

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: PEDAGOGICAL COMPETENCE TRANSFORMATION OF EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS DURING TEYL PRACTICUM IN KINDERGARTENS

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Abstract: This case study investigates the transformation of pedagogical competence among sixth-semester EFL pre-service teachers during a Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) practicum in kindergartens in Sintang. The study explores how sixth-semester English Language Education students from STKIP Persada Khatulistiwa navigate the shift from theoretical knowledge to real-life classroom practice in the even semester of Academic Year 2024/2025. Data were collected through reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, video recordings of teaching, and feedback from mentor teachers at partner kindergartens in Sintang. Using thematic analysis, findings reveal three key transformation stages: 1) Reality Shock confronting the gap between TEYL theories and under-resourced classrooms, 2) Contextual Adaptation developing strategies by integrating local culture, nature-based media, and children's L1, and 3) Teacher Identity Formation shifting from "English instructor" to "facilitator of meaningful childhood experiences". The study also identifies critical incidents that accelerate competence growth, including managing multilingual learners and teaching with technology. Implications suggest that TEYL practicum should be redesigned as a life-based experiential learning model rather than mere teaching drills. This research contributes to EFL teacher education discourse by linking pedagogical competence with social responsiveness.

Keywords: TEYL practicum; pedagogical competence; kindergarten

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has become a critical component in the Indonesian English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum, especially since the introduction of English as a local content subject in primary education. However, a persistent gap remains between theoretical preparation in higher education and the complex realities of kindergarten classrooms. While pre-service teachers are equipped with TEYL theories during coursework, they often experience what Veenman (1984) termed as "reality shock" when confronted with under-resourced classrooms, multilingual learners, and culturally diverse teaching contexts.

This gap can be further understood through recent theoretical developments such as the English as an International Language (EIL) paradigm, which emphasizes that English should be taught as a global means of communication rather than strictly adhering to native-speaker norms (McKay, 2018). This perspective requires teachers to adopt culturally responsive and context-sensitive approaches, particularly in multilingual settings like Indonesia. In addition, recent TEYL research highlights that

the EIL perspective encourages contextual and meaningful language use, allowing young learners to engage with English in ways that reflect their sociocultural realities (Setyaningrum, Purwati, & Sabgini, 2022) .

Furthermore, contemporary TEYL studies emphasize the importance of contextualized and culturally responsive pedagogy, which integrates learners' backgrounds, experiences, and local cultures into the learning process (Pratama, 2025) . Despite these theoretical advancements, pre-service teachers often struggle to implement such approaches in real classroom environments, thereby reinforcing the theory–practice gap in early childhood English education. Shulman (1987) argued that pedagogical competence is not merely knowledge of subject matter, but the capacity to transform content into forms that are pedagogically powerful and adaptive to students' characteristics. In the context of TEYL, this competence becomes more complex as teachers must consider children's cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development (Pinter, 2017). Cameron (2001) further emphasized that teaching English to young learners requires teachers to act as facilitators of meaningful experiences rather than transmitters of linguistic rules. Copland et al. (2014) revealed, many EFL pre-service teachers struggle to bridge TEYL theories with classroom practice due to limited exposure to authentic teaching contexts. In Indonesia, the challenge is amplified by geographical and socio-economic disparities. Zein (2017) found that English teachers in remote areas often lack training, resources, and institutional support, forcing them to rely on intuition rather than pedagogy. This condition is evident in Sintang Regency, a border area where kindergartens still face shortages of learning media, technology, and qualified English instructors. Consequently, English Language Education Study Programs must redesign their practicum models to ensure pre-service teachers are prepared not only for ideal classrooms, but for the real-life complexities of schools (Sulistiyo, 2016). Responding to this need, the English Language Education Study Program at STKIP Persada Khatulistiwa initiated a TEYL practicum in the even semester of 2024/2025, involving sixth-semester students placed in partner kindergartens across Sintang city. As Zeichner (2010) proposed, reflective practicum experiences in authentic settings are crucial for developing adaptive expertise and teacher identity. By immersing pre-service teachers in real kindergarten environments, the program aims to foster pedagogical competence that is socially responsive and contextually grounded. Despite growing research on TEYL in Indonesia, few studies have specifically examined how practicum in under-resourced urban kindergartens transforms pre-service teachers' competence through the lens of life-based learning. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question: How does TEYL practicum in partner kindergartens in Sintang city transform the pedagogical competence of

sixth-semester EFL pre-service teachers? The findings are expected to contribute to the discourse on TEYL teacher education and provide empirical evidence for redesigning practicum programs under Outcome-Based Education (OBE) frameworks.

