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THE CHALLENGES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA: A TESL UNDERGRADUATES PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges faced by pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum in Malaysian schools from the perspective of TESL undergraduates. Using a quantitative research design, data was collected through structured questionnaires distributed to TESL students who had completed their practicum. The results indicate that the main challenges include classroom management, handling diverse student needs, time constraints, and insufficient support from school mentors. The findings reveal significant patterns that suggest the need for improvements in teacher training programmes, especially in preparing pre-service teachers for real classroom environments. This study provides valuable insights that can guide educational institutions in enhancing practicum experiences and supporting the professional development of future educators.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, teaching practicum, TESL, challenges, quantitative research

INTRODUCTION

The teaching practicum has historically been a crucial part of beginning teacher education programmes. Additionally, the practicum serves the primary objective of preparing pre-service teachers for the teaching profession, as they must interact mutually with students in real classrooms during the practicum period (Köksal, 2019).

In Malaysia, most universities collaborate with schools to allow pre-service teachers to complete their practicum (Nurdiyana Mohamad Yusof et al., 2023). During the practicum, they put into action and assess the fundamental teaching theories, approaches, strategies, and techniques gained from their studies (Zakaria et al., 2024). This enables pre-service teachers to apply their theoretical knowledge in classrooms and schools and gives them a sense of what a real classroom is like (Köksal, 2019).

The importance of practicum as a crucial part of professional development is emphasised in teacher training programmes worldwide. TESL pre-service teachers can apply their theoretical knowledge in authentic classroom settings through practical experience, especially in multicultural and multilingual environments like Malaysia. During this stage, pre-service teachers

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implement all the teaching pedagogies they have learned in theory in their classrooms, combining them with the practical application of these technical abilities (Shure, M. A., & Sharif, A., 1 August 2022). This period is an essential element of their training because the shift from university classes to school environments often reveals a gap in readiness.

However, researchers have clarified the difficulties TESL pre-service teachers face in Malaysia. For instance, Sathappan and Gurusamy (2019) studied the practices and challenges faced by TESL practicum students during their first practicum at a Malaysian teacher education institution. Their results showed that although pre-service teachers thought the practicum improved their teaching abilities, they frequently did not receive the assistance they needed from school mentors.

The studies also mentioned various issues that TESL practicum students encounter, such as limited mentorship, the need for efficient language learning techniques, and transitioning hurdles into authentic teaching settings. Therefore, improving the practicum experience and the standard of English language instruction in Malaysia demands that these issues be tackled.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides the framework for comprehending the background, theories, and previous research about the difficulties and resources available to TESL pre-service teachers in Malaysia during their practicum. In addition to identifying critical theoretical frameworks and highlighting research gaps that require more study, it offers a thorough summary of previous studies.

This chapter has three primary sections. The first section outlines the theoretical frameworks supporting the research. The second section reviews previous research on the challenges experienced by TESL pre-service teachers during their practicum. Lastly, the final section highlights gaps in the research and explains why the current study is necessary.

Theories Regarding Teacher Training and Development.

Experiential Learning Theory

Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation are the four interconnected stages of learning, according to Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). This cycle model helps comprehend how TESL pre-service teachers deal with the challenges of practicums. TESL pre-service

teachers can participate in these phases in an organized manner through the practicum, helping them convert their theoretical knowledge into practical teaching skills.

According to the theory, students progress through four phases: active experimentation, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and experience. TESL pre-service teachers follow this cycle as they move from theoretical understanding to practical classroom implementations during their practicum. However, obstacles, including a lack of mentorship, stress, and problems with classroom management, might make this cycle less effective.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), social interaction and mentoring are essential learning components. Pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, colleagues, and university supervisors are examples of more knowledgeable others (MKOs) in the context of TESL who help students shift from theory to practice. Studies by Sathappan and Gurusamy (2019) have shown that inadequate mentoring interferes with this scaffolding process, resulting in more stress and inconsistency in classroom management.

Review of Past Studies

Challenges Faced by TESL Pre-Service Teachers

Numerous studies have highlighted the difficulties TESL pre-service teachers face in their practicum. Sathappan and Gurusamy (2019) noted that poor mentorship, challenges with classroom management, and an overwhelming workload were among the main issues. Pre-service teachers' professional development is hampered by these difficulties, which also cause stress.

Khamis et al. (2024) further underlined that TESL pre-service teachers frequently struggle with curriculum limitations, cultural adaptation, and language proficiency. Their confidence and efficacy as teachers are severely impacted by their lack of readiness to deal with these problems.

