

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AS PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN SEA-TEACHER PROGRAM

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Abstract: This study explores the multifaceted experiences of pre-service English teachers participating in the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) SEA-Teacher program, an international practicum designed to foster pedagogical and intercultural competence. Amidst the growing internationalization of education, understanding the transformative impact of such immersive programs is crucial for developing globally competent educators. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research conducted in-depth interviews and document analysis with three participants from universities in Indonesia and the Philippines who completed their practicum in Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Findings reveal a significant and consistent adaptation of pedagogical skills, with participants converging on student-centered, interactive, and communicative strategies as a necessary response to diverse educational contexts. The primary challenges identified notably language barriers and cultural differences in classroom dynamics functioned as powerful catalysts for professional growth rather than mere obstacles. Participants navigated these hurdles by employing adaptive communication techniques, seeking mentorship, and engaging in deep cultural immersion. This process cultivated enhanced intercultural competence, marked by a significant development in adaptability, patience, and cultural sensitivity. The study concludes that the SEA-Teacher program is a transformative experience, where the interplay of immersive challenges and active reflection forges resilient, empathetic, and culturally responsive future educators, affirming the profound value of international practicums in modern teacher education.

Keywords: SEA-Teacher Program, International Practicum, Pre-service English Teachers, Pedagogical Competence, Intercultural Competence

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has profoundly internationalized education, leading to an expanding number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in institutions worldwide. In this context, international collaboration is increasingly recognized as a vital component in fostering global understanding and equipping future educators with diverse pedagogical strategies and adaptability. International teaching practicums provide pre-service teachers with invaluable opportunities to connect theory with practice in real-world environments. As demonstrated in a comprehensive study of Turkish pre-service teachers' experiences in the United States, such structured international programs foster significant and interconnected development, enhancing not only professional competencies like pedagogical techniques but also crucial personal attributes such as confidence, adaptability, and a more profound global awareness (Ateskan, 2016).

One such initiative is the Southeast Asian Minister of Education Organization (SEAMEO) SEA-Teacher program, a regional intergovernmental effort established to promote cooperation in education, science, and culture (Asti, 2021). Since 2014, the program has enabled undergraduate students, typically in their fourth year, to gain cross-cultural teaching experience through a one-month international internship.

The program's core objective is to immerse aspiring teachers in different cultural contexts, enhancing their multicultural awareness, intercultural communication skills, and overall pedagogical competence. This experience is critical, as effective communication in English is not only a key professional skill but also a vehicle for personal development and intercultural exchange. This research aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), by contributing to the enhancement of higher education and the global partnership for sustainable development through shared knowledge and expertise (SDGs Report, 2023).

This study focuses on the experiences of pre-service English teachers from Indonesia and the Philippines within the SEA-Teacher program. By exploring their pedagogical adaptations, the challenges they navigated, and the development of their intercultural competence, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the transformative impact of such international practicums on the next generation of educators. However, despite the existing body of knowledge, a clear research gap remains. There is a need for in-depth qualitative studies that holistically investigate how pedagogical adaptation, intercultural competence, and challenge navigation are interconnected within the unique context of the SEA-Teacher program for English majors. While previous studies have identified common challenges (Ulla, 2016), a deeper exploration of the specific, adaptive pedagogical strategies that students use to foster inclusive learning environments is warranted. This study aims to fill that gap by providing rich, qualitative insights into the lived experiences of participants, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their professional and personal growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Intercultural Adaptation Theory

This theory, prominently articulated by Ngo Cong-Lem (2019) in "Factors Affecting the Intercultural Adaptation Process of International Students: A Case Study of Vietnamese Postgraduate Students at a Tertiary Institution in Taiwan" posits that individuals undergo a process of adaptation when immersed in a new cultural environment, facing challenges like language barriers, differential pedagogical approaches, academic pressure, and homesickness. Also, research by Ward et al. (2001) in "The Psychology of Culture Shock," states that the intercultural adaptation process involves stages such as culture shock, adjustment, and integration, with influencing factors including individual characteristics, social support, and cultural distance. This framework will be used to analyze how the subjects navigate the challenges of adapting to a new cultural context while participating in the SEA-Teacher program. This is demonstrated in recent studies where pre-service teachers experience challenges like classroom management and a "Tension between vision and reality," which function as a form of culture shock that they must navigate and adjust to (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023).

