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Cross-Cultural Experiences in Teacher Education: Indonesian Pre-Service English Teachers' Perspectives on International Teaching Practicum

Abstract

This study addresses a significant gap in the current literature concerning the international teaching practicum experiences of Asian pre-service teachers specializing in English education. Focusing on three Indonesian pre-service teachers, the research explores their experiences during international practicum in the Czech Republic, Thailand, and Malaysia. Methodologically, the study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews, along with the analysis of narrative journals and artefacts from the International Teaching Practicum (ITP) program, following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach (2006). This involved meticulous examination of data, coding, and thematic classification to derive meaningful interpretations. Key findings highlight the challenges faced by participants, including language barriers and cultural adaptation. Despite these challenges, participants reported substantial growth in confidence and self-assurance fostered by active participation in teaching and learning activities. Significantly, the practicum provided valuable insights into multicultural education, deepening the participants' understanding of different teaching methodologies, the role of teachers, and the nuances of local educational systems. The implications of this study are far-reaching, particularly in enhancing multicultural competence in teacher education. By shedding light on the under-researched area of international teaching practicum involving Asian contexts, the study contributes essential insights into the evolving landscape of global teacher education.

Keywords: Cross-cultural experiences; English education; international teaching practicum; pre-service teachers

INTRODUCTION

As schools become increasingly diverse, equipping future teachers with the necessary attitudes and skills for effective teaching in culturally and linguistically varied classrooms is imperative (Castro, 2010). In the last decade, there has been a notable shift in teacher education programs towards incorporating cross-cultural experiences (Dwyer, 2019). These experiences often extend beyond national borders, enriching teachers' professional development (Kim & Choi, 2019). Research, particularly in Western contexts, has emphasized the value of international teaching practicum. These overseas experiences are shown to bolster pre-service teachers' confidence and adaptability in unfamiliar cultural and national settings (Nketsia & Carroll, 2023). They also encourage the development of globally informed and culturally responsive curricula. Studies highlight how such international practicum can enhance teachers' self-efficacy and inspire them to integrate global perspectives and teaching methods that are sensitive to cultural differences (Lorema et al. 2013, Bernardes et al. 2021)

In response to rapid demographic and socio-cultural changes, there is a growing focus on integrating multicultural education into teacher training (Kim & Choi, 2019). The goal is to prepare future educators to effectively engage with students from various cultural backgrounds. A key strategy in achieving this is through cross-cultural teacher education programs. These programs offer pre-service teachers opportunities to immerse themselves in different cultural environments and education systems abroad. Such

immersive experiences are instrumental in transforming their perceptions and attitudes towards multiculturalism (Kim & Choi, 2019).

This research contributes to the literature on international teaching practicum, a field increasingly recognized in teacher education globally. Colleges and universities worldwide have implemented international teaching practicum, exposing pre-service teachers to a variety of cultures and teaching methodologies. Existing studies primarily examine the experiences of Western pre-service teachers from countries like Australia (Tambyah, 2019), the USA (Arshavskaya, 2018; Quinn et al., 2011; Shoffner, 2019), Canada (Bernardes et al., 2021), and Italy (Parmigiani et al., 2021). Additionally, research has begun to explore the practicum experiences of Asian pre-service teachers from China (Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013), Korea (Kim & Choi, 2019), Malaysia (Kabilan et al., 2020), Turkey (Ateşkan, 2016; Çiftçi et al., 2022), Indonesia (Auliya et al., 2020), and India (Amaas et al., 2020). These studies collectively highlight the significant role of international teaching experiences in the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers.

However, a review of the literature reveals a notable gap: there is limited research focusing on the experiences of Asian, particularly Indonesian, pre-service teachers who engage in teaching practicum across both Asian and Western countries. Most existing studies are either set in Western or Asian contexts, but rarely both. This gap underscores the need for more comprehensive research that encompasses the experiences of Indonesian pre-service teachers in diverse international settings. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies focusing exclusively on pre-service teachers majoring in English education. Exploring this specific group is vital, as it offers unique insights into the perspectives of individuals who possess theoretical knowledge in education, teaching, English language, and cross-cultural understanding.

