. ITP not only aids countries facing a shortage of teachers but also provides trainee teachers with valuable practical experiences, enabling them to apply their pedagogical knowledge in real-life contexts.

As per the 'Profil Pelajar Pancasila' principles, highlighted by [Ubaidillah et al. \(2023\)](#), there's an emphasis on global thinking in contemporary education. ITP plays a crucial role in this regard, facilitating English language learning for students and offering trainee teachers opportunities to observe and engage with students, fellow teachers, and the curriculum in authentic settings, as [Huling \(1998\)](#) points out. [Kabilan \(2013\)](#) observes that ITP enhances English students' confidence in using the language for communication. Additionally, [Baba \(2022\)](#) reports positive learning experiences among pre-service teachers who enjoy the course content. [DeVillar and Jiang \(2012\)](#) further emphasize the benefits for teachers, including the development of creative teaching material, teaching style, and effective classroom management through international practice.

International students generally report satisfaction with their academic experiences, exhibiting higher completion rates and timely graduation. However, they also encounter frustrations in aspects of their experience beyond academics, as noted by [Curtin et al. \(2013\)](#). Similarly, while the international teaching practicum offers valuable opportunities for teachers to broaden their perspectives and enhance their skills it also presents distinct challenges. For instance, Indonesian pre-service teachers in Malaysia faced major challenges such as lesson planning, language proficiency, navigating cross-cultural differences, and adapting to different curricula, as detailed by [Kabilan et al. \(2020\)](#). [Nuraeni \(2019\)](#) highlighted the challenges faced by Indonesian pre-service teachers in Thailand, including language barriers, classroom management difficulties, lack of confidence and experience, learning differences among students, and cultural challenges.

[Gong et al. \(2021\)](#) further identified a range of issues faced by participants, including language-based, lifestyle, academic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges. The international teaching practicum often requires trainee teachers to adopt teaching methods different from those they learned, leading to a realization that classroom realities

may differ significantly from what is taught in their academic programs, as observed by [Nguyen and Baldauf \(2010\)](#). Furthermore, the literature reveals that the international teaching practicum (ITP) encompasses a mix of benefits and challenges, as evidenced by studies from [Jin et al. \(2020\)](#), [Malki and Al-Hattali \(2022\)](#), [Lang et al. \(2016\)](#), [Rasman \(2018\)](#), and [Köksal \(2019\)](#). However, most research on teaching practicums, including works by [Kabilan et al. \(2020\)](#), [Yunus et al. \(2010\)](#), and [Nuraeni \(2019\)](#), tends to focus primarily on the challenges of participating in an ITP, often overlooking strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

Addressing this gap, the researchers in this current study specifically concentrates on the ways in which trainee teachers surmount challenges encountered in ITPs in Malaysia. The participants of this study offer valuable insights, having achieved their learning objectives and attained satisfactory outcomes despite facing significant challenges. This research not only aims to bridge the gap in existing literature but also seeks to equip prospective educational institutions and future pre-service researchers with essential data. This data can enhance their capabilities to effectively implement and manage ITPs. Central to this study is an exploration of the specific challenges faced by Indonesian trainee teachers during their ITP in Malaysia and an evaluation of the strategies they have employed to tackle and overcome these challenges.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing narrative inquiry as the primary approach. The choice of a qualitative method was driven by the need for a deeper understanding of trainee teachers' challenges and coping strategies, which have not been comprehensively explored. Qualitative research, as [Moser \(2017\)](#) notes, is particularly effective in delving into individuals' experiences, perceptions, behaviors, and processes, as well as the meanings they attribute to these elements. Additionally, narrative inquiry was chosen for its ability to provide more detailed information about the relationships and positional dynamics of pre-service teachers during their international teaching practicum, as discussed by [Chasanah and Sumardi \(2022\)](#). This approach enabled an exploration of the complex and subjective experiences of trainee teachers throughout their practicum, capturing nuanced aspects of their professional journey.

For this study, convenience sampling was employed to select participants who were not only readily available but also willing to engage fully in the research process, as outlined by [Etikan \(2016\)](#). This sampling method was chosen because of its practicality and efficiency in accessing participants. The selected individuals were those who had successfully met their learning objectives during their International Teaching Practicum (ITP) in Malaysia, indicating significant experience and expertise. In alignment with ethical research practices, the identities of the participants have been protected. Accordingly, their real names have been omitted and replaced with anonymous identifiers like P1, P2, and P3, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to ethical standards in research.

