



Breaking Barriers: Indonesian EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Challenges and Solutions in TEFL

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in Indonesia during their teaching practicum and the solutions they implemented to overcome these difficulties. Using a qualitative research approach with a narrative design, data were collected through observations, reflective teacher journals, and semi-structured interviews with ten pre-service teachers. The findings reveal three main challenges: pedagogical, motivational, and psychological barriers. Pedagogically, participants struggled to balance the complexity of the material with student engagement in heterogeneous classrooms. Motivational challenges included students' perceptions of English as irrelevant to their daily lives, leading to low engagement. Psychological barriers, such as fear of making mistakes and language anxiety, significantly hindered students' participation in speaking activities. To address these issues, pre-service teachers adopted strategies such as differentiated instruction, interactive teaching methods, and fostering a supportive classroom environment. These findings highlight the importance of comprehensive teacher training programs that equip pre-service teachers with practical teaching strategies and reflective practices. This study contributes to the growing body of research on teacher education and English language teaching by providing insights into effective pedagogical approaches to address classroom challenges in an EFL context.

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INTRODUCTION

English has developed into a global lingua franca used for various purposes, such as education, business and international communication (Rao 2019). More than 250 million people across the continent use English in their daily lives (Broughton et al., 2003). As the most widely spoken language in the world, English is an important tool for accessing new opportunities and knowledge in a global context (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). Countries where English is not

native, such as Japan, South Korea, and some European countries, have built English-focused learning environments to help their citizens compete internationally. In this context, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has become an important component of the global education system for cultivating effective communication skills among young people.

A key aspect to improving English language education lies in the preparation of teachers and pre-service teachers, those who are still in training before officially entering the teaching profession, as they play a vital role in the future of TEFL (Harmer, 2007). According to Ryan, Young, and Gauthier (2017), the pre-service teacher experience is a transformative process that requires the application of theory to practice and fosters the formation of professional identity in an often unfamiliar and intense practice environment. For pre-service teachers who have no previous teaching experience, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) presents new challenges that require adaptation to the local school environment, student behavior, and educational culture (Kim, 2017). These challenges are further complicated when pre-service teachers encounter cultural barriers, diverse student behaviors, and different educational systems, especially in the context of teaching abroad (Farrell, 2012). In Indonesia, pre-service teachers face similar difficulties, including limited teaching resources and lack of self-confidence, as noted by Lie (2007). Despite these challenges, such experiences also provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to expand their cultural awareness and develop more adaptive teaching competencies (Renandya & Widodo, 2016). Therefore, understanding these challenges is an important first step in formulating solutions that support pre-service teachers in enhancing their professional skills in the TEFL context (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

While many studies have explored the experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers in teaching English as a foreign language (Céleri et al., 2014; Phan & Nguyen, 2024; Setiadewi, 2019; Azizah et al., 2018; Nketsia & Carol, 2023), studies specifically addressing the challenges and solutions for prospective English teachers in Indonesia remain limited. Teaching English as a foreign language has unique characteristics in each country (Setiadewi, 2019), especially in Indonesia with its distinct cultural and social conditions. Even though learning English in Indonesia has become part of the national curriculum from primary to secondary school levels, its implementation is often faced with various challenges. These challenges include a lack of adequate teaching resources, limited teacher competence, as well as variations in student abilities due to diverse social, cultural and economic backgrounds (Lie, 2007). In addition, English in Indonesia has the status of a foreign language, which means its use is limited outside the classroom, so students have little opportunity to apply it in everyday life (Renandya, 2018). In the context of formal education, English language learning in Indonesia tends to focus on grammatical aspects and reading skills rather than speaking and listening skills. This is often criticized because it produces students who lack confidence in communicating verbally in English (Sulistiyo, 2016).

This research aims to explore the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in Indonesia in teaching English and examine the solutions they propose. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions.

1. What are the main challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in Indonesia in the Process of teaching English?
2. What solutions do pre-service teachers consider effective in addressing these challenges?

By analyzing these issues, the research aims to understand how these experiences influence their perceptions, professional readiness, and the development of their identity and adaptability as English educators. Furthermore, the study will highlight practical solutions that

can enhance their teaching practices, particularly in the context of Indonesia's unique cultural and linguistic landscape (Turunen & Touvila, 2012).

METHODS

This study used a qualitative method with a narrative research design, which was chosen because the main data focused on the experiences of participants. According to Clandinin and Connelly (as cited in Richards, 2011, p. 782), "Experience occurs narratively. Narrative research is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experiences must be studied narratively." This approach was considered effective for understanding experiences in depth, as narratives not only described events but also provided meaning and context to individual experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, narrative research allowed researchers to understand the personal and emotional dimensions of participants' experiences in reflective practice. To obtain comprehensive information, this study used three main data collection techniques: observation, teacher's diary, and in-depth interviews.