Addressing the identified research gap, this qualitative study delves into the experiences and perceptions of three Indonesian pre-service teachers specializing in English Education. These teachers participated in international teaching practicum in non-English speaking countries: the Czech Republic, Thailand, and Malaysia. The study's primary objective is to understand how the practicum contributes to enhancing the participants' confidence and comprehension, particularly in navigating the complexities of diverse cultural and educational environments. This exploration is crucial as it provides valuable insights into the personal and professional development opportunities afforded by such international experiences in teacher education. Significantly, this study enriches the existing research on international teaching practicum, focusing on a specific academic major and the Asian context. The area, especially concerning Indonesian pre-service English teachers, has been notably underexplored. Thus, the findings of this study not only add to the academic discourse but also offer practical implications for designing effective teacher education programs in a global context.

METHOD

This qualitative study involved three Indonesian pre-service teachers (PSTs) majoring in English education, all native Bahasa Indonesia speakers. They participated in a six-week international teaching program with an international youth organization, teaching English in the Czech Republic (Nava), Thailand (Jasmine), and Malaysia (Khoi). Prior to this experience, they had limited exposure to intercultural environments and

primarily used English in academic settings. In addition, the program's objectives were to enhance the participants' English proficiency, cross-cultural awareness, teaching and learning comprehension, leadership skills, and life skills for cultural adaptation. Before departure, the participants attended seminars in Indonesia on cultural diversity and living with a host family. However, specific details about the curriculum or teaching methods relevant to the host countries were not provided, requiring participants to rely on their prior knowledge and personal resources. In the host countries, participants attended university classes with other international students, focusing on various English teaching approaches, curriculum planning, and cultural adaptation. They also engaged in a homestay with local families, immersing themselves in daily cultural practices. Additional cultural experiences included city tours, excursions, bushwalking, and visits to national parks.

Furthermore, data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews post-program, lasting 60 to 100 minutes. The interviews, guided by a protocol, covered participants' backgrounds, their perceptions of the program, and their understanding of intercultural competence. In addition to interviews, reflection papers, lesson plans, and visual artefacts like photos and videos were collected. Moreover, Following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase method for qualitative analysis, researchers began by repeatedly reading the data, identifying relevant units, and forming categories. This process involved a thorough examination of interviews, journals, and artefacts. Key themes were identified and refined, with final codes developed for in-depth analysis. The most significant evidence was selected to support each theme.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This research was encapsulated in three interconnected themes: (a) Immersion in diverse cultures and expanding comfort zones, (b) Exploration of various teaching pedagogies, and (c) Building interpersonal relationships with local community members.

Immersing in Different Culture and Pushing the Envelope

In the interviews, each participant discussed their challenges with language barriers and adapting to unfamiliar cultures. Jasmine, who had no prior travel experience, contrasted with Nava and Khoi, who had travelled internationally for short trips and a religious pilgrimage, respectively. Despite their varying backgrounds, all agreed that the international teaching practicum presented unique challenges. Unlike brief visits, the practicum demanded full immersion in a new society, involving close interactions with local students and teachers. While initially daunting, this exposure to different environments was seen as an opportunity for personal growth. The participants reported that the experience positively transformed their attitudes towards foreign languages and cultures, enhancing their confidence and independence. For example, Jasmine, previously inexperienced in international settings, noted a significant boost in her English proficiency and confidence from teaching in a Thai classroom. This shift in language perception and increased self-assurance aligns with the program's objectives of fostering individual development and acquiring essential life skills.