Table 1. The participants' demographic data

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience
P1	Female	21	1 year
P2	Male	26	6 years
P3	Female	21	3 years

Data were collected through observation and open-ended interviews. Creswell (2012) stated that observation is collecting information by observing people and places. The researchers observed participants’ teaching performance in the form of videos. The information obtained was the trainee teachers’ performance during teaching practicum in Malaysia. The result of the observation is as follows.

Table 2. Observation Result

Indicator	Score		
	P1	P2	P3
Planning of the lesson	12	11	11
Implementation	32	34	37
Closure	10	11	12
Total	54	56	60

Note. P1 (participants 1), P2 (participant 2), P3 (participant 3). Max score = 64 (100%). Total score = score/64 x 100%

Table 3. Interpretation of Observation Result

Categories	Score
Ineffective	16 ≤ Score ≤ 28
Partially Effective	28 ≤ Score ≤ 40
Effective	40 ≤ Score ≤ 52
Highly Effective	52 ≤ Score ≤ 64

Note. Adapted from Principal Evaluation: Standards, Rubrics, and Tools for Effective Performance (1st ed., p 66), by J. H. Stronge, 2013, ASCD. Copyright 2013 by James H. Stronge.

Based on the data in Tables 1 and 2, the total score of P1 (participant 1) is 54 (84.3%), which is categorized as highly effective. The total score of P2 (participant 2) is 56 (87.5%), categorized as highly effective. The total score of P3 (participant 3) is 60 (93.7%), which is categorized as highly effective. All subjects received practicum scores in accordance with this study. Moreover, the researchers also used an interview to cross-check the reliability and validity of the data and reflections on teachers’ performance. A qualitative interview is used when researchers ask one or more participants using general or open-ended questions and record their answers (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were carried out through online Zoom, and each interview was about 20 minutes long. The interview was in English and Indonesian language to minimize misunderstanding. All interviews were recorded in the form of video and audio.

Furthermore, all the data from observation and interview were gathered and analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Matthews et al. (2010), thematic analysis is a process of interpreting, summarizing, and categorizing the data to identify key ideas or themes. After collecting data through observation and interviews, the researchers transcribed the data and created emerging categories to identify the data. The emerging categories were combined with supporting data to identify themes.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The participants reported challenges encountered during their international teaching practicum. Those challenges and coping strategies are categorized into several themes as follows:

Table 4. Summarizing challenges and coping strategies

No	Challenges	Coping Strategies
1.	Students Behavior	Antecedent strategies
2.	School facilities	Learning through play
3.	Mixed ability students	Grouping strategies
4.	School Curriculum	Maximizing the use of the English module to create a lesson plan
5.	Time management	Setting priorities

Student Behavior Challenges

Participants in this study reported significant challenges in managing student behavior, particularly due to the disruption caused by talkative students. Such behavior can impede the learning process for the entire class. One participant described this challenge as follows:

“The most difficult challenge was controlling noisy students who kept talking, which disturbed the concentration of other students.” [Excerpt 1, Participant 1]

This statement highlights the common problem of students engaging in conversations that negatively impact the focus of their peers. As [Joshi et al. \(2012\)](#) emphasize, disruptive behavior in the classroom can seriously undermine both the learning environment and the teacher's ability to maintain order, negatively affecting students' social and educational development. Furthermore, the issue of students sleeping in class was identified, often due to exhaustion from demanding schedules. This challenge is articulated in the following statement:

“During teaching, I experience challenges in making children focus with me. In addition, I often found that many students had a habit of sleeping during the class, probably due to tiredness from busy activities.” [Excerpt 2, Participant 2]

The participants noted that students adhere to both formal and informal school schedules, including conventional subjects and Islamic religious studies. The additional requirement of memorizing the Quran before bedtime leads to their fatigue in class. The following participant observation reflects this:

“The students there lacked awareness and delayed carrying out our requests.” [Excerpt 3, Participant 3]

Participants taught children of Indonesian workers in Malaysia, many of whom had limited educational backgrounds, contributing to disruptive behavior. According to [Wadden and McGovern \(1991\)](#), classroom management challenges often involve dealing with talking and sleeping in class. [Chung et al. \(1998\)](#) add that managing student behavior is especially complex in middle grades, and the transition from elementary to middle school can exacerbate students' disruptive behaviors due to stress. These findings indicate that managing student behavior in junior high school settings involves navigating a range of issues, from talkativeness to sleepiness, all of which demand tailored strategies from educators.

