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Challenges and Adaptation Strategies of Pre-Service EFL Teachers: An International Short-Term Teaching Program in Thailand

[1]Nabil Adhalia Putri, [1,2]Raida Asfihana

[1]Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari Banjarmasin, Indonesia
[2]Email Correspondence: raidaasfihana@uin-antasari.ac.id

Abstract

In a short-term international teaching program in Thailand, the barriers and adaptation techniques of pre-service English teachers were examined. A qualitative narrative technique and in-depth interviews with nine pre-service English teachers were employed in the study to identify several significant issues. Large class sizes and language barriers were among the problems that made teaching more challenging. Pre-service English teachers employed a range of strategies to overcome these challenges. Multimedia tools and visual aids were widely utilized to bridge language gaps and make complex concepts more accessible and easier to understand. Teachers fostered collaborative learning environments, encouraging students to work together, share ideas, and support one another throughout the learning process. The results emphasized the crucial role of pre-program planning and cultural competency in overcoming challenges in foreign teaching environments. Well-prepared teachers were better able to adjust their teaching strategies and establish rapport with their students. The importance of adaptable teaching strategies, which enable teachers to adapt to varying classroom dynamics, was also emphasized by the study. By highlighting the flexible teaching methods in cross-cultural settings, this research contributed to the development of successful teaching strategies and international education program designs. It provided valuable insights on how to better prepare teachers for overseas programs and enhance the overall teaching and learning process. This

study has several important implications for the development of international teacher education programs. First, they emphasize the importance of thorough pre-departure preparation, including cultural competency training and adaptive teaching strategies, to better equip pre-service teachers for cross-cultural classrooms. The effective use of multimedia tools and visual aids suggests that digital literacy should be an integral part of teacher training. Moreover, the emphasis on collaborative learning highlights the importance of creating student-centered and socially interactive learning environments, particularly in linguistically diverse settings. Overall, these insights contribute to the design of more responsive and flexible teacher education curricula that prepare future educators to succeed in international teaching contexts.

Keywords: adaptation strategies, challenges, language teaching, short-term international program

1. Introduction

The demand for short-term overseas programs is increasing globally due to the globalization of education and the increasing importance of cross-cultural communication. As explained by Zhao (Kabilan et al., 2020), many teacher education institutions worldwide are planning and implementing educational projects that take globalization into account, enabling the new generation of teachers to act as global citizens, understand the international system, and provide globally oriented education. These programs offer students from diverse cultural backgrounds the opportunity to live and learn in various environments.

De Wit and Altbach (2021) stated that short-term overseas programs, including language-teaching initiatives, are an integral part of the internationalization of higher education, which underlines the value of global experiences for teachers and students. Participation in such programs improves cross-cultural communication skills and contributes to career development. In addition, integrative motivation, driven by the desire to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of language teaching, as outlined by Gardner. In the context of international programs, this integrative motivation is particularly relevant for pre-service English teachers involved in language teaching experiences abroad.

These teachers not only teach the language but also engage directly in the daily life of the local community. This allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the culture, customs, and ways of life associated with the language they teach. When teachers immerse themselves in a local culture, they not only transfer language knowledge but also instill cultural values that are alive and thriving in that community.

This motivation has a substantial positive impact, not only on improving language skills but also on building stronger relationships between teachers and students. By engaging in more intense cultural interactions, pre-service English teachers have the opportunity to overcome communication barriers and enhance their cultural sensitivity skills in dealing with diverse situations (Safira et al., 2023). In addition, these cultural experiences provide them with a deeper understanding of the challenges their students face in learning the language, which in turn makes them more sensitive and effective in managing classroom dynamics. Furthermore, through these experiences, pre-service English teachers can develop more creative and locally relevant teaching approaches. They learn not only to focus on formal open materials but also to incorporate cultural elements that can motivate students to become more active participants in learning. However, among the many benefits, there are certainly challenges that pre-service English teachers face in this program.

Based on the discussion above, the author seeks to explore the importance of adaptation strategies in helping pre-service English teachers in short-term programs overcome the challenges they face. By providing a brief overview of the common difficulties faced by educators teaching English abroad, especially in Thailand, and analyzing the impact of factors such as language barriers, varying levels of language proficiency, and large class sizes, this paper will examine the strategies used by teachers to overcome these challenges. The discussion section will provide a comprehensive analysis of adaptation techniques, including promoting collaborative learning and incorporating multimedia resources, to enhance teaching effectiveness and student engagement in unfamiliar learning environments.