“Even though my major was English education in Indonesia, I had limited opportunities to converse in English there. However, during my six-week stay in Thailand, I had to teach and interact with students in English, which forced me to find the confidence to speak the language. English used to be challenging for me because I

viewed it as a strict discipline, making me feel pressured to speak it perfectly. Now, I see English as a tool for connecting with others. Language has become more practical for me, leading me to feel at ease when communicating in English.” (Jasmine, Int. 2)

The fact that the host countries were not native English-speaking nations actually necessitated the use of English for communication. This became essential because the locals couldn't speak Indonesian, and the participants were not familiar with the native languages of the host countries. The participants emphasized the vital role of English proficiency in adapting to the host country's environment and in expanding their local networks, which in turn enriched their intercultural experiences. For instance, Nava underscored this point with an anecdote:

“The environment (where no Indonesian people I could talk to) forced me to speak English 24 hours for six weeks to interact with both local people (including students and teachers) and other EPs (exchange participants) there. My receptive skills also improved. I gained many new English vocabularies that I've never heard and used before” (Nava, Int. 1)

Unlike Nava and Jasmine, who were the only Indonesian participants in their respective ITP programs, Khoi, who was participating in Malaysia, had an Indonesian exchange peer. Initially, communicating in Bahasa Indonesia with her compatriot provided comfort. However, Khoi recognized that relying on her native language would keep her within her comfort zone and limit her interactions with other international participants. Keeping in mind her primary goal of enhancing her English skills, including speaking, listening, and responding, Khoi consciously chose to communicate exclusively in English, even with her Indonesian peer. This strategy aimed to fully leverage her international experience and maximize English language practice. As a result, she reported significant improvement in her ability to use English across various communicative contexts. To illustrate her progress, Khoi shared a specific example:

“At first, I thought I'd feel at ease because I had a friend from Indonesia, but gradually, I had to push myself to interact more intensively with other exchange participants in English. And in the end, I did just that (interacting with other exchange participants using English)” (Khoi, Int. 3)

The participants attributed their language development success to several key factors: the supportive structure of the institution, interactions with other exchange participants, connections with local friends, and the structure of the program itself. Initially, local friends played a pivotal role by encouraging the participants to attend local events, which not only helped them understand cultural norms, like appropriate foods and behaviours but also provided opportunities to use English in everyday contexts. Additionally, sharing an apartment with exchange students from various countries further facilitated their daily use of English. The participants' journey in language learning extended beyond their time abroad. Upon returning to Indonesia, they continued to engage with international events organized by the host organization and their university. They also kept in touch with locals and fellow exchange participants from different countries through social media, further enhancing their language skills and maintaining their intercultural connections.

“Even until now, oh, it has been almost three years since the program ended, the WhatsApp group is still vibrating. We usually share global issues and international events. Sometimes, we also throw some jokes, as we did back then during the program. Oh, also, for sure, we are still up to interact on Instagram through direct messages”
(Khoi, Int. 3)

The interviews revealed a significant increase in the participants' confidence in using English, corroborating findings from previous research in Asian contexts. Studies by [Aamaas et al. \(2020\)](#), [Çiftçi et al. \(2022\)](#), [Kabilan et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Kim and Choi \(2019\)](#) have similarly noted the positive impact of international teaching practicum on language attitudes in non-native English-speaking environments.

In addition to enhanced language skills, the participants demonstrated increased self-efficacy, a common outcome observed in educators who engage in international teaching experiences, as documented by [Cushner and Mahon \(2002\)](#), [Lee \(2009\)](#), and [Pence and Macgillivray \(2008\)](#). This study's findings align with this trend, as seen in the case of Jasmine. Despite it being her first international experience, she reported overcoming her initial apprehensions and gaining confidence through active participation in the program.

“I had never travelled abroad previously, so initially, I felt concerned and afraid about living in a foreign country. However, the experience of immersing myself in a new culture and community, which I had only encountered indirectly within Indonesian society, turned out to be incredible. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I adapted to the new environment much better than I had expected”
(Jasmine, Int. 2)

Jasmine's experience illustrates significant personal growth achieved by venturing out of her comfort zone. Initially apprehensive, she was pleasantly surprised by her smooth adaptation to the new environment, surpassing her own expectations. This demonstrates the resilience and adaptability that can develop when individuals engage with diverse cultures. Such experiences not only expand personal perspectives but also foster valuable life skills, an aspect worth further investigation in this study.