Importance of Support Systems

Support networks are essential to lessen the challenges that pre-service teachers encounter. According to research by Ishihara (2005) and Kabilan & Veratharaju (2013), organised guidance, peer collaboration, and mentorship significantly impact TESL pre-service teachers' achievement. However, rather than focussing on how pre-service teachers actively use support systems, these studies mainly highlighted their significance.

Furthermore, Khamis et al. (2024) pointed out that tactics for language proficiency help students succeed, but they did not go into great detail on how support systems can help these strategies work. Similarly, Ishihara (2005) investigated psychological and emotional aspects such as anxiety and self-worth but failed to consider the possible advantages of mentorship and peer collaboration in resolving these issues.

Identification of Research Gap

Although the difficulties experienced by TESL pre-service teachers have been the subject of numerous studies, studies examining coping strategies and support networks are severely lacking. Instead of looking at how pre-service teachers overcome these barriers, most previous research (Sathappan & Gurusamy, 2019; Khamis et al., 2024) concentrates on identifying issues. The actual practicum experiences of TESL students in Malaysian universities, namely at Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM), were also given little attention.

This study investigates the difficulties and coping mechanisms TESL pre-service teachers use to fill these gaps. This study aims to provide a more profound comprehension of improving the teaching practicum experience for TESL students in Malaysia by investigating the function of support networks such as peer collaboration, mentorship, and institutional financial support.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the relevant theories, previous studies, and unfulfilled research needs concerning the practicum experiences of TESL pre-service teachers. The theoretical perspectives of self-efficacy theory, sociocultural theory, and experiential learning theory offer a basis for comprehending the shift from theory to practice. Pre-service teachers' problems, including stress, poor classroom management, and a lack of mentorship, have been thoroughly covered in earlier research. However, research on how TESL pre-service teachers deal with these difficulties through support networks is limited.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the study's procedures, including the research design, population and sampling, instruments, data collection, and data analysis. It offers a better understanding in answering research questions: 1) "What challenges did pre-service teachers face during their teaching practice in Malaysia?" and 2) "What support systems help these pre-service teachers cope with their practicum experiences?" Tables and figures are presented in this chapter to provide a clearer understanding of the methods employed in this study.

Research Design

This study focuses on UPTM KL degree students who pursued their practicum in primary school during their diploma. The researcher will employ a quantitative research approach using the survey method. The questionnaires will be distributed to these practicum students to examine the communication, instructional, student-related, and support-related factors they face during their practicum.

This valid research questionnaire was adopted from existing literature to meet the specific objectives of this study. Both multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions were included in the questionnaires. The Google platform will be used to administer the survey via Google Form to guarantee participants' convenience and accessibility. To ensure the accuracy of the pre-service teachers' responses, the researcher will provide clear instructions for each part.

Population and Sampling

Population

The population of this study consists of the total number of practicum students who had undergone their practicum during their diploma studies. These practicum students are the future graduates of Bachelor of Education in TESL, Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia Kuala Lumpur (UPTM KL). By having them as a total population, this study will be able to offer particular perspectives on the obstacles and opportunities that arose during their practicum period.

Sampling

This study employs selective sampling, as suggested by Jumali et al. (2023), due to the nature of the study that focuses on a specific group with relevant experiences and information related to the practicum. Hence, the sample of this study is selected from the pool of the total number of practicum students who completed their practicum in primary school for 16 weeks during **their** diploma. The considered criteria are the sample's different demographic origins, such as gender, age, and practicum placement (rural or urban), to reflect their variety of experiences in this community.

Instrumentation

To facilitate data collection, this study employs a structured questionnaire as its primary research instrument. The questionnaire was adapted from a version previously adopted, piloted, and administered by Imsa-ard et al. (2021), ensuring its relevance and reliability within the context of this research. Designed to align with the study's objectives, it explores the challenges faced by TESL undergraduates during their practicum, as well as the support systems and coping strategies they found effective. The questionnaire follows a standardised framework, comprising six key sections. The first gathers demographic information, while the second addresses communication-related factors. The third section focuses on instructional aspects, followed by questions concerning student-related issues in the fourth. The fifth section examines support mechanisms, and the final section invites participants to share their personal experiences. This comprehensive structure enables the systematic collection of data relevant to the study's aims.

The first section, section A, demographic data, requires respondents to answer multiple-choice questions. On the other hand, four different sections, from sections B to E, require participants to answer Likert scale questions. Starting on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the Likert-scale items in the questionnaire evaluate participants' experiences. The last section is Section F, which consists of one open-ended question. These enquiries are to measure subjective elements.

This questionnaire is a valuable and effective tool to collect standardised data and analyse trends and patterns across various practicum experiences. Its verified design and structured format ensure strong data gathering to guide enhancements in TESL and professional training programmes.