2.2. Experiential Learning Theory

Grounded in Kolb's (2014) seminal work, "Experiential Learning," this theory is actualized through reflective practice, a process where educators consider their experiences, learn from the outcomes, and plan for future improvements, which serves as the primary engine for professional growth (Machost & Stains, 2023). This framework will be utilized to understand how the subject learns and grows through their diverse experiences in the SEA-Teacher program, including teaching, cultural immersion, and participation in SDG initiatives.

2.3. Transformative Learning Theory

Originally developed by Jack Mezirow, this theory posits that adult learning is a process of changing one's frames of reference through critical reflection on assumptions (Mezirow, 1996). It suggests that a "disorienting dilemma," such as navigating an unfamiliar classroom, can challenge pre-existing beliefs and foster profound growth through critical reflection, a framework explicitly used to analyze the challenges faced by pre-service EFL teachers (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023). By creating an environment where individuals feel safe to express their ideas and take risks, psychological safety fosters social support, encourages exploration of new perspectives, and facilitates critical reflection. These transformative learning processes, in turn, contribute to the development of new skills, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize transformative learning outcomes (Dirkx, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). This framework will be employed to explore the potential for transformative learning within the SEA-Teacher program, examining how the experience may challenge the subject's perspectives and foster personal growth.

2.4. Global Citizenship Theory

This theory, as discussed in Banks' (2010) work, emphasizes the development of individuals who are aware of and engaged in global issues, value diversity, and are committed to social justice and sustainability. Recent research frames the experience as a process that "strives to deepen cross-cultural understanding" and highlights the need for robust teacher training to prepare globally-minded educators (Saperstein, 2020). This framework will be used to analyze how the SEA-Teacher program contributes to the development of global citizenship in the subject, particularly through their involvement in SDG-related initiatives.

2.5 Previous of Related Research Findings

The literature confirms that pedagogical skill development is a core outcome of international teaching practicums. A successful practicum significantly enhances classroom management skills and helps construct a professional identity (Karsli & Yağiz, 2022), preparing educators for a globalized world. The cultural context profoundly shapes language teaching, demanding that educators develop cultural

intelligence and culturally responsive practices to adapt effectively to different environments (Holliday, 1999; Gay, 2018).

Intercultural competence is increasingly essential for educators, defined as the ability to effectively engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This competence is not a static trait but an ongoing process that requires continuous self-reflection. Reflective practice is the cardinal process that drives this development, shaping teachers' personal and professional growth by influencing their beliefs and attitudes toward language education (Karsli & Yağız, 2022). It serves as the crucial link between theoretical knowledge and practical application, allowing teachers to systematically analyze their experiences to improve future teaching (Farrell, 2019).

Previous research on the SEA-Teacher program confirms its success, indicating that it significantly improves participants' confidence, adaptability, and use of interactive, student-centered teaching methods. While participants commonly face challenges such as language barriers and cultural adjustment, the experience is consistently described as transformative, enriching their teaching skills and cultural horizons.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research applied a qualitative research design, specifically taking on a case study approach. This method is chosen because it aims to analyze the phenomenon of in-depth knowledge about the student experiences of pre-service teachers. The primary reason for utilizing qualitative research is its focus on subjects lived experiences. As stated by Yuyun (2025), the case study method explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case themes.

This research conducted online, primarily through the interviews online and one in-person and the second data collection through documents analysis. The subjects for this study are the international exchange students who are participated in SEA-Teacher program from SEAMEO. Subjects' selection was based on specific criteria needed for the study based on their direct experience with the phenomenon under study (Campbell et al., 2020; Dawson, 2019).

Supporting reliable secondary data was incorporated from relevant indexed journals in SINTA (Science and Technology Index) and Scopus contributing to education (Ahmad & Muslimah, 2021).

Table 1.1 List of Subjects

No	Initial	Subject home university	Subject host university
1	DS	University of Mindanao Tagum College	Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari
2	DA	University of Mindanao Tagum College	Dong Thap University
3	FH	Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari	University of Mindanao Tagum College

Asrulla et al (2023) elucidated that purposive sampling was employed to identify specialized respondents satisfying predetermined criteria. The subjects in this

research were three students from Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari (UNISKA) and University of Mindanao Tagum College (UMTC) who joined SEA-TEACHER program. All three subjects were selected to seek to explore, explain, or describe what is happening within a smaller group of people or objects (Dawson, 2019). Qualitative researchers do this because they believe data from the smaller group might provide insights into the behavior or situation of the broader research population.