However, Khoi's experience presented a unique contrast. Teaching English in a country where it is a second language (ESL) while originating from a country where English is a foreign language (EFL) initially struck her as ironic. However, this concern quickly dissipated as she engaged in the teaching process. Khoi's reflection on this aspect sheds light on the complexities and outcomes of such intercultural teaching experiences.

“At first, I thought my presence in this school might be futile, having to teach these students English when I was convinced their English proficiency surpassed mine, as they used English more frequently than I did. But from the very first day of teaching, they welcomed me with open arms, a feeling I had never experienced before. Day by day, I realized that my presence was eagerly anticipated by these students. It turned out to be not just about how often English was used but also about how I taught them public speaking, encouraged them to express their opinions, and taught them how to deal with cultural diversity, making them more confident and open-minded. And that's the point”
(Khoi, Int. 3)

Nava, who had previously travelled abroad, experienced similar feelings. She also expressed how her international teaching experiences differed from her prior travel abroad. She commented:

“During my travels with family in other countries, my activities primarily revolved around savouring delicious cuisine and indulging in shopping. It was essentially a vacation, just a leisurely trip. I always felt secure because my parents were there for me. As a result, I initially had doubts about my ability to succeed in this program. However, my perspective has since evolved. I found immense satisfaction in teaching local students, working alongside teachers at the school, and integrating into the local community—a far cry from typical travel experiences. I developed a deep appreciation for immersing myself in a culture distinct from my homeland and deriving valuable lessons from it” (Nava, Int. 1)

In conclusion, the participants overcame language barriers and adapted to new environments, leading to a more positive attitude towards using a foreign language. A key factor in their professional development was the challenge of teaching English to students who did not speak Indonesian. These international experiences enabled the pre-service teachers to instruct students whose first language differed from their own, enhancing their self-efficacy and sense of personal achievement. Additionally, the experience facilitated deep immersion into the local community, allowing the participants to form meaningful connections with local residents and integrate more fully into local society. This goes beyond superficial interactions, contributing significantly to their overall development and cultural understanding (Ateşkan, 2016; Kabilan, 2013).

Examining Varied Teaching Pedagogies

This research found that participants greatly valued the learning experiences from their international teaching practicum, particularly in terms of exposure to diverse teaching methods not commonly seen in Indonesia. This opportunity allowed them to observe different educational practices firsthand, enriching their perspectives and informing them how they might adapt these methods to Indonesian classrooms. Similarly observed that student teachers often value such experiences for exposure to varied pedagogical approaches and cultural insights.

The participants observed a range of effective teaching strategies in the host countries, differing significantly from Indonesian techniques. This sparked an interest in incorporating these innovative approaches into their future teaching. Aligning with findings from Parmigiani et al. (2021), the international experience encouraged the pre-service teachers to reflect deeply on various aspects of their identity, including their linguistic skills, teaching methods, and self-reflection capabilities. For example, Jasmine’s observations in a Thai classroom led her to critically assess her own teaching style:

“I was honestly amazed to see the condition of the classrooms and all their facilities here because I teach in a school in rural Thailand, and you know what? Their facilities exceeded my expectations. Among the makeshift wooden partitions between classrooms and the improvised thatched roofs, there was a neatly installed screen with a projector. Sadly, the teachers here hardly ever utilized these facilities. They never even used laptops during their lessons; they relied solely on books and verbal explanations from the teacher during class. This inspired me to introduce varied

learning activities by optimizing the provided classroom facilities. We learn through singing, playing games, watching my cultural presentation, role play, and such things that are surprisingly rare for them. The students responded very positively, and the atmosphere became much more enjoyable” (Jasmine, Int. 2)

In contrast to Jasmine's individual teaching experience, Khoi had the opportunity to engage in collaborative teaching with other exchange participants from countries like China, India, and Turkmenistan. This collaborative setting enabled her to observe and learn diverse teaching methods, including choices of teaching materials, classroom activities, and delivery techniques. As [Smolcic and Katunich \(2017\)](#) suggest, such international teaching practicum (ITP) provides opportunities to integrate students' cultural backgrounds into educational experiences, thereby enriching learning for all. PSTs can gather a range of successful educational practices and deepen their connection to a global learning community, recognizing the importance of catering to students with varied cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds.