2. Literature

Engelhard stated that study abroad refers to any postsecondary education program provided outside the boundaries of the student's home country. Increasingly, people are recognizing that these courses are essential for cultivating students' cultural intelligence and equipping them for future careers in global environments. Engelhard (2016) defines short-term international programs as a catch-all phrase encompassing the entire range of study-abroad options, including conventional programs such as exchanges, semester- and year-long study-abroad programs, as well as summer and winter study-abroad programs. In recent years, shorter-term, more intensive study abroad programs have gained popularity, aiming to develop cross-cultural competency and understanding, as well as other professional and personal skills. Short-term study abroad or short-term foreign programs are the most popular kind of educational programs offered by institutions.

This program is valuable for broadening participants' horizons in various aspects, both academically and personally. One of its primary objectives is to enhance intercultural understanding through direct interaction with people in the host country. By participating in this program, students, particularly those majoring in English, can develop stronger cross-cultural communication skills while gaining a deeper understanding of the local culture's values and traditions. A key activity for students in this program is teaching. Teaching in an international context is undoubtedly different from traditional teaching, offering students the opportunity to enrich their experiences and enhance their professional skills. This opportunity enables them to develop creativity, innovation, and adaptability in addressing global challenges.

While teaching English, pre-service English teachers often encounter obstacles that hinder the teaching process. To address these challenges, they employ various strategies to overcome them effectively. In the opinion of Hibatullah (2019), English language education is significantly influenced by four factors: cultural background, teaching methods, instructor competence, and students' ability to absorb foreign language materials. These components are highly relevant to the challenges faced by international programs, particularly in multicultural classrooms.

Apart from these factors, language barriers are undoubtedly the most significant challenge faced by teachers in international programs, as posited by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Arshad & Chen, 2009). This theory emphasizes that social interaction, with language as the primary medium for conveying ideas and constructing understanding, forms the foundation of personal development. This highlights the importance of teachers being proficient in the language to facilitate meaningful discussions. In his social learning theory, Bandura (1971) emphasized the importance of social interaction and observation in the learning process. As explained by Bandura, people do not only learn from direct experience; they also learn from seeing how others behave and how that behavior affects them. The three main components of observational learning are attention, retention, and reproduction. This suggests that students' observations of behavior or models, as well as social interactions between students and educators, can significantly influence how students understand and internalize lessons.

The students' differing proficiency levels in English present another obstacle. Chen's (2009) sociocultural theory also provides valuable insights into learning. This perspective holds that successful learning occurs when people engage in social interactions and receive more experienced individuals, such as educators. With this approach, known as scaffolding, teachers gradually support students until they can understand the material independently.

This method provides teachers with recommendations on how to accommodate students with varying levels of language proficiency in the classroom while also considering each student's unique needs. By adopting the scaffolding process, teachers can adapt their teaching methods to the competency levels of their students. Additionally, to overcome these obstacles, interactive learning techniques can be combined with scaffolding. Kiyasova Ra'no Malikovna et al. (2022) claimed that interactive learning approaches consistently produce positive learning outcomes, including increased student attention, greater interest in the subject matter, and enjoyment during the learning process. This approach not only makes students more actively involved but also encourages them to understand better and internalize the ideas taught.

Furthermore, the massive number of students in a single session has a substantial impact on the teaching and learning process. This problem may make it more challenging to provide each student with individualized attention, complicate classroom management, and reduce the efficacy of teacher-student interactions.

As a result, learning standards are generally lowered, as children with special needs or differing comprehension levels often fail to acquire the required skills. As stated by Achilles (1999), the concept of class size has a significant impact on the quality of learning. As class sizes increase, it becomes increasingly challenging for teachers to provide each student with the individualized attention they need. Learning becomes difficult in the often crowded classroom setting, which exacerbates this. This confirms the findings of Fredricks et al. (2004), who discovered that students in big classes usually lose interest when instructors do not give them adequate attention.