Data collection primarily executed through structured interviews, conducted both virtually via Zoom and in-person to accommodate subjects across different geographical locations. The interview questions were specifically designed to elicit detailed narratives about the participants' pedagogical skill development, the educational challenges they faced, and their growth in intercultural competence. This primary data was supplemented by document analysis, which involved examining two types of materials: personal documents, such as reflective journals and portfolios, and official program documents, like SEA-Teacher guidebooks, to provide additional context and depth.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, a data triangulation approach was employed, which involves using multiple data sources to build a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Anita B, 2021). The analysis process was conducted in three phases. In the initial phase, data from in-depth interviews was transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify emergent patterns. Subsequently, personal and official program documents were analyzed to provide contextual depth. In the final phase, findings from both sources were synthesized, interpreted within the study's theoretical frameworks, and cross-verified to ensure a robust and nuanced analysis.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the analysis of data collected through the Interviews data, the personal documents (online blogs/portfolios) of the subjects and the program documents (SEA-Teacher Guideline). The findings are organized thematically, corresponding to the research questions, and are supported by direct insights from the subjects' experiences.

4.1 Pedagogical Skill Development and Adaptation

4.1.1 Adapting Teaching Strategies to Local Contexts

All three subjects explicitly mentioned that adapting their teaching methods to suit the host country's education system and student needs. DS, a subject from the Philippines who taught English to Grades 10 and 11 in Indonesia, emphasized a "student-centered approach" and utilized "group activities, interactive discussions, and visual aids". She noted adapting to the "Indonesian education system," which was "different from what I was used to," highlighting the need for flexibility in her teaching methods.

Similarly, DA, a subject from the Philippines teaching Grade 10 English in Vietnam, employed "interactive activities, group discussions, and multimedia presentations" with a focus on "student engagement". He learned to "adjust my teaching style to suit the local context" of the Vietnamese curriculum and teaching methodologies.

FH, a subject from Indonesia teaching various grades in the Philippines, utilized

"games, songs, and interactive activities" to make learning enjoyable, focusing on a "communicative approach". He adapted to the "Philippine education system and curriculum" and learned to be "creative and resourceful" with potentially limited materials.

4.1.2 Classroom Management in Diverse Settings

Subjects also encountered challenges related to classroom management that required adaptive strategies. DA specifically noted difficulties with "classroom management due to large class sizes" in Vietnam. FH observed "cultural differences in classroom discipline and student participation" in the Philippines, which necessitated adjustments in his approach. One subject (FH) also highlighted the need to "enhance our vocal and classroom management to ensure the quality" when teaching large classes of "45 students". These observations highlight the need for pre-service teachers to develop flexible and culturally sensitive classroom management techniques.

4.2 Educational Challenges and Navigation Strategies

4.2.1 Overcoming Language Barriers

A significant and consistently reported challenge across all subjects was the language barrier. DS identified a "significant language barrier" where students sometimes struggled with English in Indonesia. DA noted the "language barrier was a primary hurdle," with students frequently using the local language in Vietnam. FH also found "communication with students and locals was challenging due to the language barrier" in the Philippines. To navigate these, subjects consistently employed strategies such as "visual aids, gestures, and simplified language". FH also specifically mentioned using "Google Translate" to facilitate communication. One subject (DA) also noted the challenge of "having the expertise mixed up" when teaching English as a Science major, compounded by the language barrier.

A core objective of the SEA-Teacher program is to encourage the practice and improvement of English skills, with English designated as the universal communication language for all program activities (SEAMEO, 2025; UAD, 2025; UKI, 2019). Subjects' experiences of encountering and navigating language barriers, and their consistent use of English (alongside adaptive communication strategies like visuals and simplified language), directly illustrate their engagement with this objective. One subject (DS) explicitly stated, "Yes, I used a simple language so I can make the students understand me and also I learn some local Indonesian language".

4.2.2 Navigating Cultural Differences in the Classroom

Beyond language, subjects encountered cultural differences that impacted their teaching. DS noted "cultural differences in learning styles and classroom dynamics" in Indonesia. DA and FH observed "cultural differences in student behavior and expectations" in Vietnam and the Philippines, respectively. Their navigation strategies involved seeking advice from "mentor teachers and local colleagues" and actively "embracing the local culture" to better understand and respond to these nuances.

Official documents highlight the importance of host universities providing mentors and sending universities assisting with lesson plans and curriculum

discussions (UKI, 2019; UAD, 2025). Subjects' accounts of seeking advice from "mentor teachers and local colleagues" indicate that these support structures, as outlined in program guidelines, were indeed utilized and contributed to their ability to navigate challenges and adapt. One subject (DA) specifically mentioned, "My English supervisor and Cooperating teacher were very supportive and were very hands-on especially in providing feedback during the lesson planning phase and demo teaching".

