

STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN THE SEA-TEACHER PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY IN INDONESIA- PHILIPPINE

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Abstract: The SEA-Teacher Program is a collaborative initiative among Southeast Asian nations, pioneered by SEAMEO, which aims to enhance pre-service teachers' intercultural competence and teaching skills through cross-cultural practice. The urgency of this research stems from the complex challenges participants face during their placements, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and diverse education systems. These conditions impact learning effectiveness and participant adaptation, necessitating in-depth strategies and reflection to address them. Analyze the specific counter-strategies, coping mechanisms, and support systems employed by the pre-service teachers to effectively navigate and overcome these challenges. Generate practical recommendations and evidence-based strategies derived from these experiences to inform the preparation of future participants, enhance program design for educators and policymakers, and strengthen regional collaboration in teacher education. Highlight the lessons learned and best practices developed by the participants in promoting adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving skills, thereby contributing to their professional and personal transformation into effective future teachers. The study method employed is a qualitative approach with reflective analysis. Data were gathered through interviews, teaching practice reports, and participant reflection notes. The analysis is focused on identifying intercultural, linguistic, and pedagogical challenges, as well as the adaptation strategies used, such as collaboration with local teachers, modification of teaching methods, and the utilization of cultural experiences.

Keywords: *strategies, challenges, pre-service teacher, SA-Teachers, case study*

INTRODUCTION

The Sea-Teacher Program is a collaborative initiative among Southeast Asian countries aimed at enhancing the intercultural competence and teaching skills of pre-service teachers Musa & Ariyanti (2020). This program was initiated by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariat. In this cross-cultural program, education students have the opportunity to undertake teaching practice abroad, which not only broadens their horizons but also hones their ability to adapt to vastly different educational and social environments Diem et al. (2020), Nazhafah and Muslim (2021), Mahyawi, (2025).

However, the implementation of this program is not without its various challenges. One of the main obstacles faced by participants is the significant difference in culture and intercultural values between their home country and the host country Nurazizah, Muslim, & Setyarini,

(2021). This disparity can affect their psychological condition, impede communication, and cause discomfort while performing their teaching duties. To overcome this, participants are required to develop a deep understanding of the local culture, including customs, social norms, and communication styles used in the destination country Hapsari, Ammar, & Ghali, (2020).

Besides the cultural aspect, language barriers also present a crucial issue. Many participants encounter difficulties in effectively delivering lesson material due to limited proficiency in the language of instruction used in the classroom Hřebačková, (2019). Therefore, efforts such as learning the local language, collaborating with local teachers, and utilizing daily cultural experiences become important strategies for enhancing communication and learning effectiveness Léon-Henri and Jain, (2017).

Equally important, pre-service teachers are also confronted with differences in the structure of the education system, curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment systems prevailing in each country Sujadi, Wulandari, & Kurniawati, (2019). Adapting to these differences requires participants to be open-minded, reflective, and active in seeking feedback from mentors and peers, as well as continually developing their professional capacity Laichak, (2019), Mantiri, O. (2011), Afifah, and Wirza, (2021)

Developing high-quality teacher education programs is a crucial factor in ensuring the provision of quality education in the Southeast Asian region. One concrete effort to achieve this goal is through the SEA-Teacher Program, an initiative by SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) that provides pre-service teachers with the opportunity to undertake cross-national teaching practice in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the implementation of this program in the field is not free from complex challenges that can affect the readiness, adaptation, and effectiveness of pre-service teachers during their placement period Napanoy, Gayagay, & Tuazon, (2021).

This study specifically aims to explore the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in the SEA-Teacher program, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these difficulties. The focus is placed on the intercultural, linguistic, and pedagogical aspects that color the dynamics of their experiences during the program. By summarizing and reflecting on these experiences in the form of a book of collected stories, the outcome is expected not only to serve as a means of documentation but also as a source of inspiration and learning for prospective participants and education policymakers in the future Freed, Benavides, & Huffling, (2019).

Based on the background, the problem formulation for this study is as follows:

What are the main obstacles faced by pre-service teachers in the SEA-Teacher program, particularly concerning language, cultural differences, and differences in the education system in the host country?

What strategies are implemented by pre-service teachers to deal with these challenges while participating in the SEA-Teacher program in Southeast Asia?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research method, which aims to describe phenomena in a comprehensive and profound manner. This method was selected for its effectiveness in uncovering the complexities of the learning process through the analysis of various influencing factors. According to Nassaji (2015), the descriptive qualitative approach

is highly relevant for educational research, particularly for perceiving how individuals interact within their learning environments. Consequently, this research sought to acquire a broader understanding of the participants' performances, experiences, and comprehension within the context of learning.

The participants of this study consisted of eight pre-service teachers (2 students from Indonesia and 6 students from the Philippines) who participated in the SEA-Teacher Program. Data were collected through open-ended interviews to gather rich, detailed narratives about their experiences.