Furthermore, John Sweller and Paul Chandler (2009) clarify that a high cognitive load may degrade the quality of teaching. For big class numbers, teachers must put more effort into communicating the material and ensuring that students understand it. Teachers' efficacy and health may suffer as a result of the stress this task causes.

This task can lead to stress, which can negatively impact teachers' health and effectiveness. Utilizing multimedia resources in teaching methods can improve student comprehension and help manage cognitive load, offering a potential solution to these challenges. People learn more effectively when information is presented using a combination of words and graphics, according to a multimedia learning hypothesis developed by Mayer (2006). To enhance student comprehension and recall of the material being taught, this method emphasizes the importance of utilizing learning materials that combine text and graphics simultaneously.

3. Method

This study examines the challenges and adaptation techniques in teaching English during a short-term program using a narrative inquiry methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted with pre-service English teachers participating in an international program in Thailand to gather data. The interviews aimed to gain

insights into the difficulties and adaptation techniques of nine students who taught at Ma'had Al-Bi'that and Al-Irsyad lil Banat, Yala, Thailand, in 2023 and 2024. An open-ended interview technique was employed, allowing participants to share their stories in-depth and organically, which enabled this study to capture rich and authentic narratives.

The following steps are part of the Creswell (2012) framework for narrative research, which was used in this study:

a.   Identify The Phenomenon

The difficulties faced by English teachers in Thailand's short-term International programs are the main topic of this study. The researcher initially approached the respondents by outlining some of the major difficulties they had encountered in Thailand. Based on the findings of the informal interviews, the researcher developed a variety of research tools to conduct formal interviews and identify the phenomena that occur among pre-service teachers.

b.   Select Participants

To shed light on the phenomenon, nine pre-service teachers who had direct experience teaching English during the program at Ma'had Al-Bi'that and Al-Irsyad lil Banat in Yala, Thailand, were selected.

c.   Collect The Stories

Stories and experiences from the selected participants regarding the challenges they had while teaching language classes in the worldwide program are collected. Open-ended interviews were used to collect data because they enabled participants to provide in-depth accounts of their experiences, including difficulties, solutions, and comments.

d.   Re-story The Narratives

To highlight the main themes and difficulties that the participants recognized, the gathered narratives were organized and presented in a structured manner. This step entailed methodically organizing the stories to highlight key points, such as methods of learning and language challenges. The narratives were

organized to guarantee that their program experiences were represented in a clear and significant way.

e. Collaborate with Participants

To ensure their experiences were accurately portrayed and that the narratives reflected their intended meaning, participants were consulted at every stage of the process. After their stories were reorganized, participants were asked to review and comment on them. The procedure preserved the authenticity of their experiences by ensuring that the narratives accurately reflected their viewpoints and clarified any potential misunderstandings.

f. Write Participants' Stories

The difficulties encountered and the adaption strategies used by the teachers in this unique educational environment were detailed in a thorough narrative. The main hurdles, language barriers, were highlighted in this story, along with the methods the teachers employed to overcome them.

g. Validate The Report Accuracy

To guarantee truth and authenticity, the final narratives were verified by comparing them to the original reports and getting participant confirmation. To find any inconsistencies or errors, the written narratives and the raw interview data were cross-checked during the validation phase. This approach strengthened the collaborative nature of the research while also guaranteeing that the narratives accurately reflected their experiences. The study maintained its findings as highly credible and trustworthy by taking into account participant feedback and confirming that it matched the original narratives.

Using a narrative inquiry methodology, the study revealed the challenges participants encountered and how they adapted to a cross-cultural setting. The primary limitation of this research is its reliance on subjective narrative data, which is influenced by the individual experiences and interpretations of each participant. However, this study is expected to make significant contributions to the development of English teaching practices in short-term overseas programs through a systematic methodology and thematic analysis.

4. Discussion

Several difficulties can impact the teaching and learning process while teaching a language in an international short-term program. Observations suggest that many pre-service English teachers tend to focus on course delivery and instructional strategies. However, they often struggle with language barriers, varying student proficiency levels, and effective classroom management. Students in this program come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, which can make classroom dynamics even more complex. As a result, this section will cover the main obstacles that pre-service English teachers encounter in short-term, worldwide programs, as well as how they overcome them.