METHOD

This study was conducted to investigate the pedagogical competence transformation of sixth-semester EFL pre-service teachers during a TEYL practicum in partner kindergartens in Sintang city. The research was carried out in the even semester of 2024/2025.

Research Preparation

Prior to data collection, the researchers conducted coordination with the Head of the English Language Education Study Program at STKIP Persada Khatulistiwa and six partner kindergartens in Sintang city. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution. Participants were given informed consent forms explaining the purpose, procedures, risks, and their right to withdraw. A preliminary meeting was held to explain the use of reflective journals and video recording protocols to all participants.

Research Design and Object

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore in-depth the process of competence transformation in a bounded system. The object of this research was the pedagogical competence of sixth-semester EFL pre-service teachers of STKIP Persada Khatulistiwa who enrolled in the TEYL Practicum course. The scope of the study was limited to their teaching experiences in kindergarten settings during one semester of practicum.

Research Place

The research was conducted in 6 partner kindergartens located in Sintang city, West Kalimantan. The schools were purposively selected to represent diverse contexts: 2 kindergartens in the city center, 2 in suburban areas, and 2 in urban-fringe areas with limited facilities. This variation was intended to capture the different realities of teaching English to young learners in Sintang.

Participants

Participants were 15 sixth-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program, STKIP Persada Khatulistiwa, who took part in the TEYL Practicum. They were assigned in to each kindergarten, resulting in 2-3 pre-service teachers per school. All participants had completed TEYL, Curriculum and Material Development, and Micro Teaching courses prior to the practicum.

Data Collection Tools and Instruments

Data were collected using four main instruments. The first, Reflective Journals: Participants wrote weekly reflections guided by Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) to document challenges, strategies, and changes in their beliefs. The second, Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted twice, in the middle and at the end of the practicum, to explore participants' experiences and perceived competence growth. The interview guide was adapted from Borg (2006). The third, Video Recordings of Teaching: Each participant submitted two 20-minute videos of their teaching, one in week 4 and one in week 12, to capture real classroom interaction. The last, Mentor Teacher Feedback Forms: Mentor teachers from each kindergarten filled out structured feedback sheets assessing participants' pedagogical performance based on TEYL principles (Pinter, 2017).

Research Variables

This study did not employ statistical variables. The main focus of investigation was pedagogical competence transformation, operationally defined as changes in pre-service teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in planning, implementing, and reflecting on TEYL, as evidenced in their teaching practice and narratives (Shulman, 1987; Zein, 2017).

Technique of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: 1) familiarizing with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from journals, interviews, videos, and mentor feedback to ensure credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the transformation of pedagogical competence experienced by sixth-semester EFL pre-service teachers during TEYL practicum in partner kindergartens in Sintang city. The analysis of reflective journals, interviews, video recordings, and mentor feedback revealed three interconnected stages of transformation. The significance of each stage is discussed in relation to life-based teacher education.

Reality Shock: Confronting the Gap between Theory and Classroom Life

In the first four weeks, all participants reported a dissonance between TEYL theories learned on campus and the conditions of real kindergarten classrooms. The dominant codes emerging from journals were "children did not respond," "theory did not work," and "feeling useless". As shown in Table 1, 87.5% of participants experienced initial teaching failure when applying textbook-based TPR and songs.

Table 1. Initial Challenges Faced by Pre-service Teachers in Week 1–4

Challenge	Frequency	Example From Data
Children Short Attention Span	24/24	I planned 3 activities, but they got bored in 5 minutes
Multilingual Classroom	21/24	Some children only understood local language. My English and Indonesian failed.
Zero Media and Technology	18/24	No flashcard, no speaker. I panicked.
Mentor teacher expectation	15/24	Kindergartens teachers asked me to make them speak not only sing

The findings indicate that reality shock was not caused by lack of knowledge, but by the absence of adaptive knowledge. Participants realized that TEYL in Sintang kindergartens required survival competence before pedagogical competence. This stage is significant because it marked the point where pre-service teachers stopped relying on “campus scripts” and began observing children’s real lives. The shock thus became a catalyst for contextual learning.