Observations were conducted to directly observe how participants reflected on their actions in real situations and how these reflections influenced decision-making in teaching. According to Creswell (2014), observation was an effective technique for capturing the dynamics of behavior and processes in a natural context. Next, participants wrote a teacher's diary or daily record that documented their personal reflections on their teaching experiences, challenges faced, strategies used, and lessons learned. In line with Schön's (1983) opinion, which emphasized the importance of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, this diary provided in-depth insights into participants' reflective processes. The third technique was in-depth interviews, which explored participants' experiences and perspectives in detail. According to Kvale (1996), in-depth interviews provided opportunities for participants to share their narratives freely, thus producing rich and meaningful data. With this combination of techniques, the study aimed to understand participants' experiences holistically, deeply, and contextually in their reflective practices.

The population of this study consisted of seventh-semester students from the English Language Education Program at a state university in North Sumatra. The sample included 10 participants (5 males and 5 females) who had completed a three-month teaching practicum (PPL) in both public and private secondary schools. Participants were selected through initial observation to ensure they were actively engaged in reflective teaching practices.

The data collection in this study was conducted through observation, teacher diaries, and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted during the first two weeks of the teaching practice program (PPL) to identify prospective teachers who demonstrated reflective practices in teaching. These observations focused on how participants managed the classroom, motivated students, and implemented teaching strategies. Data from observations were recorded systematically

To support the selection of participants who were relevant to the research objectives. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), observation in qualitative research helps ensure that the data obtained is relevant to the phenomenon being studied. In addition, teacher diaries were used to document participants' reflective experiences during teaching practice. Participants were asked to write one diary entry every week for three months of PPL. In this diary, they explained the challenges they faced, the strategies used to overcome them, and their reflections on the teaching results. The teacher diary format was adapted from Nurfaidah's research (2016), which emphasized the importance of documenting reflective experiences in teaching. As stated by

Creswell (2014), the use of diaries allows researchers to obtain in-depth data about participants' experiences.

Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted after participants completed the PPL program. Each interview lasted for 30 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian so that participants felt more comfortable sharing their experiences. These interviews aimed to explore the reflective experiences of prospective teachers, focusing on the challenges they faced in terms of teaching materials, student motivation, and classroom management, as well as the solutions implemented to overcome these challenges. This approach refers to the theory of reflection developed by Farrell (2012), which includes reflection in action, reflection on action, and reflection for action. To ensure the credibility of the data, the researcher used method triangulation by combining observation, teacher diary, and interviews. Member checks were conducted to ensure that the data obtained truly reflected the participants' experiences. In addition, consistency in data collection and analysis was maintained to maintain reliability, while triangulation helped minimize researcher bias.

After the data was collected, data analysis was carried out through three main stages based on the Miles and Huberman (1994) analysis model: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. In the data reduction stage, all data obtained from observations, teacher diaries, and interviews were transcribed and reduced to eliminate irrelevant information, so that only data that was significant to the research objectives was retained. Furthermore, the reduced data was arranged and presented in narrative, table, or matrix form to facilitate the identification of important patterns. Data presentation was carried out systematically to make it easier for researchers to understand the relationship between various findings and the research context. The last stage is drawing conclusions and verification. Researchers re-read the results of data reduction and presentation in depth to find the main themes that emerged, such as the types of challenges faced by participants, the strategies they used to overcome them, and the forms of reflection they practiced. These conclusions were then verified by triangulation of methods, namely comparing the results of observations, teacher diaries, and interviews to ensure the consistency and validity of the findings.

In addition, the member check technique was used to ensure that the results of the analysis truly reflected the experiences and views of the participants. The data analyzed also went through peer debriefing, where researchers asked colleagues to evaluate the interpretation of the data to minimize researcher bias. With this analysis method, research is expected to produce findings that are credible, consistent, and relevant to the research context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Challenges Faced by Pre-service English Teachers

Pedagogical Challenges

Participants found it challenging to prepare engaging materials suitable for students with varying proficiency levels. When materials were too simple, students became bored; when too complex, they felt frustrated, according to the observation results, participants seemed to have difficulty in delivering material to students with varying English abilities. In one class, there were students who quickly understood the material and looked bored when the teacher repeated the explanation, while other students seemed to be left behind and unable to follow the lesson. Participants A and B noted that some students quickly grasped concepts, while others needed more time and support. Balancing the pace was difficult-slowng down bored advanced learners,

while introducing challenging content overwhelmed weaker students. Participant A shared in her journal how these challenges created uncertainty in her teaching decisions. She often second-guessed whether her lesson plans were effective and appropriate for all students.

