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Designing Meaningful Lessons: Barriers and Solutions in Instructional Planning Among Indonesian Prospective EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Instructional planning is widely recognised as essential for effective teaching, yet prospective teachers often lack the knowledge, experience, and resources to design context-responsive lessons. Research on lesson planning has predominantly focused on in-service teachers, leaving limited insight into the multidimensional barriers teacher candidates face in Indonesian EFL contexts, particularly within private universities. This qualitative case study addresses this gap by examining two guiding questions: (1) What factors hinder prospective teachers in designing instructional plans? Moreover, (2) What solutions can effectively address these barriers? Three purposively selected eighth-semester students from the English Language Education Study Program at a private university in Indonesia were studied based on scaffolding principles. Data were triangulated through open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and then analysed thematically with member checking to ensure trustworthiness. Findings highlight three interconnected challenges: limited mastery of pedagogical vocabulary and authentic material development, misalignment between methods and materials, and a persistent gap between theoretical coursework and practical classroom dynamics. Proposed solutions include intensive tiered mentoring by lecturers and supervising teachers, integration of authentic locally relevant materials, and real-case-based lesson design workshops. These findings contribute to teacher education research by offering evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform and practicum design that strengthen prospective teachers' competence in creating meaningful and contextually grounded lesson plans.

Keywords: Instructional planning, prospective EFL teachers, lesson plan, contextualised materials.

INTRODUCTION

Many classrooms in developing educational contexts struggle with fragmented, teacher-centred instruction that does not meet diverse learner needs. A core issue is the lack of coherent instructional planning that aligns objectives, activities, and assessment (Mufanti et al., 2024; Malaikosa & Sahayu, 2018; Renandya et al., 2018). Without well-designed lesson

plans, Hobbs and Porsch (2021) argue that teachers often rely on improvised or textbook-driven delivery, leading to disengagement and uneven learning outcomes. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, this problem is magnified: students face language barriers and require carefully scaffolded input and practice (Huda, 2017; Alsalihi, 2020; Hanifa, 2018). According to Maloshonok and Terentev (2017), poor planning frequently results in a mismatch between student proficiency levels and instructional activities. In many teacher education programs, planning is taught theoretically—students memorise curricular components or Bloom's Taxonomy verbs without sufficient practice in authentic classroom contexts (Grossman, 2018; Pastini & Lilasari, 2023; Nurmatova & Altun, 2023). This creates a gap between what they know conceptually and what they can implement during practicum, leading to plans that lack alignment between objectives, methods, and assessments and rely heavily on decontextualised textbook materials rather than authentic, learner-relevant sources.

These persistent challenges underscore the need to reconceptualise instructional planning not as a mere administrative task but as a foundational pedagogical practice that directly shapes teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hattie, 2012). Effective instructional planning is a core teaching competency, functioning as a strategic roadmap that allows teachers to anticipate diverse learner needs, select and adapt instructional materials, and sequence learning activities coherently and purposefully (Sanchez, 2024; Straessle, 2014). When thoughtfully designed, lesson plans go beyond fulfilling curriculum requirements; they integrate national standards with local classroom realities while providing the flexibility to respond to unpredictable classroom dynamics and learner diversity (Le & Bui, 2024; Hanifa et al., 2024). Global teacher education frameworks emphasise planning as essential for promoting learner-centred pedagogy and developing higher-order thinking skills required in 21st-century education (Voogt & Roblin, 2012; Schleicher, 2018). However, developing these competencies is often hindered by multidimensional barriers that combine technical and affective challenges, including limited mastery of pedagogical vocabulary, difficulties aligning methods with materials, and psychological constraints such as anxiety, low confidence, and limited self-efficacy (Crosthwaite et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2021; Achmad et al., 2023).

For prospective teachers, developing lesson plans is one of the most critical yet challenging components of their professional preparation. Pre-service teacher candidates are expected to translate theoretical knowledge gained from coursework into structured instructional designs that align learning objectives, materials, methods, and assessments. However, many struggle with this task due to limited classroom experience and an incomplete understanding of abstract pedagogical principles in real-world contexts (Lomi & Mbato, 2020; Sali & Kecik, 2018; Jantarach & Soontornwipast, 2018). Lesson planning requires technical skills, such as selecting appropriate operational verbs and sequencing activities according to curriculum standards, and adaptive expertise to integrate authentic materials and anticipate learner diversity (Hanifa, 2018; Crosthwaite et al., 2021). Without sufficient practice and mentoring, prospective teachers often produce overly theoretical plans, heavily dependent on textbooks, or disconnected from students' socio-cultural contexts (Alanazi, 2019; Baecher et al., 2013). This persistent gap between theoretical preparation and practical application can undermine their ability to deliver meaningful instruction and respond flexibly to classroom dynamics.