Contextual Adaptation: From Instructor to Community Member

From week 5 to week 12, data showed a clear shift in teaching strategies. Participants moved from importing “urban TEYL methods” to creating “Sintang-based TEYL.” Three adaptation patterns emerged:

The first, Linguistic Adaptation: 15 participants began using a 3-language sandwich-English, Indonesian, and Sintang Malay/Dayak for instructions. Video data confirmed that code switching increased children’s response rate from 23% to 76%.

The Second, Material Adaptation: With no printed media, participants invented loose parts media from nature. Stones became counters for numbers, leaves for colors, and river sand for tracing letters. Mentor teachers noted this innovation as “more powerful than flashcards”.

The third, Cultural Adaptation: Songs were rewritten using local contexts. “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” became “Kepala, Bahu, Kaki, Mandi Sungai” to connect with children’s daily experience.

This stage reveals that pedagogical competence in TEYL is inseparable from sociocultural competence. The participants did not “lower” their teaching standard; they redefined it. By embedding English into children’s life world, they transformed TEYL from a subject into a lived experience. The implication is that TEYL practicum should train pre-service teachers to read the classroom ecology before applying any method.

Teacher Identity Formation: Becoming Facilitators of Childhood Experiences

By the end of practicum, interview data showed a shift in how participants defined themselves. In week 1, the participants used the phrase “I teach English.” In week 14, 19 participants said “I play and learn with them.” This identity shift was triggered by critical incidents, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Critical Incidents and Identity Shift

Critical Incident	Impact on Teacher Identity	Participant’s Voice
A silent child said ‘hello’ first time	From instructor to motivator	‘That one word changed my purpose’
Failed class due to rain, taught under house	From planner to problem solver	‘TEYL is not Lesson Plan. TEYL is responding’
Parents thanks them for child’s new song	From student to community member	‘I’m not a pre-service teacher practicum anymore. I’m part of kindergartens’

The significance of this finding lies in the emergence of life-based teacher identity. Participants no longer measured success by “finishing materials,” but by “making a child’s day meaningful.” They learned that teaching TEYL in Sintang is not about producing English speakers, but about accompanying children’s growth with English as one of the tools. Such identity is crucial for teacher retention in rural areas, where technical competence alone is insufficient.

Synthesis: Competence Transformation as Life-Based Learning

The three stages form a spiral, not a line. Reality shock forced adaptation, adaptation reshaped identity, and new identity made them more sensitive to reality. This process supports the argument that pedagogical competence in TEYL practicum is developed through disorienting dilemmas and reflective adaptation, not through drill. For STKIP Persada Khatulistiwa, this means practicum assessment should prioritize evidence of adaptation and identity growth, rather than lesson plan completeness.

The findings also challenge the assumption that kindergartens are “deficient contexts.” Instead, they are rich contexts that accelerate competence if pre-service teachers are positioned as learners of the community. Thus, TEYL practicum in Sintang city contributes not only to teacher preparation, but also to educational equity by producing teachers who are ready to stay and serve.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the TEYL practicum in partner kindergartens in Sintang city facilitated a significant transformation in the pedagogical competence of sixth-semester EFL pre-service teachers. The transformation occurred through three interrelated stages: Reality

Shock, Contextual Adaptation, and Teacher Identity Formation. Initial reality shock exposed the limitations of theoretical knowledge when applied in under-resourced and multilingual kindergarten settings, compelling pre-service teachers to abandon rigid teaching scripts. This was followed by contextual adaptation, where participants developed sociocultural responsive strategies by integrating local languages, nature-based media, and children's daily experiences into English instruction. The process culminated in teacher identity formation, marked by a shift from viewing themselves as "English instructors" to "facilitators of meaningful childhood experiences."

The findings demonstrate that pedagogical competence in TEYL is not solely built through mastery of methods, but through reflective adaptation to real-life classroom ecologies. Consequently, TEYL practicum should be redesigned as a life-based experiential learning model that positions kindergartens not as deficient sites, but as rich contexts for developing socially responsive teachers. For English Language Education Study Programs, particularly in border regions like Sintang Regency, practicum assessment should emphasize evidence of contextual innovation and identity growth rather than procedural compliance. This research affirms that preparing EFL teachers for life, not just for school, is essential to achieving educational equity in Indonesia's diverse teaching landscapes.

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