“I often worry about whether the material I am providing is appropriate. If it is too easy, students lose interest, but if it is too hard, they give up. I try to adapt, but sometimes it feels like an endless cycle of trial and error.”

She elaborated on this concern by explaining how some students quickly complete assignments and start chatting with their classmates, clearly uninterested in the lesson, while others sit staring at their work, unsure of how to proceed. This difference in learning speed makes it difficult to manage the class effectively. Even when she provides additional practice for faster learners, she notices that they often complete it quickly as well, further highlighting the gap in understanding levels. Participant B echoed this concern, noting that despite her efforts to modify her lessons, it is nearly impossible to ensure that every student is equally engaged and challenged.

“In every lesson, I see students who complete assignments quickly and seem bored, while others struggle to understand even after I explain them over and over again. It made me question whether I was really helping them.”

She prepared differentiated worksheets, but some students still struggled while others completed them quickly without real engagement. Frustrated, she saw weaker students copying answers instead of studying, while more advanced students felt the class was too slow. Both participants emphasized the challenge of not only selecting appropriate materials but also delivering them effectively for a variety of learning styles, which was often overwhelming and time-consuming. Participants C and D also struggled to maintain engagement despite simplifying explanations, providing guidance, and using a variety of techniques. Participant C recalled breaking down grammar topics into simpler parts, but some students remained confused and reluctant to participate, which caused frustration for both students and the teacher.

“Even when I break the material down into smaller parts, some students still seem confused. I feel like I can’t understand everything. Sometimes I repeat the explanation in a different way, but I still see blank faces staring at me. It makes me doubt whether I am teaching effectively.”

She explained how, after explaining a grammar rule several times, she still found that students were unable to apply it in the exercises. Some students would nod as if they understood, but when asked to demonstrate their understanding, they remained silent or gave incorrect answers. This made her question whether her teaching methods were effective or whether the students were simply not interested in the subject. Participant D also shared her experiences, specifically regarding student engagement. She noted that while some students were eager to participate, others remained passive, often avoiding eye contact or giving minimal responses when asked questions.

“I tried using different strategies-group discussions, games, even videos-but there were always a few students who sat quietly, unwilling to participate. I wondered if they were intimidated, or If they just didn’t find the lesson interesting. It was frustrating because I wanted to make learning fun for them.”

Participant D observed that some students were afraid to speak English due to lack of confidence, even when reassured that mistakes were part of learning. Some gave short answers or avoided participation, for fear of embarrassment. She also noticed that students became disengaged when the lesson became difficult, showing signs of frustration through silence or distraction. Participants C and D were frustrated by the difficulty of motivating disengaged students. Despite efforts to create a supportive environment, some students remained disinterested. Managing varying levels of engagement was mentally exhausting, requiring constant adjustments to maintain attention.

Motivation Challenges

One of the most significant challenges faced by participants was students’ lack of motivation in learning English. Many students viewed English as irrelevant to their daily lives and future aspirations, leading to low engagement during lessons. This problem was particularly evident in classrooms where students had little exposure to English outside of school, making it difficult for them to see the value in learning the language. For many students, English was just another subject they had to pass, rather than a skill that could benefit them in real-life situations. This mindset affected their willingness to participate in class activities, laboriously complete assignments, or practice English outside of class. Teachers found that when students lacked motivation, they often avoided speaking English, refused to engage in discussions, and showed little interest in learning new vocabulary or grammar structures.

During my observation I saw that Some students seemed unenthusiastic about following the lesson. They were mostly silent, did not answer questions, and looked unmotivated. When the teacher gave instructions, some students even seemed reluctant to open their books or respond. Participant G shared his frustration with this issue, explaining that many students did not even attempt to participate in class. They observed that students often ignored instructions or remained silent when asked to speak English, making it difficult to create an interactive learning environment. Participant G said in her interview

“Students think English is not important and don’t even try. Getting them to participate or even listen is a real struggle.”

Participant G elaborated on this by describing a common scenario in their classroom. During speaking exercises, students often hesitate to answer, not because they don’t know the words, but because they lack confidence and motivation. Even when the teacher encourages them, they respond reluctantly or avoid speaking altogether. G noticed that some students would rather pretend not to understand the question than try to answer in English. This lack of effort makes it difficult for them to improve their language skills, as they are unwilling to engage with the language in a meaningful way.

Similarly, Participant J observed that even when teachers tried to explain the benefits of learning English, many students remained indifferent. Participant J found that students often associated English with complicated grammar rules and memorization rather than as a practical skill that they could use in the future, he wrote in his diary

“I’ve tried to tell them that English can help them in many ways, but they don’t see it that way. They don’t feel the need to use it in their daily lives, so they don’t try.”