Studies across different countries reveal that prospective teachers frequently encounter challenges in lesson plan development despite recognising its importance. In Saudi Arabia, Alanazi (2019) found that 50 pre-service teachers enrolled in a teaching practice course struggled to organise and sequence lesson content effectively, even though they understood its role in teaching. Similarly, Achmad et al. (2023) examined seven English education student-teachers during their internship in Indonesia. They reported difficulties formulating competency indicators, writing objectives, selecting methods and media, designing activities, and creating assessments per the 2013 Curriculum. In Thailand, Jantarach and Soontornwipast (2018) observed 22 EFL student-teachers and identified lesson planning as a cyclical process, pre-planning, planning, implementing, and reflecting, requiring feedback and adaptation. Sanchez (2024), studying 229 pre-service teachers in the Philippines, revealed partial mastery of lesson planning knowledge, poor practical skills, and difficulties writing SMART objectives and ensuring component alignment due to limited exposure and feedback. Contextual factors also shape these issues; for example, Wulandari et al. (2021) found that Indonesian junior high EFL teachers faced technological and methodological constraints when preparing online lesson plans during the pandemic.

Despite growing awareness of the importance of lesson planning in teacher education, research shows that many prospective teachers still face significant barriers in developing effective instructional plans. Prior studies have described common difficulties such as writing objectives, aligning components, and selecting methods or materials. However, they often stop short of examining these challenges holistically within specific educational contexts. Moreover, most investigations focus on identifying technical shortcomings, with limited exploration of how institutional support, mentoring, and reflective practices can help prospective teachers bridge the gap between theory and classroom realities. This creates a need for research that uncovers the multidimensional factors hindering novice teachers and proposes context-responsive strategies to address these barriers. The novelty of the present study lies in its dual focus: it examines both the internal and external factors that impede prospective teachers' ability to design meaningful lesson plans and explores practical, evidence-based solutions tailored to their needs and educational context. Accordingly, this study aims to answer two critical questions: (1) What factors hinder prospective teachers in designing instructional plans? Furthermore, (2) What solutions can effectively address these barriers?

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine in depth the challenges prospective teachers face in preparing Learning Implementation Plans (RPP) and propose context-based solutions. A case study design is well-suited because it allows researchers to explore complex phenomena in real-life contexts and capture multiple dimensions of participants' experiences (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). Furthermore, participants were selected through purposive sampling from eighth-semester students enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of a private university in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was employed because it allows researchers to intentionally select participants who can provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The selection criteria included: (1) having completed relevant coursework

such as ELT Curriculum and Microteaching; (2) participation in the Field Experience Program (PLP II) at the secondary school level; and (3) representation of varied Cumulative Grade Point Averages (high, medium, and low) to ensure diversity of perspectives. Three participants were chosen to represent each GPA category, namely: Participant 1 (GPA 3.80), Participant 7 (GPA 3.56), and Participant 14 (GPA 3.11). This purposive strategy ensured variation in academic performance and teaching practicum experiences, providing a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by prospective teachers in authentic educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected using three complementary methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the depth and credibility of the findings. First, open-ended questionnaires were administered to gather initial information about specific difficulties in designing lesson plans, such as challenges in selecting cognitive-level vocabulary, adapting materials, and integrating media. Open-ended questionnaires are widely used in qualitative research to capture participants' subjective experiences and provide rich descriptive data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to confirm and elaborate on the questionnaire responses, focusing on technical issues (e.g., preparing learning activities), pedagogical aspects (e.g., aligning plans with curriculum requirements), and psychological factors (e.g., anxiety in lesson plan development). Semi-structured interviews effectively explore participants' perspectives while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Third, document analysis was performed on participants' lesson plans, teaching materials, and reflective journals from their PLP II practicum. Document analysis enables researchers to identify patterns, verify information from other sources, and examine the consistency between learning objectives and instructional practices (Bowen, 2009). Using multiple data sources provided methodological triangulation, strengthening the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 2015).