Furthermore, descriptive qualitative research emphasizes a naturalistic approach, signifying that the investigation is conducted under natural conditions without the manipulation of variables. Creswell & Creswell (2017) underline that this method allows researchers to observe phenomena as they naturally occur, lacking interventions that might alter the dynamics of the research setting. This approach enables the research to authentically capture the nuances and dynamics crucial in the learning process, thereby providing a more accurate description of the teaching strategies employed and the various challenges encountered.

Moreover, this research design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the teaching practices implemented by the pre-service teachers throughout the program. The research focus is not solely confined to the instructional strategies used but also includes the obstacles they faced in implementing those methods. Through this approach, the study is expected to produce richer insights into how pre-service teachers adapt to real-world conditions in the field and how they cultivate their teaching proficiencies in the face of diverse challenges.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Motivation

The analyzed initial expectations of the SEA-Teacher program pre-service teachers, as summarized in the table, reveal a multidimensional motivation anchored across three key domains: Linguistic, Pedagogical, and Cultural/Personal. Participants primarily viewed the program as a vital opportunity for immersive language practice and a platform for professional enhancement, expecting to acquire new teaching strategies and adapt to diverse educational systems. Crucially, their outlook went beyond mere professional training, emphasizing a desire for reciprocal cultural exchange where they anticipated learning from students' unique perspectives while simultaneously broadening their own global worldview, recognizing the need for adaptability in the face of expected cultural and linguistic challenges.

Main Theme	Expectation Category	Description
1. Linguistic & Communication	English Language Immersion	Expecting to use English daily in a cross-cultural setting to improve communication skills.
	Dependence on English	Anticipating that teaching in the host country will heavily rely on English as the medium of instruction.
2. Pedagogical & Professional	Acquisition of New Teaching Strategies	Hoping to learn new strategies, approaches, and techniques from

		local teachers that can be utilized back home.
	Curriculum/System Adaptation	Anticipating differences in material knowledge levels and the structure of the educational system/curriculum, requiring adaptation of teaching methods.
	Confidence Building	Viewing the program as a unique opportunity to gain teaching experience and grow into a more "confident and adaptable" educator.
3. Cultural & Personal	Reciprocal Exchange (Two-Way Learning)	Seeing cross-cultural teaching as not just imparting knowledge, but also learning from students' cultures, values, and perspectives.
	Cultural Learning Opportunity	Hoping to learn extensively about the culture and customs of the destination country.
	Broadening Global Perspective	Gaining a wider perspective and seeing the world more openly ("see the world more widely").
	Anticipation of Challenges	Realistically anticipating facing "language barriers and cultural differences" as an inherent part of the growth process.

Table 1. Students Motivation in Participating the program

This table outlines the expectations of participants in a cross-cultural teaching program, categorized into three main themes. The Linguistic & Communication theme centers on a desire for English language immersion, anticipating daily use in a cross-cultural setting to improve skills, and a heavy dependence on English as the medium of instruction in the host country. The Pedagogical & Professional expectations involve acquiring new teaching strategies and techniques from local educators, anticipating the need to adapt to differences in the host country's curriculum and students' knowledge levels, and viewing the program as a confidence-building opportunity to become a more adaptable educator. Finally, the Cultural & Personal theme highlights a commitment to reciprocal, two-way learning by exchanging knowledge and learning from students' cultures, extensively learning about the host country's customs, broadening a global perspective, and realistically anticipating challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences as part of the overall growth process.

Strategy and Adaptation in Teaching

This summary explores the adaptive teaching strategies employed by SEA-Teacher program participants to successfully navigate diverse and cross-cultural classroom settings. The strategies applied demonstrate a strong commitment to learner-centered instruction, focusing on making content contextually relevant and highly engaging through methods like Project-Based Learning and interactive activities. Crucially, the participants developed robust techniques for communication adaptation, including simplifying language, using extensive

visual aids, and scaffolding complex material to bridge language and cultural gaps. Furthermore, their approach was deeply rooted in cultural and contextual awareness, prioritizing observation of local practices and understanding student backgrounds to ensure their teaching was both relevant and effective in the specific host country environment.

Main Strategy Category	Specific Strategy	Description
1. Learner-Centered & Engaging	Contextual Teaching Strategies	Made lessons exciting and relevant to better capture students' attention and maintain motivation.
	Project-Based Learning (PBL)	Used extensively because the host country's teaching style was project-based and to bypass language difficulties since not all students understood English.
	Interactive Activities & Games	Incorporated to make lessons more engaging and test understanding (e.g., games after practice).
	Collaborative Tasks/Group Activities	Encouraged student participation and communication, fostering a dynamic learning environment.
Communication & Language Adaptation	Adjusting Speaking Pace & Vocabulary	Consciously used simpler vocabulary, shorter sentences, and spoke at a moderate pace to recognize and address potential language differences/barriers.
	Scaffolding/Breaking Down Concepts	Broke down complex concepts into smaller parts and provided step-by-step instructions. Also included checking for understanding before proceeding.
	Heavy Reliance on Visual Aids	Used diagrams, realia, flashcards, and gestures to convey meaning, reinforce concepts, and bridge communication gaps.
	Open Communication/Feedback	Encouraged students to ask questions if they didn't understand and to feel free to answer or suggest ideas to clarify the lesson.
Cultural & Contextual Awareness	Understanding Student Backgrounds	Took time to understand students' backgrounds, interests, and learning styles before implementing strategies.
	Cultural/Educational Context Focus	Focused on understanding the local culture and educational context to ensure lessons were relevant and engaging.
	Observation & Learning from Locals	Observed and learned from the teaching methods used by the local teachers.
	Curriculum/Material Adaptation	Adapted materials to suit the students' language proficiency and learning needs.