Participant J tried to motivate students by explaining how English could offer better job opportunities or travel options, but students found this irrelevant, arguing that they could rely on translation apps or their native language instead. Negative perceptions of English, often rooted in past difficulties with pronunciation or grammar, created frustration and a cycle of disinterest—students avoided practice, worsening their skills and reinforcing their belief that English was too difficult. Participants G and J also noted students’ reluctance to participate unless directly asked. Even when interactive methods such as games or group activities were introduced, many students showed little interest, viewing them as distractions. Students from low-resource settings faced additional challenges, with limited exposure to English making the language feel distant and impractical. Lack of motivation remained a significant challenge, requiring extra effort from teachers to encourage engagement.

Psychological Challenges

Psychological barriers, particularly students’ lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes, posed significant challenges to participants in their teaching experiences. Many students expressed deep anxiety about speaking English in front of their peers, which significantly hampered their ability to engage in classroom discussions. This fear was often rooted in a lack of exposure to spoken English and the belief that making mistakes would lead to embarrassment or ridicule. As a result, students avoided participating in speaking activities, which contributed to a tense and unresponsive classroom atmosphere.

During my observation of prospective teachers, I saw that many students looked nervous when asked to speak English, especially when they had to appear in front of the class. They preferred to remain silent or speak very softly. Participants E and F observed this phenomenon in their classrooms, noting that students’ reluctance to speak English created ongoing challenges in fostering an interactive and communicative learning environment. Participant E said in her interview

“Many students are hesitant to speak English because they are afraid of being laughed at if they make a mistake. This fear prevents them from trying.”

This fear of being judged often causes students to remain silent even when they know the correct answer. Rather than taking risks in speaking, they preferred to minimize their participation, either by responding in very short phrases, mumbling their words, or avoiding eye contact altogether. Some students would whisper their answers to their classmates rather than speaking out loud, indicating their discomfort using English in front of the entire class. This hesitation disrupted the natural flow of learning, as teachers had to constantly prompt students to respond, often receiving minimal engagement in return.

Participant F echoed these concerns, emphasizing how students’ fear of making mistakes not only affected their willingness to speak but also affected the overall classroom dynamic. She observed that many lessons felt one-sided, with the teacher doing most of the talking while students listened passively. Even when direct questions were asked, long pauses

often occurred as students hesitated, weighing the risks of answering incorrectly. She described her frustration in her diary:

“I struggled to keep the class lively. Students were not very responsive during the lesson, which made me feel like my teaching was not effective enough.”

Participants noted that students’ fear of making mistakes and being judged made the lessons feel stagnant. Even proficient students were hesitant to participate due to concerns about pronunciation or grammar mistakes. This fear was especially evident during spontaneous speaking tasks, where students avoided eye contact, fidgeted, or provided minimal responses. The social dynamics of the classroom exacerbated this problem, as many students were more concerned about peer reactions than teacher feedback. The presence of confident peers heightened their insecurities, leading to a classroom culture where most remained silent unless directly addressed. Over time, students developed a mindset that they were “not good” at English, which further inhibited participation and negatively impacted the overall learning environment.

2. Solutions Employed by Pre-Service Teachers

Enhancing Teaching Materials

In the face of the lack of student engagement in the motivation challenge, participants improved the quality and variety of teaching materials to make them more interesting and relevant. They adapted the materials to students’ interests and daily life contexts, such as using songs, videos, or trending topics. This strategy aims to bridge the gap between the learning materials and students’ realities, so that they can more easily understand and be interested in learning English. Participants recognized that one of the main challenges in teaching English is keeping students engaged and ensuring that learning materials are accessible and stimulating. Many students struggle to grasp abstract concepts, and traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on textbooks often fail to engage them. To address this, participants put a lot of time and effort into designing visually appealing, contextually relevant, and engaging learning materials that would better resonate with their students.

Participants A and I reflected on the same thing, namely the impact of using more dynamic and interactive materials in their lessons. They found that when they included visuals, such as images, infographics, and real-life scenarios, students showed a marked increase in their engagement levels. Participant A shared in her journal:

“I Incorporated images and real-life scenarios into my lesson plans, and it worked well. Students seemed more engaged and asked more questions.”

This observation highlights the importance of using materials that students can easily understand and relate to. By presenting information in a way that was visually stimulating and relevant to their everyday lives, Participants A and I noticed that students were more willing to participate in discussions and engage with the lesson content. In addition to visuals, they also explored using real-world examples to make the lessons more meaningful. They noticed that students responded more positively when the material was connected to their personal experiences or familiar cultural references. In their journals, they described how integrating

elements from popular TV shows, local events, or famous figures helped students grasp abstract concepts more easily. Participant I noted:

“When I connected the grammar lesson to their favorite TV show or used examples from trending social media topics, they paid more attention. It made the lesson feel less like a lecture and more like a conversation.”

