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Teaching Internship Experiences and Challenges in a Cross-Cultural Context: A Reflection on the SEA-Teacher Program

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 21 January 2026</p> <p>Revised: 10 May 2026</p> <p>Accepted: 11 May 2026</p>	<p>This article reflects the teaching internship experiences and challenges of a pre-service teacher participating in the SEA-Teacher program in the Philippines. This international teaching internship provide not only valuable opportunities to develop cultural sensitivity and global awareness, but also present challenges regarding classroom communication, unfamiliar learning environments, and pedagogical adaptation. Using a reflective descriptive approach, this study analyzes personal teaching experiences, classroom interactions, and cultural adjustments. Data were systematically collected through reflective writing, lesson plans, and program reports, and subsequently evaluated using reflective descriptive analysis. The findings reveal that navigating a cross-cultural educational context requires continuous adaptation and adjustment to the instructional routines and communication strategies in order to accommodate diverse learning expectations and manage large classes. To overcome these challenges, motivational and interactive activities with student-centered learning approaches were implemented. Finally, the study concludes that learning experience in international settings significantly develop pedagogical competence, professional resilience, and teacher identity. International teaching internship programs are therefore highly recommended as integral components of EFL teacher education.</p> <p>How to Cite: Sabariah, S., & Hidayat, A. (2026). Teaching Internship Experiences and Challenges in a Cross-Cultural Context: A Reflection on the SEA-Teacher Program. <i>ASPIRATION: Jurnal Studi Pengabdian Masyarakat Indonesia</i>, 2(1), 22-28. https://doi.org/10.66272/27zn1r28</p>
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1. INTRODUCTION

The preparation of pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers requires teaching internship that meaningfully connects the theoretical knowledge with the classroom application. Teaching internship is an essential part of teacher education because it provides pre-service teachers first hand opportunities to apply pedagogical theories, teaching strategies, and classroom management skills in authentic settings.

Through this experience, pre-service teachers learn how to design the lesson plans, manage classroom activities, and interact with students more effectively. Zeichner (2020) explains that teaching internship plays an important role in shaping teachers' professional identify from the pre-service stage, as it helps pre-service teachers develop professional values, a sense of responsibility, and appropriate teaching norms.

Likewise, Farrell (2021) and Burns (2020) highlight that teaching experience encourages ongoing reflection on teaching internships, which supports the growth of pedagogical knowledge and professional competence. Overall, teaching internship provides a strong foundation for preparing EFL pre-service teachers to become reflective, capable, and adaptable educators.

In the context of global education, teaching internship has increasingly moved toward cross-cultural and international experiences. Teaching internship conducted in multicultural



environments offers pre-service teachers valuable opportunities to develop an understanding of students' diverse cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and values, all of which influence the teaching and learning process. Through direct interaction with students from different cultures, pre-service teachers become more aware of how cultural diversity shapes classroom dynamics and educational expectations.

Byram (2021) emphasizes that intercultural communicative competence is a crucial attribute for language teachers in the era of globalization, as language teaching cannot be separated from cultural understanding. In line with this view, cultural differences have been shown to influence classroom interaction patterns, learning expectations, and teacher-student relationships (Samovar et al., 2020; Deardorff, 2020). As a result, teachers are often required to adjust to unfamiliar classroom norms and negotiate different pedagogical expectations when teaching in multicultural settings.

Widodo (2022) further argues that EFL teachers working in international contexts need to demonstrate pedagogical flexibility and cultural sensitivity in order to create effective and inclusive learning environments. These competencies enable teachers to respond appropriately to students' needs while respecting cultural differences. Therefore, cross-cultural teaching internship should be viewed not only as a challenging experience but also as a meaningful professional learning opportunity that supports the personal and professional growth of pre-service teachers.