The data were analysed through several systematic stages to ensure rigour and trustworthiness. First, thematic coding was conducted, where interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were inductively coded to identify key themes such as "vocabulary selection difficulties," "limited access to contextual materials," and "mentor guidance needs." Inductive thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research to derive patterns and insights directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, triangulation was applied by comparing data from questionnaires, interviews, and document analyses to validate the consistency and credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015). For instance, difficulties in selecting teaching methods revealed during interviews were corroborated with evidence from lesson plan analyses. Third, member checking was employed by asking participants to review and confirm the interpretations of their responses to enhance accuracy and minimise researcher bias (Schwandt, 2014). Finally, qualitative content analysis was performed to examine the alignment of instructional components and to interpret deeper meanings within participants' lesson plans and reflections, following established qualitative analysis procedures (Schreier, 2012). This multi-step process addressed the research questions concerning barriers and informed the development of context-based solutions to improve instructional design skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data obtained from open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis revealed three major themes that illustrate the challenges faced by prospective teachers in designing lesson plans. These themes reflect linguistic and material development difficulties, integrating methods with lesson components, and the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical classroom application. The thematic findings are presented below, supported by excerpts from participants and evidence drawn from their lesson plan documents.

Table 1. Challenges faced by prospective teachers in lesson plan design

Theme	Teachers' statements
Limitations in Vocabulary Selection and Teaching Material Development	*"I am often hesitant to use the word 'analyse' for fear that the designed activity is too difficult."* (Participant 1)
	"My difficulty lies in the materials used. Most of the package book materials use formal language, making it difficult for students to understand." (Participant 7).
	"I wish there were English books that used authentic examples…" (Participant 7)
Difficulty Integrating Learning Methods with Materials	*"I have to prepare the material first before deciding on a method, but often the two are out of sync."* (Participant 7)
Theory–Practice Gap Due to Minimal Field Experience	*"I often get confused about how to design activities that are not only theoretical, but also easy to practice in the classroom."* (Participant 1)
	"I didn't expect students to be confused when I asked them to identify a form without a visual example." (Participant 14)

Table 1 presents the challenges encountered by prospective teachers when designing lesson plans. The first theme, *limitations in vocabulary selection and teaching material development*, shows that participants struggled to select appropriate operational verbs and contextual materials. Participant 1 admitted that they often hesitated to use higher-order verbs such as *"analyse"* out of concern that the activity might be too strenuous for students. Similarly, Participant 7 highlighted the reliance on textbook-based materials written in formal language, which students found hard to understand, and expressed a desire for more authentic, locally relevant examples. These statements indicate that prospective teachers lacked confidence in aligning cognitive demands with student abilities and had limited resources or skills to adapt materials to the learners' context. The second theme, *difficulty integrating learning methods with materials*, reflects how lesson components were often treated separately rather than cohesively. Participant 7 acknowledged that material preparation and method selection were "out of sync," resulting in lessons that lacked instructional alignment. This suggests prospective teachers need support connecting teaching strategies with content and objectives to ensure coherent and engaging learning experiences. The third theme, *the theory–practice gap due to minimal field experience*, highlights challenges in applying theoretical knowledge to authentic classroom contexts. Participant 1 admitted feeling confused about translating theory into practical activities, while Participant 14 was surprised that students became confused without sufficient visual support. These insights suggest that limited practicum exposure hindered participants'

ability to anticipate classroom dynamics and design lessons that addressed students' real needs.

Table 2. Practical solutions to overcome barriers in instructional plan design

Theme	Teachers' statements
Intensive Mentoring by Teachers and Lecturers	"I hope that teachers will not only sign the lesson plan, but also provide detailed input such as the selection of verbs or examples of material that are relevant to students." (Participant 1)
	Significant RPP revisions after mentoring, e.g., activity changed from "reading the form in the textbook" to "analysing the school extracurricular registration form." (Participant 14)
Use of Authentic Materials Based on the Student's Environment	"Instead of using dialogue from a package book, I wanted to create a congratulatory example from a social media trend like a graduation greeting on Instagram." (Participant 7)
Training on the Preparation of Real-Case-Based Lesson Plans	"We need a workshop that not only teaches theory, but also how to adjust the lesson plan when students don't respond or the facilities don't support it." (Participant 14)

The data analysis reveals several context-driven solutions that prospective teachers consider effective in addressing the challenges they encounter when designing instructional plans. First, intensive mentoring by teachers and lecturers emerged as a critical support mechanism. Participants highlighted that meaningful feedback and hands-on guidance are far more beneficial than formal approvals. Participant 1 explained that they expected mentors to provide concrete suggestions on elements such as verb selection or relevant examples. Document analysis confirmed that structured mentoring had a tangible impact. Participant 14's lesson plan showed substantial improvement—revising an activity from "reading the form in the textbook" to "analysing the school extracurricular registration form." These revisions demonstrate how direct, formative feedback helps prospective teachers align instructional design with authentic student contexts.