For example, when teaching vocabulary related to emotions, she used scenes from popular movies or TV shows that depicted different expressions of emotion. This approach allowed students to visualize the meaning of the words rather than simply memorizing definitions. Similarly, in a lesson on the past tense, she encouraged students to describe memorable events from their own lives, making the grammar lesson more personal and engaging. Participants also observed that students were more motivated to learn when the material reflected their interests. Rather than using generic exercises from a textbook, some teachers designed activities that incorporated students' hobbies, such as sports, music, or technology. Customizing these materials not only makes lessons more engaging but also creates an interactive classroom atmosphere where students feel that their interests are recognized and valued.

Despite these positive results, participants acknowledged that preparing these materials requires extra time and effort. Finding the right balance between making lessons fun and covering the required curriculum is a constant challenge. Several teachers also noted that while engaging materials can initially capture students' interest, sustaining that interest requires ongoing adaptation and creativity. In addition, the availability of resources plays a significant role in the effectiveness of this strategy. Teachers working in schools with limited technological support must rely on printed materials and hand-made visuals, which sometimes limits the range of tools they can use, participants agreed that improving teaching materials is an important aspect of making English lessons more effective and engaging. By incorporating visuals, real-life examples, and culturally relevant content, they were able to create a learning environment that fostered curiosity and active participation. Their reflections emphasized that teaching materials should not only convey information but also inspire students to engage with the language in meaningful ways.

Using Interactive Methods

To overcome pedagogical challenges, such as the difficulty of adapting teaching materials to students' varying abilities, participants used interactive learning methods. This method allows pre-service teachers to create a dynamic classroom atmosphere that involves all students, both high and low ability. Activities such as group discussions, educational games, and project presentations encourage students to actively participate according to their ability level. Thus, this method helps maintain student engagement and reduces boredom or frustration due to inappropriate materials. Motivating students to actively participate in English lessons proved to be a significant challenge for the participants. Many students viewed English as a difficult and irrelevant subject, which often resulted in disinterest and reluctance to participate in class activities. To overcome this challenge, the participants used a variety of interactive teaching methods aimed at transforming the classroom into a more dynamic and engaging learning environment. By incorporating games, role-plays, group discussions, and project-based activities, they attempted to engage students and encourage greater engagement in the learning process.

Participant B reflected on how introducing interactive elements into her teaching significantly increased students' enthusiasm and willingness to participate. She observed that when lessons included engaging tasks, students became more engaged, willing to contribute, and less intimidated by the learning process. She said in an interview that:

"When I introduce games and interactive tasks, students become more engaged and participate more willingly. It makes a big difference."

This insight highlights the importance of creating an enjoyable learning experience where students feel motivated to learn without fear of failure. She noted that the shift from traditional lecture-based instruction to more interactive teaching fostered a sense of excitement in the classroom. Students, who were previously hesitant to get involved, began to show greater enthusiasm when they competed in language-based games or worked together to complete tasks.

Among the most effective strategies were group discussions and collaborative activities, which allowed students to interact with each other while using English in a natural context. Unlike passive learning, where students simply listen to the teacher, these activities encouraged them to actively express their ideas, negotiate meaning, and develop confidence in speaking. Participant H shared her experience with the storytelling activity:

"Today, we worked on the group storytelling activity. It was great to see students helping each other and speaking English more confidently."

From my observation, students are more active when teachers use short videos that are funny and relevant to the material. This proves that relevant and fun teaching strategies can increase student engagement in the learning process.

During this activity, students were divided into small groups and given instructions to create a story together. The process of brainstorming, constructing sentences, and telling their story required them to use English in a meaningful way. Participants noted that students who were usually quiet felt more comfortable speaking up in a smaller group setting. Additionally, by collaborating with peers, they received support and encouragement, which helped reduce their anxiety about making mistakes.

Similarly, role-playing activities proved to be another powerful tool for increasing student motivation. Participants observed that when students were given roles in simulated real-life scenarios-such as ordering food at a restaurant, booking a hotel room, or conducting an interview-they were more willing to engage in conversation. These activities not only made learning more relevant but also helped students build practical language skills. Many students who were reluctant to speak in a traditional classroom setting became more expressive when they were given roles to play. The structured nature of role-playing reduced their fear of speaking because they had a clear goal and script to follow. In addition to games and discussions, project-based learning also played a significant role in motivating students. Assignments that required students to work together to create a presentation, poster, or short video gave them a sense of ownership over their learning. When students were responsible for producing something tangible, they became more engaged in the learning process. One participant noted that when she allowed students to choose topics they were interested in, such as sports, music, or technology, their engagement levels increased dramatically.