4.2.3 Addressing Diverse Student Needs

Subjects also described specific instances of addressing individual student needs. One subject (DA) recounted a time a student struggled to express thoughts due to shyness; the teacher approached him, allowed whispering, and later addressed the class about confidence and refraining from laughing at classmates' mistakes, leading to improved participation. Another subject (FH) handled students with reading difficulties by ensuring they used a tutoring program. All subjects emphasized understanding students' needs and incorporating activities that catered to them, including engaging less attentive students by having them read or complimenting their efforts to show inclusion.

This study found that subjects were proactive in addressing diverse student needs to foster an inclusive environment. They employed specific strategies, such as providing one-on-one encouragement to shy students and ensuring those with reading difficulties received proper support. By emphasizing understanding and catering to individual needs, the subjects demonstrated a commitment to creating a supportive and engaging classroom for all learners.

4.2.4 Personal Adjustment and Homesickness

The international practicum also presented personal challenges that required coping strategies. All subjects mentioned "cultural adjustment" and "homesickness" as significant hurdles. FH specifically noted "adjusting to new food and environment". These personal factors indicate the emotional and psychological demands of the international experience, which could indirectly impact their teaching focus. Subjects coped by collaborating with local teachers and embracing the local culture.

4.3 Intercultural Competence and Reflective Practice

4.3.1 Deep Cultural Immersion and Awareness

All subjects engaged deeply with the local culture of their host countries. DS experienced "rich cultural immersion," learning about "Indonesian traditions, values, and daily life" through local markets, food, and cultural events. DA immersed himself in "Vietnamese culture," learning about "local customs, traditions, and values" through participation in local events and trying local food. FH experienced deep immersion in "Philippine culture," participating in "local festivals, visiting temples, and learning basic local phrases". This direct engagement consistently led to a "deeper understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity" and a "broader perspective on cultural diversity".

This research found that subjects also faced personal challenges, including cultural adjustment and homesickness, which presented emotional and psychological demands. They managed these hurdles by collaborating with local teachers and

embracing the local culture.

4.3.2 Cultivating Patience, Adaptability, and Cultural Sensitivity

Through their experiences, subjects explicitly reflected on developing key intercultural attributes. DS emphasized the importance of "patience, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity". DA recognized the importance of "cultural sensitivity and adaptability". FH noted that the experience developed his "patience and understanding". These reflections indicate a conscious development of intercultural competence.

Their reflections on cultivating patience, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity directly demonstrate the achievement of these program goals. The challenges they faced, such as cultural adjustment and homesickness (Monteverde, 2025), while difficult, also served as catalysts for developing the adaptability the program aims to foster.

In this section researcher found that through their experiences, subjects explicitly reflected on their personal growth, identifying the development of key intercultural attributes. They recognized an increase in their patience, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity, indicating a conscious development of intercultural competence.

4.3.3 Transformative Personal and Professional Growth

The subjects consistently described their SEA-Teacher journey as profoundly impactful. DS explicitly stated that "reflecting on my experiences... allowed me to grow both personally and professionally," describing her journey as "transformative". DA reflected that "reflecting on my experiences helped me grow as an educator and as an individual," also describing his journey as "transformative". FH described his experience as "life-changing," and his blog posts themselves served as a form of reflective practice, where he explicitly mentioned "reflecting on my teaching methods" and his "personal growth throughout the journey". One subject (DS) also stated, "Yes, I try to be better everyday to teach because now I understand being a teacher means you should fit for your students not students should fit for you". Another (DA) noted, "Everything that I learned from those experiences allowed me to reevaluate myself, and apply those suggestions to effectively deliver a conducive teaching and learning process to my students". These accounts highlight the program's role in fostering significant personal and professional development beyond just the acquisition of teaching skills.