One of the programs that facilitates international teaching internship for education students is the SEA-Teacher program under the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO). This program is designed to provide cross-border teaching experiences within the Southeast Asian region as an effort to enhance the quality of pre-service teachers through authentic learning in an international context. Through participation in the SEA-Teacher program, pre-service EFL teachers are positioned as prospective professional educators who are responsible for planning the lessons, implementing instructional activities, managing classroom, and adapting to the educational systems and cultural contexts of host country. Widodo and Allamnakhrah (2020) argue that international teaching internship programs contribute significantly to the development of professional competence and global awareness among pre-service teachers.

In addition, teaching experiences encourage pre-service teachers to develop pedagogical reflection and professional attitudes, which are essential for long-term professional growth (Shafa et al., 2025; Rozimela et al., 2025). Therefore, the SEA-Teacher program provides a relevant and meaningful framework for examining EFL pre-service teachers' teaching internship experiences in an international setting.

Despite its numerous benefits, implementing teaching internship in an international context also presents various challenges for EFL pre-service teachers. Language barriers often become a major obstacle in classroom communication, particularly in explaining instructional materials and managing classroom interaction effectively. Moreover, differences in classroom culture, such as discipline patterns, level of students' participation, and expectation regarding the teacher's role, require pre-service teachers to adapt their teaching strategies and classroom management approaches. Farrell and Kennedy (2022) reveal that the main challenges faced by pre-service teachers in cross-cultural context include classroom management issues and difficulties in adapting instructional methods to unfamiliar learning environments. Similarly, Riyanti (2025) and Ulfa et al. (2024) emphasize that the ability to reflect critically and adapt pedagogical practices is crucial in addressing professional challenges encountered during teaching internship. However, these challenges constitute an important part of the professional learning process and contribute to the development of pedagogical and professional competence.

Based on the above discussion, it is important to examine in depth the teaching internship experiences and challenges of EFL pre-service teachers participating in the SEA-Teacher program. This article aims to describe the teaching experiences of EFL student during the participation in the SEA-Teacher program, identify challenges encountered in cross-cultural teaching contexts, and analyse the implications of these experiences for the development of pedagogical and professional competencies. This study expected to contribute to academic discourse in EFL teacher education

and serves as a reference for the development and evaluation of international teaching internship programs for prospective EFL teachers.

2. METHODS

This article employs a reflective descriptive approach to examine the author's teaching internship experience during participation in the SEA-Teacher program. This approach was selected because it enables critical reflection of lived teaching experiences and their connection to relevant pedagogical concepts and theories. Reflective practice is widely acknowledged as a fundamental component of teacher education, as it facilitates deeper understanding of classroom practice and supports the professional development of pre-service teachers (Farrell, 2021; Zeichner, 2020). Accordingly, this approach is considered appropriate for exploring teaching internship experiences and challenges in an international context.

The data presented in this article are from the author's personal experience as an EFL pre-service teacher who participated in the SEA-Teacher program. No external participants were involved, as the focus of the study is on individual professional reflection. The experiences examined include classroom teaching activities, interactions with students and mentor teachers, and the process of adapting to classroom culture and the educational system in the host country.

Data were collected through reflective writing and supporting documentation. Reflective writing consisted of written reflections produced during and after the teaching internship, focusing on teaching experiences, challenges, and pedagogical adaptations. Supporting documentation included lesson plans, SEA-Teacher program reports, and personal teaching notes related to classroom implementation. These data sources are commonly used in reflective academic studies to systematically document professional experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic reflective analysis. The analysis began with an in-depth reading of the reflective data to gain an overall understanding of the teaching experience, followed by the identification of key themes such as cultural differences, instructional adaptation, classroom management, and professional learning. These themes were then interpreted reflectively by linking the author's experiences to relevant theories and previous studies. This analytical process enables meaningful interpretation of professional learning derived from cross-cultural teaching internship (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Farrell, 2021).