Despite the positive impact of these interactive methods, participants acknowledged that sustaining motivation remained an ongoing challenge. While students responded well to engaging activities, their enthusiasm sometimes fluctuated, particularly when facing difficulties in comprehension. Additionally, not all students were equally eager to participate-some remained hesitant even in interactive settings. Participants recognized that motivating students required continuous effort, adaptability, and a deep understanding of what inspired them, participants agreed that incorporating interactive teaching strategies was essential in fostering a lively and engaging classroom environment. By making lessons more interactive and student-centered, they were able to break down barriers to participation and create opportunities for students to develop confidence in using English. Their reflections underscored the importance of not only teaching the language but also making the learning experience enjoyable and meaningful.

Building Supportive Relationships

The lack of student motivation in learning English is overcome by building a supportive relationship between teachers and students. Participants realized that a friendly, open, and empathetic approach can create a positive learning environment. By feeling appreciated and supported, students become more comfortable and motivated to engage in the learning process. Teachers also try to understand the background and needs of students, and provide personal encouragement. Participants emphasized that building strong relationships with their students was critical to creating a positive and open learning environment. Many students enter the classroom with psychological barriers, such as fear of making mistakes, low self-esteem, or a lack of interest in the subject. To overcome this, participants made a conscious effort to build rapport with their students, recognizing that when students feel valued and understood, they are more likely to engage in class activities and actively participate in discussions.

Participant C reflected on the impact of personal interactions with students, noting that taking the time to understand their interests and backgrounds significantly improved the classroom dynamic. She observed:

“When I take the time to talk to students about their interests, they start to open up and participate more in class activities.”

This simple yet effective approach allows students to see their teacher as someone who genuinely cares about their well-being, not just their academic performance. Many students who were initially quiet and hesitant to speak up began to show more enthusiasm once they felt a personal connection with their teacher. According to the observation results, the teacher creates a safe and supportive environment. I noticed that students became more confident after the teacher said ‘It’s okay to make mistakes, we’re here to learn’. That simple sentence made students smile and start to dare to try.

Participant D shared a specific moment from her diary where a small interaction led to a real change in a student’s behavior:

“After I asked a student about his favorite sport, he smiled and started participating more actively during the lesson. I realized how small interactions like that can make a big difference.”

This interaction highlights how personal engagement can change students’ attitudes toward learning. By showing interest in their hobbies, favorite TV shows, or even weekend

activities, teachers can break down the social and emotional barriers that often prevent students from engaging in class. When students feel cared for and heard, they become more comfortable expressing themselves, even in subjects they initially find challenging. Participants emphasized that building trust with students helped reduce anxiety. Many students, especially those with lower proficiency, fear being judged for making mistakes. However, when teachers show patience and encouragement, students feel safer taking risks with language. Participants also incorporated casual conversation into lessons to create a relaxed atmosphere and reassure students that the classroom is a safe place to communicate. In addition, showing empathy for students' difficulties, such as family pressures or lack of resources, strengthens the teacher-student bond, fostering motivation and a sense of belonging.

While these strategies were effective, participants acknowledged that building strong relationships takes time and consistency. Not all students open up right away, and some require repeated efforts to feel comfortable in the classroom environment. Additionally, cultural and personality differences influence how students respond to these interactions. While some students readily engage in one-on-one conversations, others remain reticent, requiring teachers to adopt a more patient and individualized approach, participants agreed that developing supportive relationships is not just an additional aspect of teaching but a fundamental component of effective education. By building trust, demonstrating genuine interest, and creating an emotionally safe classroom environment, teachers can significantly influence students' willingness to participate and engage in English language learning. Their reflections underscore the importance of human relationships in education, affirming that meaningful learning experiences are built not only through academic instruction but also through relationships that inspire confidence and motivation.

Encouraging Confidence in Speaking

To overcome psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes when speaking, participants implemented a gradual and supportive strategy. They provided small-scale speaking exercises first, such as working in pairs or small groups before performing in front of the class. In addition, teachers also gave praise for students' efforts, not just the final results, to increase their self-confidence. A non-judgmental classroom environment is essential so that students feel safe to try and learn from their mistakes. One of the most significant psychological barriers that students face in learning English is the fear of making mistakes, especially when speaking. Many students hesitate to participate in class discussions, fearing embarrassment or criticism from their peers. This anxiety often leads to silence, reluctance to engage, and lack of confidence in using English. To address this issue, participants adopted incremental and supportive strategies aimed at fostering a more positive and supportive learning environment.

Participant E emphasized the importance of creating small, manageable steps to help students build confidence in their speaking abilities. She shared:

"I encourage students to speak English in small steps and praise their efforts, even if they make mistakes. Over time, they become more confident."