Table 2. Students Strategy in Teaching

This analysis shows that the participants prioritized strategies that address language barriers (e.g., visual aids, scaffolding, simplified speech) and promote active student engagement (e.g.,

PBL, contextual teaching, group work) while being highly context-sensitive (e.g., learning from local teachers, understanding student backgrounds).

Challenges in Teaching

Based on the detailed analysis table, this summary introduces the significant academic challenges encountered by participants in the SEA-Teacher program, highlighting the intensive need for adaptation and flexibility. The most prominent obstacle was the Language and Communication Barrier, driven by students' varying English proficiency, which required teachers to continuously adjust lesson materials and employ creative, practical activities to convey concepts. At the same time, participants grappled with Curriculum and Content Adaptation, having to quickly integrate into a new educational system with different teaching methods, expectations, and unique local elements, such as religious scripture applications in lessons, often while teaching a subject outside their field of study. These challenges, compounded by Resource and Logistical Constraints like limited school facilities, collectively forced the educators to be resourceful, patient, and highly adaptable in a demanding cross-cultural setting.

Main Challenge Category	Specific Academic Challenge	Description of Impact
1. Language & Communication Barriers	Students' Low English Proficiency	Required continuous adjustment of lesson materials and demanded the teacher be flexible and creative in teaching delivery.
	Difficulty Communicating Clearly	Not all students were fluent, making it difficult to communicate ideas clearly or fully understand instructions during lessons.
	Teacher's Own Language Self-Consciousness	Fear and self-consciousness about grammar (fear of speaking) when teaching an English subject, especially for non-English majors.
2. Curriculum & Content Adaptation	Adjusting to Different Curriculum	Required participants to quickly get used to a new curriculum and often necessitated adapting lesson plans to align with the host school's structure.
	Differences in Teaching Methods/Expectations	Required participants to be flexible and creative in lesson planning and delivery to match the host school's methods and expectations.
	Subject Mismatch (Teaching English as a Non-Major)	Participants who were not English majors found it challenging to make lesson plans and learn the topics for the English subject they were assigned to teach.
	Integrating Local Context/Scriptures	Differences in curriculum, including the application of religious scriptures in the lesson plan, presented a unique adaptation challenge.

3. Resource & Logistical Constraints	Limited School Facilities/Resources	Required participants to "make do" with limited resources and necessitated them to be more resourceful in their teaching approach.
	Fair Assessment Methods	Challenge in figuring out the best way to assess student learning in a way that felt fair and appropriate within the new educational context.

Table 3. Challenges in teaching

The academic challenges faced by SEA-Teacher participants are multifaceted, but are fundamentally rooted in the imperative for extreme adaptation across linguistic, curricular, and logistical domains. The primary hurdle is the Language and Communication Barrier, where students' low English proficiency necessitates continuous modification of teaching materials and forces teachers to be highly flexible and creative to ensure clear comprehension. Concurrently, participants must navigate Curriculum and Content Adaptation, quickly integrating into a host educational system defined by different structures, teaching expectations, and the inclusion of unique local elements, such as religious scripture in lessons, often while teaching outside their specific major. These core challenges, compounded by Resource and Logistical Constraints like limited school facilities, collectively demand that pre-service teachers exhibit high levels of resourcefulness, patience, and a constant willingness to adjust both their pedagogy and their personal comfort to maintain effective instruction in the cross-cultural classroom.

CONCLUSION

The SEA-Teacher program effectively serves its mission to enhance pre-service teachers' skills and intercultural competence by providing an intense cross-cultural experience, though its implementation is deeply intertwined with complex challenges. Participants are primarily motivated by a multidimensional drive encompassing linguistic immersion, professional growth through acquiring new pedagogical strategies, and a strong desire for reciprocal cultural learning and global perspective broadening. However, these aspirations are immediately tested by the reality of significant academic hurdles, chiefly revolving around the Language and Communication Barrier due to students' low English proficiency, and the necessity for rapid adaptation to vastly different curricula, teaching methods, and local educational contexts, sometimes complicated by resource limitations or teaching subjects outside their expertise.

To overcome these obstacles, participants successfully deployed a range of adaptive and learner-centered strategies that ultimately contributed to their professional development. The focus shifted heavily toward communication adaptation through scaffolding, simplified vocabulary, and extensive use of visual aids to bridge language gaps, while the pedagogical approach emphasized engaging, contextualized instruction using methods like Project-Based Learning and interactive activities. This necessity for flexible, context-sensitive teaching—prioritizing local observation and continuous self-reflection—transforms the challenges into rich learning experiences, underscoring the program's value in producing educators who are not only adaptable and resourceful but also deeply culturally aware, ready to thrive in an increasingly interconnected global teaching environment.

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