Coping Strategies for Student Behavior

Participants identified coping strategies to manage disruptive student behaviors, which typically include inconsistent responses to teacher directives and other forms of disruption, as described by Banks (2014). The participants successfully implemented these strategies, as evidenced in their statements:

“Giving strict and clear rules and instructions made the students focus on me during the teaching practicum.” [Excerpt 4, Participant 2]

“To overcome this, they must be guided and assisted so that the assigned tasks are completed properly.” [Excerpt 5, Participant 3]

Based on these interviews and supplementary documentation, it is evident that trainee teachers predominantly utilized antecedent strategies to address students' behavior. These strategies involve setting clear rules and instructions as a means to proactively manage classroom behavior. Antecedent strategies, as defined by Pariska (2022), are aimed at altering the learning environment that might trigger disruptive behavior and clearly outlining expected behaviors. Moreover, Kern and Clemens (2007) support this approach, stating that antecedent strategies are an effective initial step in managing student behavior.

These strategies include establishing clear classroom rules and expectations, using unambiguous instructions and commands, presenting material that matches the students' instructional level, interspersing simple tasks among more challenging ones, and incorporating student interests into activities. Banks (2014) also emphasizes that an efficient classroom management program often incorporates antecedent techniques, which include active supervision, rule listing, and monitoring student progress. Furthermore, a study by Pariska (2022) highlights the effectiveness of antecedent strategies in managing student behavior, reinforcing their importance in classroom management.

Challenges with School Curriculum

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in educational settings, serving as the backbone for instructional goals and subject matter. As Walker (2003) explains, the curriculum is not only essential for providing teachers with a structured framework for required subjects but also significantly influences what is taught and learned, ultimately shaping our identity and future prospects. However, the participants of this study encountered unique challenges at a newly established school, which opened in 2020. Being a new institution, it lacked a well-defined curriculum, organizational structure, and clear learning objectives. The students being taught were part of the school's inaugural batch, further contributing to the absence of a transparent system and an established curriculum. The participants shared their experiences regarding these challenges:

“The school had no fixed curriculum, making it difficult to make a lesson plan.” [Excerpt 18, Participant 1]

“There was no fixed curriculum in this school, even though the curriculum is needed to determine learning goals and strategies.” [Excerpt 19, Participant 2]

“School management was not well organized. There is no fixed curriculum, and we are not given any direction on what material has or has not been taught.” [Excerpt 20, Participant 3]

From excerpts 18, 19, and 20, it is evident that the lack of a fixed curriculum posed significant challenges for the participants. The curriculum, as a systematically planned component of the educational system, plays a crucial role in shaping educational activities. Young (2014) emphasizes that curriculum is a social construct which not only guides but also constrains the activities of educators and curriculum designers. Without a well-prepared, conceptualized, and effectively implemented and evaluated curriculum, educational activities risk deviating from their intended goals and outcomes. This situation highlights the fundamental importance of a well-structured curriculum in achieving educational objectives.

Coping Strategies for Curriculum Challenges

In response to the lack of a fixed curriculum, trainee teachers adapted by utilizing an existing English module to establish school goals, methods, materials, and assessments. This approach aligns with the recommendation by Ibrahim et al. (2013) that a thorough understanding of the curriculum can be significantly enhanced through the study of course textbooks. Additionally, the participants leveraged their university education, particularly skills acquired in micro-teaching classes, to devise appropriate teaching methods, as illustrated in the following statements:

“I implemented my knowledge gained from the micro-teaching class and adjusted to the students’ conditions or abilities for the learning strategies. In addition, I used existing modules to create a lesson plan.” [Excerpt 21, Participant 1]

“We made a lesson plan by following the module that has been provided.” [Excerpt 22, Participant 3]

The above excerpts indicate that a key coping strategy for the absence of a fixed curriculum involved maximizing the use of the English module to formulate lesson plans. Lesson planning is a vital preparatory step for trainee teachers. Without a defined curriculum, participants focused on crafting lesson plans that addressed learning objectives, activities, and assessments. They utilized the English module as a guide for determining teaching materials and learning objectives. Furthermore, the selection of teaching methods was informed by the students’ abilities and conditions, with additional input drawn from micro-teaching classes and discussions with supervisors. This multi-faceted approach enabled the trainee teachers to navigate the challenges posed by the unfixed curriculum effectively.