This approach allows students to engage in the learning process without feeling overwhelmed. Rather than forcing them to speak in full sentences right away, Participant E focuses on small milestones-answering a question in English, responding with a short phrase, or

even simply trying out pronunciation. By acknowledging and celebrating these small steps, she helps students recognize their progress and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Teacher diaries further reflected the positive impact of this method. Participant J noted that when students received consistent encouragement and praise, they became more willing to participate in class. He wrote:

“By the end of the week, some students who were usually quiet became more active participants. It was a small but meaningful victory.”

This observation underscores how gradual exposure to speaking activities, coupled with positive reinforcement, can significantly increase students' confidence. The key is to shift the focus from perfection to progress, allowing students to understand that mistakes are a natural part of learning.

Participant F also highlighted the importance of normalizing mistakes as part of the language learning process. He said in an interview:

“I reassure students that it is normal to make mistakes. I even share some of my own language learning experiences to help them feel less anxious about trying.”

By sharing her own struggles and experiences in learning a foreign language, Participant F was able to humanize the process, making students feel less isolated in their fears. When students see that even their teachers face similar challenges, they feel more comfortable taking risks in speaking English. This personal approach helps create a supportive classroom atmosphere where students no longer view mistakes as failures but as opportunities for growth.

Another effective strategy that participants used was integrating low-pressure speaking activities into their lessons. Instead of putting students in high-stakes situations—such as speaking in front of the entire class—they encouraged them to practice in smaller groups or pairs. Activities like think-pair-share, role-playing, and casual conversation exercises helped students speak English without the added pressure of a large audience. Participants noted that students were more likely to speak up when they felt safe in a smaller peer group. In addition, participants worked to change the overall classroom culture by encouraging peer support and reducing judgment. They actively reminded students to respect and support each other, emphasizing that everyone in the class is learning together. This helped minimize teasing and fostered a sense of camaraderie, where students felt more comfortable making mistakes in front of their classmates.

Participants acknowledged that overcoming the fear of making mistakes was not an overnight process. Some students remained hesitant and needed ongoing encouragement. However, with continued support, patience, and reinforcement, many students gradually began to speak up more in class, showing increased confidence and engagement. Participants' reflections confirmed that overcoming students' fear of making mistakes requires more than just teaching grammar and vocabulary—it also requires creating an environment where students feel safe, valued, and encouraged to take risks. By celebrating progress, sharing personal experiences, and fostering a culture of support, teachers can help students overcome their anxiety and develop the confidence needed to communicate in English.

The findings of this study further illuminate the complex nature of the challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in their teaching practices, particularly in terms of pedagogical difficulties, student motivation, and psychological barriers. These challenges echo the experiences

and findings from previous studies that have examined the realities of classroom teaching and the multifaceted demands placed on teachers (Richards, 2021; Farrell, 2022). The balance between providing content that is both accessible and challenging is one of the most significant issues for new teachers. It is not enough for teachers to simply choose appropriate materials; they must ensure that the content engages students at varying levels of proficiency, which is a task that requires constant evaluation and adjustment. This challenge is particularly pronounced when teachers encounter a mix of students who grasp concepts quickly and others who struggle with the basics. This balancing act, which involves differentiating instruction and addressing diverse learning needs, has been widely discussed in the literature as a fundamental aspect of teaching effectiveness (Tomlinson, 2014; Gudmundsdottir, 2019).

The socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) offers important insights into how teachers can scaffold students' learning to meet their individual needs. Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) emphasizes the importance of providing appropriate levels of support that enable students to progress just beyond their current abilities. However, the reality of implementing this theory is challenging, particularly in classrooms with significant variability in student proficiency. In practice, teachers may struggle to find strategies that are sufficiently flexible to meet all students' needs, especially when time constraints and classroom dynamics limit their ability to provide individual attention (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). This is where the role of teacher cognition becomes critical. According to Freeman and Johnson (2019), teachers' beliefs and their knowledge of teaching practices shape how they approach lesson planning and delivery. The participants in this study often reflected on the tension between their desire to engage all students and the constraints of the classroom, pointing to a critical need for deeper reflection in teacher education. Through ongoing reflection, teachers can better understand their instructional choices and make data-driven adjustments to improve lesson effectiveness.