The subjects consistently described their SEA-Teacher journey as a profoundly transformative and life-changing experience that fostered significant personal and professional growth. Through active reflection on their teaching methods and experiences, they reevaluated their perspectives as educators. This led to a crucial shift in understanding, recognizing that a teacher must adapt to their students' needs. These accounts highlight that the program's impact extends far beyond skill acquisition, promoting deep personal and professional developments.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings reveal that the SEA-Teacher program serves as a powerful catalyst for professional and personal growth, aligning with theories of experiential and transformative learning. The educational challenges encountered by the participants, particularly the language barrier and cultural differences in the classroom, functioned as "disorienting dilemmas" that prompted a critical re-evaluation of their pre-existing assumptions about teaching. This process aligns with Mezirow's (1996) theory of transformative learning. The consistent shift toward student-centered and interactive pedagogies was not merely a stylistic choice but a necessary adaptation to overcome these dilemmas. This cycle of experiencing a challenge, reflecting on its meaning, and actively experimenting with new strategies exemplifies Kolb's (2014) experiential learning cycle, which is fundamentally driven by reflective practice (Machost & Stains, 2023).

The nature of these pedagogical adaptations can be understood with greater nuance through the framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), particularly in light of recent research on the challenges of applying this theory in diverse, international higher education settings (Park, 2025). CRP is built on three core tenets: fostering academic success, developing cultural competence, and cultivating critical consciousness. Analyzing the participants' experiences through this more structured framework reveals a pragmatic and context-specific application of these principles.

The pre-service teachers' actions align strongly with the first two tenets of CRP. Their shift to interactive, game-based, and student-centered strategies was a direct and successful effort to build a bridge to their students' cultural and learning backgrounds, demonstrating cultural competence in practice. This focus on making the classroom function effectively across cultures aligns with Park's (2025) finding that educators in international settings are most readily drawn to this tenet. Concurrently, by adapting their methods to ensure students could understand and engage for example, by using simplified language and seeking support from mentors they took direct responsibility for student learning, thereby promoting academic success. Their collaboration with local cooperating teachers exemplifies a model of shared responsibility for student success, another key element highlighted in contemporary discussions of CRP (Park, 2025).

The third tenet of CRP, critical consciousness, which involves challenging societal inequities and power structures, presents a more complex picture. Park (2025) finds that educators in international contexts are often hesitant to engage this tenet, given the complexity of local social issues and their position as temporary cultural outsiders. It is logical to conclude that the SEA-Teacher participants, during a one-month practicum, pragmatically focused on effective classroom practice (tenets 1 and 2) rather than attempting a deep critique of the host country's educational or social systems. This should not be viewed as a shortcoming, but rather as a logical and contextually appropriate limitation of a short-term international immersion experience.

In synthesis, the SEA-Teacher program facilitates a powerful, pragmatic application of culturally responsive principles. The participants' journey demonstrates the development of a localized form of CRP that prioritizes intercultural competence and immediate academic success, reflecting the realities and constraints of their practicum. This journey prepares them to be more resilient, empathetic, and globally-minded educators, capable of thriving in diverse

classrooms as envisioned by Global Citizenship Education (Saperstein, 2020), even if it does not encompass the full theoretical spectrum of CRP as originally conceived in a different national and social context.

To build on the findings and limitations of this study, future research should pursue several key avenues to enrich the understanding of international teaching practicums. A valuable direction would be to conduct longitudinal studies that follow SEA-Teacher alumni into their first few years of professional teaching to assess the long-term impact on their classroom practices and sustained intercultural competence. To address the limitation of the small sample size, large-scale quantitative or mixed-methods research could identify statistically significant trends across a more diverse cohort, combining broad survey data with in-depth interviews for both breadth and depth. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of experiences across different host countries could isolate how specific national and local contextual factors shape the practicum experience. Finally, investigating the perspectives of host country mentor teachers would provide a crucial, complementary viewpoint, offering insights from the host's perspective to create better support systems for both mentors and the pre-service teachers they supervise.

6. CONCLUSION

The researcher concludes that the SEAMEO SEA-Teacher program is a transformative experience for pre-service teachers. When placed in unfamiliar educational environments, subjects were compelled to move beyond theory and actively adapt their teaching skills. A key finding was the consistent shift towards student-centered, interactive strategies like group activities and games as a necessary response to engage learners across cultural and linguistic divides. This hands-on process of adaptation marks a significant leap in professional competence, fostering a flexible and resourceful teaching approach suited for diverse, real-world classrooms (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008).

The subjects' journey was consistently marked by a trio of challenges: language barriers, cultural differences, and personal adjustments. However, these hurdles proved to be powerful catalysts for growth. By navigating these difficulties through adaptive strategies and cultural immersion, subjects developed a profound empathy for the language learner's perspective. This combination of intense experience and active reflection created a transformative learning process, forging more resilient, culturally sensitive, and self-aware educators. Ultimately, this study affirms that immersive international practicums are an invaluable component in developing the core competencies of an effective 21st-century teacher.

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