Khoi observed a wide array of teaching styles, noting that not all participants had formal educational backgrounds or teaching training. This diversity prompted her to reflect on and evaluate her own teaching methods in comparison.

“There were several exchange participants who struggled to choose suitable and engaging teaching materials, and their delivery lacked interactivity. Some didn't prepare anything before class; they improvised spontaneously during the lesson. I don't consider that approach something worth emulating. However, I also observed others who were very dedicated and mature in preparing their materials, and their activities were engaging, making the students actively participate in the learning process. Their classes felt vibrant and alive. That's what inspired me to continue improving my teaching methods in Malaysia. I believe this experience will greatly benefit my future teaching career. I've gained extensive knowledge about diverse teaching and learning techniques that can engage students in subjects and help meet class goals. Consequently, I aspire to be a teacher who diligently strives to offer the most effective teaching and learning methods for my students” (Khoi, Int. 3)

Khoi recognizes the significant impact of her exchange experience on her future teaching career. The program's diverse exposure to teaching and learning methods has enriched her pedagogical toolkit, preparing her to engage students effectively in various subjects and meet class objectives. This experience has reinforced her commitment to continual professional development, shaping her into an adaptable, dedicated educator focused on student engagement. Throughout the program, Khoi observed a range of teaching approaches. She encountered some that struggled with effective material selection and interactivity, while others excelled in crafting engaging lessons. Motivated by these observations, Khoi plans to refine her teaching strategies in Malaysia, using her newfound knowledge to enhance her effectiveness as a teacher.

Furthermore, Khoi realized the importance of discussions and brainstorming in collaborative teaching settings. She understood the need for alignment and consistency among teachers to achieve the desired educational outcomes. This aligns with previous research findings that tout international teaching experiences as valuable for PSTs' professional development. Such experiences contribute to significant shifts in teacher

identity, classroom confidence, cultural awareness, and strategies to support English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Cinelli & Jones, 2017; Jin et al., 2020; Tambyah, 2019).

Interpersonal Relationship with Locals

The six-week stay in the host countries provided participants with the opportunity to engage directly with local people, particularly focusing on their interpersonal relationships with local teachers and students. Such experiences are crucial for pre-service teachers (PSTs), as Steele and Leming (2022) note, because exposure to diverse cultural settings broadens their understanding of multicultural students and equips them for the associated challenges and opportunities. An integral aspect of this transformative learning process is critical reflection and dialogue, whether with peers or advisors. It is essential for PSTs to re-evaluate their pre-existing knowledge of teaching and understand how it might be adapted or reinterpreted in different cultural contexts. This process involves not only introspection but also engaging in dialogue, where sharing and reflecting on diverse perspectives is key (Mezirow, 1995).

The participants' interactions with local students and teachers facilitated unique self-reflective experiences. For instance, Jasmine's efforts to connect with students in Thailand led her to introspect and adapt her approach to teaching and engagement.

"I wanted to get close to my students there, but it seemed challenging to strike up a conversation with them. After thinking and observing their patterns, I decided to offer them snacks while chatting with them about small things. And you know what happened? It worked! The kids loved it, and it became my routine after teaching and on holidays, especially since the students here live close to the school. Oh, as days went by, more and more students invited me to go somewhere to play. How joyful my heart is!" (Jasmine, Int. 2)