Motivational challenges, particularly the perception of English as irrelevant to students' lives, further complicate teaching efforts. Many students, as participants in this study reported, struggle to see the value of learning English beyond the classroom. This resonates with Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2021) research, which underscores that students' motivation plays a pivotal role in language acquisition. Motivation is influenced by a variety of factors, including personal interests, the perceived usefulness of the language, and the learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The participants in this study pointed out that their students often viewed English as an abstract subject that held little relevance to their everyday lives, making it difficult for them to engage fully in lessons. This finding aligns with Lamb's (2017) observation that students in low-resource areas, where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited, tend to see little practical value in learning the language. Gao and Zhang (2023) similarly note that in rural and under-resourced regions, the absence of English-speaking environments outside the classroom creates a disconnect between the language and students' immediate realities, resulting in low motivation and engagement. Furthermore, the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that students' intrinsic motivation is fostered through autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In the context of language learning, when students do not feel a personal connection to the language, their motivation to learn diminishes. This lack of motivation is compounded by the fact that many students in the study exhibited a lack of confidence in their English skills. As participants observed, students often lacked the belief in their ability to succeed, which led to disengagement and low participation in class. Ushioda (2013) proposes that teacher immediacy behaviors such as providing personalized feedback, offering encouragement, and fostering

positive teacher-student relationships-can have a significant impact on students' motivation. By establishing a supportive classroom environment, teachers can enhance students' sense of competence and relatedness, which in turn fosters greater engagement and motivation.

The participants in this study who incorporated personalized feedback and encouragement found that these efforts had a positive effect on students' willingness to participate, even though the improvement was often gradual. Psychological barriers, particularly language anxiety and fear of making mistakes, were also prevalent among students, adding another layer of complexity to the teaching experience. These findings align with the work of Horwitz (2013) and MacIntyre and Gregersen (2020), who highlight that anxiety is a common emotional response to language learning. Anxiety can create significant barriers to learning, as students become fearful of speaking and making mistakes in front of their peers. This often leads to avoidance behaviors, where students actively disengage from speaking activities to protect themselves from the embarrassment of making errors. This anxiety is particularly pronounced in peer-influenced environments, where social judgment plays a major role in students' willingness to participate (Young, 2021). The fear of negative evaluation and social comparison can undermine students' confidence and further hinder their language development. As Krashen (1982) suggests, such anxiety acts as a "filter" that prevents language input from being fully absorbed and processed, ultimately hindering language acquisition.

Gregersen and Horwitz (2019) argue that affective strategies, such as mindfulness techniques, peer support, and the creation of a supportive classroom climate, can help mitigate anxiety and encourage greater student participation. This aligns with the efforts of the pre-service teachers in this study, who employed a variety of interactive methods, such as games, storytelling, and group projects, to reduce anxiety and enhance engagement. Research by Swain and Lapkin (2020) further supports the idea that peer collaboration can increase learner confidence and reduce anxiety, as students feel more comfortable practicing their language skills in a less formal, collaborative setting. These strategies are consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), which emphasize active student participation and the use of real-world language in meaningful contexts. Walsh (2021) also points out that interactive classroom discourse, where teachers scaffold students' responses, fosters deeper engagement and language development.

The participants in this study who utilized interactive methods found that these strategies encouraged greater participation, although they still faced challenges with managing group dynamics and ensuring that all students were actively involved. Despite the benefits of these strategies, the study also highlights the need for continuous adaptation and creativity on the part of teachers. As Farrell (2022) and Richards and Farrell (2021) point out, effective teaching requires ongoing professional development and the ability to refine instructional practices in response to the evolving needs of students. Teachers must be equipped with the skills to navigate the diverse challenges of the classroom, from differentiating instruction to managing classroom behavior. Teacher education programs, therefore, must provide comprehensive training in areas such as classroom management, differentiated instruction, and the use of interactive teaching methods (Burns & Richards, 2018; Freeman, 2016). Additionally, reflective teaching practices, as advocated by Farrell (2018), can help pre-service teachers develop the skills necessary for analyzing their teaching experiences and making data-driven improvements. By engaging in ongoing reflection, teachers can better understand the impact of their instructional strategies on student outcomes and adjust their approaches accordingly.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by pre-service English teachers during their teaching practicum in Indonesia, as well as the creative solutions they employed to address these difficulties. These challenges categorized as pedagogical, motivational, and psychological highlight the complexities of teaching English as a foreign language in diverse and resource-constrained settings. Despite these obstacles, the findings demonstrate the resilience, adaptability, and ingenuity of pre-service teachers in their efforts to engage students and enhance the effectiveness of their teaching practices. Pedagogical challenges, such as participants struggled to balance the complexity of the material with student engagement in heterogeneous classrooms underscore the importance of equipping pre-service teachers with skills in material design and differentiation. Effective teaching materials that are visually appealing, contextually relevant, and aligned with students' interests can significantly enhance engagement and comprehension. Furthermore, motivational challenges, such as motivational challenges included students' perceptions of English as irrelevant to their daily lives, leading to low engagement. Highlight the need for interactive and student-centered teaching methods that foster collaboration, curiosity, and enjoyment. Psychological barriers, such as fear of making mistakes and language anxiety, significantly hindered students' participation in speaking activities. Addressing these issues requires teachers to build rapport with their students, foster mutual respect, and reduce anxiety through encouragement and positive reinforcement.

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