To enhance the credibility of the reflection, empirical experiences were consistently connected with established literature and theoretical frameworks. This ensures that the reflection presented is analytically and academically rigorous.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Context of Teaching Internship Implementation

The teaching internship reflected was under SEAMEO SEA-Teacher Batch 11 and was conducted in the Philippines with the University of Batangas as the host university and Inosloban-Marawoy Integrated National High School as the teaching internship site. During the period of internship, the author was assigned to teach English to four classes of grade 10 students with 30 to 40 students each. Teaching responsibilities included four local teaching demonstrations and one final teaching demonstration, which required lesson planning, classroom implementation, and evaluation of students' learning outcomes. Prior to instructional practice, the author undertook three days of classroom observation to gain an initial understanding of the curriculum, instructional system, classroom routines, and students' learning characteristics.

Classroom observation was very important to shape author's subsequent teaching internships. Through the observation, the author identified notable differences between the Indonesian and Philippine educational contexts, especially in the curriculum, classroom management, and teacher-student interaction patterns. For example, classroom routines in the host school emphasized active verbal participation and collective responses, which is different

from the author's previous teaching experiences. These insights were essential to form instructional plans and prevent the unsuitable transfer of teaching strategies from the home context. As Zeichner (2020) suggests, observation enables pre-service teachers to develop contextual awareness and also align pedagogical decisions with classroom realities.

Furthermore, the observation stage also functioned as an initial reflective phase that supported smoother pedagogical adaptation. The author was better prepared to anticipate potential instructional challenges by understanding students' behavioural tendencies, participation styles, and classroom expectations in advance. This finding highlights that teaching context should be understood as a dynamic factor that directly influences pedagogical decision-making during teaching internship, not simply as background information.

3.2. Teaching Experiences in a Cross-Cultural Context

Cross-cultural element during the teaching internship provided valuable insights about the complexity of EFL instruction. One significant experience was adapting to differences in curriculum and routines in the host school. Teaching strategies that were effective in Indonesian school, could not be directly implemented in the host school in the Philippines without adjustment. This experience confirmed that pedagogical practice is context-dependent and must be continuously adapted to learners' environments. Richards (2021) emphasizes that effective language teaching requires sensitivity to contextual variables rather than reliance on fixed instructional methods.

Cultural differences also became a challenge, especially in communication and interaction patterns. Students demonstrated varied ways of responding to instructions, expressing opinions, and participating in learning activities. Some students were highly expressive and confident in classroom interaction, while others preferred collective or choral responses. These dynamic interactional patterns required the author to adjust communication strategies and reconsider assumptions about student engagement. This experience aligns with Byram's (2021) view that intercultural communicative competence in language teaching involves the knowledge of cultural differences and the ability to respond appropriately to those differences.

After sustaining the engagement in cross-cultural teaching, the author developed a deeper awareness that effective EFL instruction requires cultural sensitivity as an important element of pedagogical competence. Teaching was no longer perceived solely as the delivery of instructional content but as a process of negotiating meaning within culturally situated classroom practices. This shift in perspective represents an important stage in the author's professional learning as a pre-service teacher in an international context.

3.3. Challenges in Teaching Internship

The international teaching internship provided meaningful learning opportunities, but there were also challenges that required constant reflection and adjustment. One major challenge is variances in the culture and expectations of classroom learning. Participation amongst the students varied widely, some very engaged in what was happening around them and others needing considerable prompting to take part. This variation illustrated how embracing a culture of learning informs classroom dynamics and makes or breaks the effectiveness of instructional strategies (Samovar et al., 2020).

The next challenge was the author's initial lack of confidence when teaching in an unfamiliar pedagogical setting. The first days of teaching were filled with anxiety and confusion, especially in terms of controlling classroom activities and keeping the flow functioning well. In particular, their emotional obstacles impacted on instruction and classroom management. Through practice and reflection over time, however, the author began to develop a sense of greater confidence and control over instruction. Farrell (2021) notes that reflective engagement with teaching experiences is essential for fostering professional resilience and confidence among pre-service teachers.

Classroom management also became a persistent challenge due to the relatively large class size of 30 to 40 students. Managing these big classes required clear instructions, effective time management, and consistent classroom routines. Initial classroom management strategies were not always effective, prompting the author to revise instructional approaches. This finding supports Farrell and Kennedy's (2022) conclusion that classroom management is among the most common challenges faced by pre-service teachers in cross-cultural teaching contexts and requires experiential learning rather than purely theoretical preparation.