Jasmine noted that, despite cultural differences, she and her students in Thailand found common ground, leading to smooth and warm interactions. She chose to view these differences not as challenges but as enriching experiences. This perspective helped her embrace cultural diversity in her interactions. Her experience with local teachers in Thailand was also a learning curve. Initially, Jasmine found the "teacher-oriented" and somewhat "authoritarian" style of teaching, including the use of disciplinary measures, to be daunting. The student's high level of obedience and respect towards their teachers added to her apprehension about forming relationships with her colleagues. However, upon reflection, Jasmine resolved to build positive connections with them. She recognized that the local teaching methods contributed to the disciplined nature of the students and decided to embrace a different approach in her future career, a commitment she made internally. To foster good relationships with the local teachers, Jasmine initiated conversations with them, discovering their willingness and interest in engaging with her. Despite language barriers, these interactions revealed the teachers' amiable personalities, contrasting with their professional demeanour. Some teachers even extended invitations to Jasmine for meals at their homes, further deepening their personal connection.

Nava, who taught in the Czech Republic, had a different yet positive experience with the school environment there, particularly in her interactions with local teachers and students. She was impressed by the relaxed and flexible approach of the teachers, which boosted her confidence about fitting in. Nava noted that the teachers were often referred to

by their nicknames, a practice that seemed to reflect cultural norms and contributed to a warm rapport between students and teachers. This informality fostered a comfortable classroom environment, where students freely shared thoughts and asked questions, similar to a conversation with friends.

This dynamic contrasts with the more formal educational setting in Indonesia, where interactions are typically more structured. Nava observed that the Czech students thrived under the guidance of approachable teachers, confidently engaging with the material and seeking clarifications without hesitation. The teachers' recognition of student contributions, from verbal input to creative ideas, further enhanced the positive learning atmosphere. However, not only Jasmine and Nava but also Khoi briefly shared how she learned to build good relationships with students and teachers despite the differences in backgrounds. She explained this in her narrative.

"Perhaps the most profound lesson I have learned is the appreciation for diversity. Interacting with Malaysian students and immersing myself in their culture has broadened my perspective and challenged preconceived notions. I now understand the value of celebrating and embracing differences, both in the classroom and in society at large. This newfound appreciation for diversity has fuelled my desire to foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment that values every student's unique background and experiences" (Khoi, Int. 3)

Khoi's experience in Malaysia led to a significant shift in her understanding of diversity. By interacting directly with Malaysian students and immersing herself in their culture, she began to reevaluate and challenge her previous perceptions. This exposure underscored the importance of celebrating differences, a concept that extends beyond classroom interactions to broader societal contexts. This deepened appreciation for diversity has profoundly influenced Khoi's educational approach. She is now more determined than ever to foster an inclusive and equitable classroom environment, one that respects and values the diverse backgrounds of all students. As Khoi moves forward in her teaching career, she is committed to embracing and integrating these insights, aiming to create a learning space where diversity is not just recognized but celebrated as a key component of educational growth.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the transformative experiences of Indonesian pre-service teachers (PSTs) during their international teaching practicum (ITP) in non-native English-speaking countries, significantly contributing to their personal and professional development. Overcoming language barriers and cultural differences, the participants enhanced their English proficiency and adaptability, a process that went beyond linguistic skills to encompass a broader cultural understanding and integration into diverse societal contexts. Their exposure to varied teaching methodologies in the host countries offered fresh pedagogical perspectives, underscoring the value of adaptable and inclusive teaching methods. This experience has led to a marked increase in their self-efficacy and confidence, especially in using English for effective communication and teaching, aligning with existing literature on the benefits of ITP.

A pivotal outcome of these experiences has been the development of a deep appreciation for diversity. Engaging with students and educators from various cultural

backgrounds catalyzed a transformative shift in the PST perspectives, significantly influencing their educational philosophy. This newfound appreciation for cultural diversity has inspired a commitment to fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments that honour and value the unique backgrounds and experiences of every student. In conclusion, the international teaching practicum has been instrumental in shaping these Indonesian pre-service teachers' professional identities and teaching philosophies. The practicum has not only honed their pedagogical competencies and cultural sensitivities but has also instilled a profound respect for diversity, integral to their future educational endeavours. This study enriches the body of research on international teaching experiences, particularly in Asian contexts, highlighting their crucial role in the evolving landscape of global teacher education.

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