Table 1
Respondents' Demographic Profile 1

SECTION A	Demographic questions :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Course programmes 2. Age 3. Gender 4. Semester 5. Location of practicum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple Choice Questions • 5 questions • Questions 1 to 5
SECTION B	Communication Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likert Scale Questions • 5 questions • Questions 6 to 10 	
SECTION C	Instructional Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likert Scale Questions • 9 questions • Questions 11 to 19 	
SECTION D	Student-related Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likert Scale Questions • 5 questions • Questions 20 to 24 	
SECTION E	Support-related Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likert Scale Questions • 5 questions • Questions 24 to 29 	
SECTION F	Personal Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-Ended Questions • 1 question • Question 30 	

Data Collection

The process of the data collection involves 7 steps. Each step will be explained in detail in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1

Data Collection.



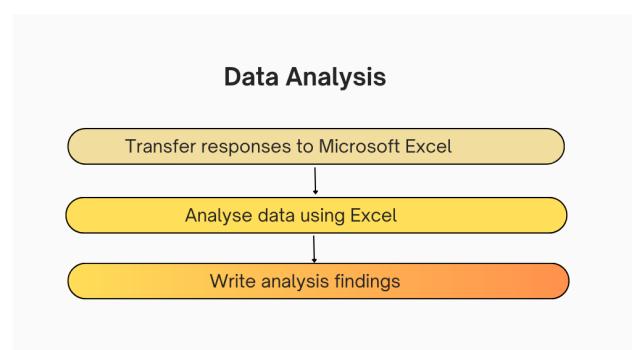
Data collection involves seven essential steps to ensure efficient and reliable data gathering. The first step is to use Google Forms to create questions. The questions contain multiple-choice and Likert scale formats that are understandable and relevant to the study's objectives. Afterwards, a shareable link is created and sent out via WhatsApp and email so that respondents can be contacted efficiently. Responses are gathered, allowing the researcher to monitor participation.

Once enough information has been collected, the responses are organised and subjected to further analysis in Excel. During the data analysis phase, the researcher uses statistical tools to find findings and recommendations, which is crucial to ensuring accurate analysis. The results are then used to develop a report that includes essential information, findings, and recommendations. At every stage, it is necessary to convert unprocessed data into accurate information that aids in well-informed decision-making.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis is illustrated in the flow chart below.

Figure 3.2
Data Analysis.



Three crucial processes in the data analysis process turn unstructured responses into relevant findings. The responses are first imported into Microsoft Excel, which enables the researcher to arrange, classify effectively, and filter data while guaranteeing that all gathered information is well-structured and easily accessible. After that, data is analysed using Excel features, such as charts and formulas. This step is crucial to explain raw data into understandable results, allowing the researcher to extract accurate conclusions. Finally, a report is ready and prepared to help convey the results. This process ensures that data is processed efficiently based on the findings.

This chapter describes the method used to examine the challenges TESL pre-service teachers face in Malaysian classrooms. The researcher explains the structured questionnaire, which comprises quantitative questions and the demographic profile of the participants. Data collection is carried out with a focus on participant acknowledgement to guarantee informed consent and privacy. The investigation employs a thematic framework and statistical analysis to gather important information from the responses.

This quantitative method provides a solid foundation for understanding TESL pre-service teachers' experiences and informs helpful suggestions for enhancing support in future courses. The findings in the following chapters offer additional insight into these experiences and further discuss the topic of Malaysian teacher education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by TESL pre-service teachers during their practicum and identify the support systems that helped them cope. Based on the survey data collected from UPTM TESL undergraduates, several recurring themes emerged: communication barriers, classroom management difficulties, confidence issues, and mentorship effectiveness.

Table 1: What challenges did pre-service teachers face during their teaching practice in Malaysian schools?

No.	Survey Item	Key Result	Implication
1	Communication with peers	60% disagreed it was a concern	Peer communication was generally not problematic
2	Communication with school administrators	77% agreed/strongly agreed it was a concern	High anxiety in formal communication
3	Communication with school mentors	73% agreed/strongly agreed it was difficult	Lack of mentor approachability affected learning
4	Communication with students	64% agreed/strongly agreed it was challenging	Difficulty engaging and instructing students
5	Communication with supervisors	68% agreed/strongly agreed it was a concern	Formal roles created anxiety and hesitation
6	Teaching in large classes	45% agreed/strongly agreed they felt discomfort	Classroom size affected management and focus
7	Teaching mixed-ability classes	43% agreed/strongly agreed they felt worried	Challenges balancing student needs
8	Confidence in explaining lessons	68% disagreed with the statement (i.e., they were confident)	Most felt confident in lesson delivery
9	Overall confidence in teaching ability	71% disagreed with the statement (i.e., they were confident overall)	Majority had positive self-perception
10	Time management	87% disagreed/strongly disagreed with poor time management	Most handled lesson pacing well
11	Providing feedback to students	69% disagreed/strongly disagreed with being unconfident	High confidence in giving feedback
12	Reluctance to attend school due to students	58% disagreed/strongly disagreed	Students were not a major source of stress
13	Ability to maintain discipline	64% disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement	Majority believed they could manage behaviour
14	Frequency of fatigue	21% agreed/strongly agreed they felt fatigued often	Emotional and physical fatigue present in some respondents