Challenges in Time Management

Trainee teachers in this study reported significant challenges in managing time effectively. At their workplace, students were engaged in both formal and informal educational settings. Formal education involved learning general subjects, while informal education focused on religious lessons. The combination of these two types of learning led to a packed schedule for the students. Compounding this challenge was the goal set by the school principal for the trainee teachers. They were tasked with preparing students to

showcase their English skills at the closing ceremony. Given the mixed abilities of the students and the limited preparation time, this objective presented a substantial challenge in time management for the participants:

“Trainee teachers had limited time to achieve the target from the principal.” [Excerpt 23, Participant 1]

“We had limited time to do our assignments, such as teaching practicum reports, community service reports, articles, videos, and news. We are overwhelmed with these assignments, especially when they are assigned abruptly.” [Excerpt 24, Participant 2]

“Students had demanding schedules for both school and religion. We struggle with time management because we lack sufficient time to meet the learning objectives.” [Excerpt 25, Participant 3]

As revealed in excerpts 23, 24, and 25, participants not only grappled with the demanding schedules of their students but also faced their own time constraints. They were required to balance a myriad of tasks, including teaching practicum reports, community service reports, and other academic assignments, often within tight deadlines. This situation made it difficult for trainee teachers to allocate adequate time for teaching and fulfilling their academic responsibilities, thus intensifying the time management challenges.

Coping Strategies for Time Management

Faced with busy schedules and the need to meet various learning goals, participants in this study developed specific strategies to manage their time effectively. A key approach involved prioritizing tasks and objectives to ensure that both university assignments and teaching goals were accomplished. Additionally, participants took proactive steps at the onset of their practicum in Malaysia by organizing their schedules for the duration of their stay. The coping strategies employed by the participants are illustrated in the following statements:

“To manage the time, I determined my priorities.” [Excerpt 26, Participant 1]

“On the first day, I organized my schedule so that I could complete the tasks according to the deadline and achieve the learning targets.” [Excerpt 27, Participant 2]

As indicated in excerpts 26 and 27, prioritizing tasks emerged as an effective way for trainee teachers to manage their time. By identifying and focusing on the most important tasks first, they could efficiently complete their university assignments and fulfill their learning objectives. Furthermore, creating a well-structured schedule at the beginning of their practicum enabled the trainee teachers to allocate time and resources optimally, ensuring that all learning targets were met. These time management strategies proved successful, as evidenced by the students' ability to demonstrate their English-speaking skills through various activities such as speeches, storytelling, emceeing, choral speaking, and drama. Remarkably, these outcomes were achieved within a one-month period, and the results were satisfactory, showcasing the effectiveness of the coping strategies employed by the trainee teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the specific challenges faced by trainee teachers during their International Teaching Practicum (ITP) program and examined the coping strategies they employed. By facilitating the expression of trainee teachers' emotions through observations and interviews, the research uncovered a range of distinct challenges encountered during the teaching practicum. These challenges were broadly classified into four categories: managing mixed-ability students, time management, dealing with inadequate school facilities, and addressing student behavior. The participants employed various strategies to address these issues. To manage student behavior, they used antecedent strategies; for inadequate facilities, they optimized learning through play; to tackle the unfixed curriculum, they relied on school modules for determining goals, methods, materials, and assessments; grouping strategies were applied to handle mixed-ability students; and for time management challenges, they created schedules and set priorities.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed for the initial education department to enhance the ITP program. Firstly, outlining tasks at the program's onset is suggested to aid trainee teachers in effective time management. Additionally, it is recommended that trainee teachers should thoroughly prepare for their practicum by focusing on developing classroom management skills. This can be achieved through increased teaching experiences, such as tutoring and volunteer work, and a deep understanding of the curriculum. Trainee teachers are also encouraged to cultivate critical thinking skills to adeptly navigate and resolve practicum challenges. The study underscores the importance of conducting further research to collect diverse data on the challenges encountered during teaching practicums. Such research can provide valuable insights into improving teacher preparation standards at universities, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the ITP program.

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