4.1 Language Barriers

One of the biggest obstacles during the brief international teaching program was language. The goal of international teaching programmes is to facilitate knowledge sharing by bridging linguistic and cultural divides. However, instructors frequently face specific challenges while navigating such diverse environments. Instruction was complex for teachers to express. This frequently resulted in misconceptions that needed further clarification and repeated explanations. Thai students were fluent in Thai and spoke Siamese or Pattani Malay, which is distinct from Malaysian Malay, with relatively limited ability in other languages. When teachers and students lacked a common language to communicate effectively, this linguistic variation added complexity. Following an article by Husein (2020) about the Malay-Muslim conflict in southern Thailand, which prohibited the use of minority languages in government offices and replaced them with Thai as the national language, one respondent claimed that Malay was beginning to decline, leading to a loss of the right to speak Malay.

Teachers employed a variety of techniques to overcome this obstacle, including the use of gestures, demonstrations, and visual aids. By employing visual aids such as pictures and music to enhance the learning process, teachers make their teaching strategies more engaging. This approach proved successful in increasing student comprehension and closing the communication gap. Clarity was further ensured by

the use of visual aids, particularly for individuals with limited proficiency in English. Additionally, teachers maintain student involvement and reduce uncertainty by taking a patient and flexible approach. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, as presented in Arshad and Chen (2009), which highlights the significance of language as a mediating instrument in the learning process, is consistent with this difficulty. Teachers can effectively support students' learning and enable them to interact with the material despite language barriers by implementing communication-supporting tactics. In addition to enhancing the teaching process, this focus enables educators to advance their careers by developing innovative teaching strategies and refining their communication skills.

Pre-service teachers also help students overcome these language challenges. To assist their peers, students who comprehend the teacher's explanations better frequently translate the content, either in person or verbally. As stated by Bandura's Social Learning Theory, this cooperation is beneficial. In addition to first-hand experience, people can also learn by watching others and the results of their activities. Because students can assist and learn from one another, this supports the idea that student collaboration can improve learning. This approach emphasizes the importance of social interaction and observation in the learning process. Better-understood students serve as role models or mentors for their peers, which accelerates learning and reduces communication barriers. Students with higher levels of English proficiency can actively engage in the learning process with this approach. Additionally, it boosts students' sense of support for one another and raises their confidence and engagement in the classroom. Teachers' and students' experiences overcoming language barriers underscore the importance of ongoing modification in teaching. In addition to addressing current classroom issues, pre-service teachers who become more proficient in using interactive and visual aids also contribute to the creation of inclusive and effective teaching practices. These initiatives also promote intercultural understanding, laying the groundwork for stronger international ties through education. An enhanced perspective benefits educators and learners by preparing them to succeed in increasingly varied and linked situations.

4.2 Diverse Proficiency Levels

Another issue is managing a classroom full of students with different skill levels. This problem frequently occurs in diverse classrooms, particularly in global contexts where students' prior English exposure and educational experiences vary significantly. To ensure that no student feels left behind in the learning process, it is essential to address these variances effectively. While some students struggle with basic concepts, others grasp them quickly and possess advanced English skills. It is challenging to establish a learning environment that benefits every student equally because of this variability. However, many students still need to learn the fundamentals of English first.

Teachers use differentiated instruction, which modifies content to accommodate varying competency levels and scaffolding tactics. Tiered assignments, for instance, allow more experienced students to take on increasingly tricky work while novices focus on fundamental skills. All students can actively participate without feeling overburdened or disengaged due to these tactics. Simple technological tools, such as instructional games or visual presentations, can also improve understanding gaps and increase participation from students with varying skill levels. Additionally, teachers advise students who speak English sufficiently to work together to support their less proficient classmates. These methods align with Arshad and Chen's (2009) statement about Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, which emphasizes the importance of individualized support in helping students reach their full potential. Through tailored instruction and peer collaboration, educators can create an environment where learners of all skill levels can participate actively and gradually advance their abilities. Interactive teaching strategies help to keep the classroom lively while encouraging diversity and group projects.