The findings reveal several key challenges encountered by pre-service teachers, particularly in the areas of communication, classroom management, instructional delivery, and emotional resilience.

Many participants reported difficulty communicating with school administrators and school mentors, with 77% and 73% respectively agreeing that these were sources of concern. In contrast, communication with peers was not seen as problematic, with 60% disagreeing it was a concern. This suggests that hierarchical relationships in schools may create barriers for novice teachers (Dixon et al., 2019; Weller & Long, 2019).

In the classroom, 45% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they felt uncomfortable teaching in large classes, while 43% expressed worry when teaching mixed-ability students. These concerns reflect challenges in adapting lesson plans to diverse learners and managing crowded classrooms (Lekwa et al., 2019; Mamperi, n.d.).

Regarding teaching confidence, 68% disagreed that they lacked the confidence to explain lessons, and 71% disagreed with having low overall teaching confidence. This shows that most pre-service teachers felt adequately prepared to deliver content, although some still reported difficulty with time management (13% agreed they struggled) and discipline (15% agreed or strongly agreed they could not maintain it) (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021; Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022).

Emotional fatigue was also present. While 36% disagreed that they felt fatigued frequently, 21% admitted to often feeling tired. These findings suggest that although many pre-service teachers manage well, a portion experience mental and physical exhaustion, often tied to workload and classroom challenges (Kim et al., 2021; Hogan & White, 2021).

Table 2

What support systems helped these pre-service teachers cope with their practicum experiences?

No.	Survey Item	Key Result	Implication
1	Frequency of advice from school mentor	85% agreed/strongly agreed	Most received consistent mentor guidance
2	Quality of teaching advice from school mentor	87% agreed/strongly agreed	Mentors provided valuable instructional support
3	Mentor encouragement during practicum	91% agreed/strongly agreed	Emotional and motivational support was significant
4	Frequency of advice from university supervisor	81% agreed/strongly agreed	Supervisors were generally available
5	Supervisor's helpfulness during practicum	85% agreed/strongly agreed	Supervisors contributed to practicum success
6	Suggestions for faculty improvement (open-ended responses)	Common themes: more practicum training, better mentor pairing	Need for structured support and preparation acknowledged by respondents

The data shows that mentorship and supervisor support played crucial roles in helping pre-service teachers manage their practicum experiences.

About 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they received frequent advice from school mentors, and 87% said their mentors provided consistent teaching guidance. Additionally, 91% felt their mentors offered emotional encouragement,

indicating a strong positive impact of mentorship on the practicum experience (Keiler et al., 2020; Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2020).

University supervisors were also an important support source. Around 81% of respondents received regular advice from supervisors, and 85% found them helpful throughout the practicum. These results reflect the importance of structured, ongoing communication between trainees and supervisors (Thessin, 2019; Yaghi & Bates, 2020).

Open-ended responses suggested that many pre-service teachers desired better faculty preparation prior to entering schools. Common themes included more practicum simulations, improved mentor matching, and mental readiness workshops. This reinforces earlier findings on the value of pre-practicum preparation and strong institutional support (Phang et al., 2019; Diver, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges faced by pre-service teachers in Malaysian schools, particularly in communication with administrators, mentors, and students, as well as managing large and mixed-ability classrooms. Despite these difficulties, most pre-service teachers reported confidence in lesson delivery and time management, suggesting that while they struggle with external factors, they feel prepared in core teaching competencies.

The study also emphasises the crucial role of support systems, such as school mentors, supervisors, faculty collaboration, and structured training programmes, in helping pre-service teachers navigate their practicum experiences. Effective mentorship, regular feedback, and well-designed preparatory training contribute to their professional development and overall teaching effectiveness. Strengthening these support mechanisms can enhance the transition from pre-service training to full-time teaching, ensuring that new educators are better equipped to handle the demands of the classroom.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author 1 contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft.

Author 2 was responsible for data collection, analysis, and validation of the results.

Author 3 provided supervision, critical review, and editing of the final manuscript.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the **Review Board** under reference number [**Approval Number, if applicable**]. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

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