Second, the findings underscore the importance of using authentic materials that reflect students' everyday lives. Participant 7 wanted to adapt content beyond formal textbook dialogues by incorporating examples relevant to students' experiences, such as congratulatory messages from social media platforms. Incorporating such context-based materials provides opportunities for more meaningful engagement, making lessons more relatable and communicative. Finally, the study identifies the need for training on real-case-based lesson planning to strengthen prospective teachers' adaptive capacity. Participant 14 stressed that workshops should focus on theoretical design principles and strategies for responding to unexpected classroom conditions, such as students' disengagement or inadequate facilities. Their revised lesson plan demonstrated this adaptation by including contingency steps like replacing video content with printed images if technical issues occurred.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the obstacles prospective EFL teachers face in designing instructional plans (RPP) and explored effective solutions rooted in authentic classroom

contexts. The results revealed three primary challenges: a limited ability to translate curriculum goals into measurable objectives, a reliance on decontextualised materials, and insufficient preparation for real classroom contingencies. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that novice teachers often struggle with lesson planning due to inadequate pedagogical vocabulary and the absence of contextualised examples (Achmad et al., 2023; Alanazi, 2019; Baecher et al., 2013). Participants' difficulties in selecting appropriate action verbs and aligning learning outcomes with Bloom's taxonomy also reflect Nurmatova and Altun's (2023) conclusion that novice EFL educators frequently lack the scaffolding needed to bridge theoretical frameworks with practical lesson design, underscoring the importance of adaptive training to develop reflective and responsive practitioners in 21st-century EFL classrooms (Voogt & Roblin, 2012; Renandya et al., 2018).

The second major issue concerns overreliance on formal textbooks, which limits contextual relevance and student engagement. Consistent with Huda (2017) and Hanifa (2018), participants expressed the need for authentic materials derived from students' everyday environments, such as social media content or real-life documents. Crosthwaite et al. (2021) emphasise that developing TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) is crucial for effectively integrating authentic and digital materials—a skill that prospective teachers in this study also identified as lacking. Addressing this challenge requires individual initiative and institutional support through structured professional development. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Schleicher (2018) argue that teacher preparation programs must include explicit training on contextual material design and responsiveness to students' sociocultural backgrounds, especially in EFL contexts.

A further challenge highlighted is the theory–practice gap, where participants were unprepared to adapt lesson plans to dynamic classroom realities. This finding supports Jantarach and Soontornwipast's (2018) and Lomi and Mbato's (2020) arguments that novice teachers often experience a "reality shock" when theoretical preparation fails to anticipate classroom contingencies. Calls for workshops that simulate real-class scenarios reflect (Grub et al., 2021), evidence that case-based training improves instructional flexibility. Similarly, Grossman (2018) and Hobbs and Porsch (2021) advocate for teaching core practices through mentored rehearsal and reflection, which directly resonates with participants' demand for intensive mentoring.

The proposed solutions, intensive mentoring, authentic materials, and real-case-based training, are supported by global and local literature. Intensive mentoring aligns with research highlighting the importance of ongoing, feedback-rich supervision in narrowing the gap between coursework and practicum (Achmad et al., 2023). Using authentic, context-sensitive materials is consistent with Kemp's instructional design principle of context analysis (Ross & Morrison, 2019) and broader student-centred pedagogies that enhance relevance and engagement (Pastini & Lilasari, 2023). Finally, training that simulates classroom contingencies reflects best practices in case-based teacher education, as discussed by Presnilla-Espada (2014) and Csanadi et al. (2020), who advocate iterative cycles of design, enactment, and reflection to foster adaptive expertise.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges faced by prospective EFL teachers in designing instructional plans (RPP) and identified feasible strategies to address them. The findings

revealed three key difficulties: limited ability to translate curriculum goals into measurable objectives, reliance on decontextualised materials, and insufficient preparation for handling real classroom situations. These issues highlight persistent gaps between theoretical coursework and practical teaching demands. Several practical measures emerged from the study to address these gaps. Providing consistent support from lecturers and mentor teachers, incorporating authentic materials drawn from students' contexts, and offering case-based simulation training can help novice teachers develop more context-sensitive and workable lesson plans. However, the study's scope was limited to a single institution with a relatively small group of participants; therefore, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future research involving multiple institutions, larger samples, and longitudinal approaches could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how lesson-planning skills can be effectively strengthened during teacher preparation.

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