In addition, pre-service teachers organize English camps on the beach, where they not only teach English formally but also share learning tips, exchange experiences, and provide mini-games to increase students' motivation to learn English. This interactive approach, as noted by Malikovna et al. (2022), has been consistently linked to positive learning outcomes, including increased attention, interest in the subject matter, and enjoyment during the learning process. As a

result, Thai students can easily absorb and remember what is taught. Pre-service teachers also improve students' language skills through various creative and interactive activities. For example, as part of cultural arts learning, students are invited to make *sasirangan*. This also helps them improve their communication skills by speaking and working together. Learning activities also play a *tarbang* role. This means that students not only observe traditional arts but are also engaged in language activities, such as listening to instructions, understanding terminology, and actively participating in discussions during practice.

These activities are designed to provide students with a comprehensive and engaging learning experience. Teachers enhance language learning and foster an understanding of cultural diversity by integrating cultural components and practical exercises. In addition to making learning more enjoyable, these integrated tactics help students develop collaborative attitudes and learning abilities.

4.3 Overcoming Classroom Dynamics

Another problem for teachers is managing classroom dynamics in crowded settings, particularly in short-term international teaching programs. As explained by Achilles (1999), the size of the class has a direct impact on the quality of instruction and learning, with larger classrooms often hindering communication between teachers and students. In specific settings, not every student may be adequately reached by the teacher's voice and presence, which can impair participation and comprehension. Since teachers often struggle to meet the individual needs of each student and keep them actively engaged, packed classrooms limit opportunities for meaningful interaction. This makes it challenging to provide individualized attention. There is also little interaction between teachers and students due to crowded classrooms. As a result, it isn't easy to gauge how well each student has understood the material being taught. These restrictions frequently lead to a passive learning environment and decreased participation. Using a mini microphone in class is a straightforward but efficient solution to this problem. Teachers can ensure that all students, including those seated in the back of the class, can hear their directions and explanations using a mini microphone.

Pre-service teachers in Southern Thailand must refine their teaching strategies to ensure that all students maximize their learning potential in their crowded classrooms. Leveraging technology to support learning is one way to do this. With digital tools like projectors and smart TVs, teachers can deliver lessons more effectively. This technology allows the delivery of information that was previously limited by time and space to be done more systematically and engagingly. Teachers can make the material more accessible to students with diverse learning styles by using visual presentations, learning videos, or other interactive media.

Mayer (2006) developed the theory of Multimedia Learning, which posits that people learn more effectively when information is presented through a combination of visuals and text rather than just text. This is based on the idea that visualization helps open additional cognitive channels, allowing for further data processing. For example, students can visualize abstract concepts that are difficult to understand through verbal explanations by using graphics or videos. In such situations, technologies such as smart TVs can be used to display relevant interactive videos or simulations, while projectors can be used to display well-crafted presentation slides. With digital aids, teachers can engage students by incorporating multimedia elements such as animation and sound.

5. Conclusion

Considering the difficulties faced by pre-service English teachers in short-term foreign teaching programs, such as large class sizes, varying levels of competence, and language barriers. The primary solution to these problems was found by incorporating effective adaptation techniques, including the use of multimedia technology, differentiated training, and the creation of a collaborative learning environment. Based on the discussion above, researchers emphasize the value of pre-program planning and flexible teaching strategies to enhance instruction in cross-cultural settings. Teachers can establish a more effective and inclusive learning environment, helping students better connect with the material and meet their learning objectives, by addressing these issues with customized approaches.

Suggestion

It is crucial to emphasize that the difficulties encountered in short-term foreign education programs are closely related to the methods employed to resolve them. To optimize learning outcomes for every student, adaptation strategies such as cultural competency, multimedia tools, and differentiated instruction should be used in conjunction with direct teaching strategies, including scaffolding, peer collaboration, and effective classroom management techniques. Further research is needed to investigate the underlying causes of the remarkably low level of English proficiency among Thai students thoroughly. For a thorough understanding of the problem and the identification of viable solutions, this study should examine a range of potential impacts, including the constraints of the educational system, cultural variables, teaching styles, and resource availability. Incorporating social and cultural adaptation tactics into teaching practices is essential for teachers participating in future foreign programs, as it can encourage students' participation and sense of inclusion. Teachers can better prepare for the dynamic and frequently challenging circumstances of short-term overseas teaching programs by focusing on these principles, which will ultimately lead to more successful teaching and learning experiences.

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