3.4. Instructional Strategies and Pedagogical Adaptation

In response to the challenges encountered, the author implemented various instructional strategies and pedagogical adaptations to enhance teaching effectiveness. One key strategy involved the use of motivational activities at the beginning of lessons to capture students' attention and increase learning readiness. These activities functioned as affective warm-ups that helped reduce student anxiety and create a positive learning atmosphere. As Dörnyei (2020) emphasizes, motivation plays a central role in successful language learning, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to the target language is limited.

Additionally, the author adopted a student-centered learning approach by incorporating game-based learning, group discussions, and interactive tasks. These strategies encouraged student participation and supported classroom management by actively engaging learners in instructional activities. Interactive learning also allowed the author to observe students' language use more closely and adjust instructional pacing accordingly. This approach reflects the principles of communicative language teaching, which emphasize meaningful interaction and learner engagement as central components of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2019).

Pedagogical adaptation was not limited to instructional techniques but also extended to classroom communication and teacher positioning. The author learned to adjust tone, instructional clarity, and feedback strategies to align with students' expectations and classroom norms. This adaptive process illustrates that pedagogical competence develops through continuous interaction between teaching experience, reflection, and contextual understanding.

3.5. Development of Pedagogical and Professional Competence

This internship helped shape pedagogical competence for the author. The author used this direct access of a classroom to hone the ability to plan lessons, deliver instruction, manage a classroom and measure student comprehension. Reflection allowed the author to critically assess her pedagogical planning and then decide when adaptations were appropriate. These experiences show that pedagogical skills are not stable, but evolve gradually based on reflective teaching.

From a professional perspective, teaching in an international context fostered greater awareness of professional responsibility, ethical conduct, and cultural sensitivity. The author became more conscious of the teacher's role as a facilitator of learning and a cultural mediator in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. This experience strengthened the author's professional identity as a future EFL teacher who is better prepared to address challenges in diverse educational contexts. These findings support Farrell's (2021) and Zeichner's (2020) arguments regarding the role of teaching internship in professional identity formation.

3.6. Meaningful Experiences and Personal Reflection

One of the most meaningful aspects of the teaching internship was experiencing the role of a teacher with real responsibility for students' learning. Unlike simulated teaching activities, the SEA-Teacher program required the author to make immediate instructional decisions that directly affected students' engagement and understanding. This responsibility fostered a strong sense of professional commitment and accountability, which are essential attributes of effective teachers.

The teaching internship also facilitated a personal transformation in the author's self-perception as a teacher. Initial feelings of uncertainty gradually shifted toward greater self-

assurance as teaching experience accumulated. Reflective practice played a crucial role in this transformation, enabling the author to recognize both strengths and areas for improvement. This reflective awareness contributed to more confident instructional decision-making and professional growth.

Overall, these meaningful experiences indicate that teaching internship functions not only as pedagogical training but also as a formative process in shaping professional identity. Through sustained reflection and engagement in real classroom contexts, the author developed a more mature understanding of teaching as a complex, reflective, and context-sensitive professional practice.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching internship in the SEA-Teacher program provides meaningful professional learning experiences for EFL pre-service teachers in international contexts. During the direct engagement of cross-cultural teaching environments, the author gained deeper understanding of the complexities of language teaching, especially in pedagogical adaptation, cultural sensitivity, and classroom management. Although various challenges were encountered, these challenges served as valuable learning opportunities that promoted reflective and adaptive teaching internships.

The findings of this reflective study indicate that teaching internship contributes significantly to the development of pedagogical and professional competencies, particularly in terms of lesson planning, instructional flexibility, classroom management, and professional identity formation. Therefore, international teaching internship programs such as SEA-Teacher should be continuously supported and developed as integral components of EFL teacher education. Future reflective studies are expected to further enrich understanding of pre-service teachers' professional learning in international teaching contexts.

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