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# Enhancing Pre-Service English Teachers' Professional Competence Through School-Based Practicum

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the impact of school-based practicum on the development of professional competence among pre-service English language teachers. Conducted with 42 fourth-year undergraduate students enrolled in a TEFL program at Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages, the research adopted a mixed-methods design involving pre- and post-practicum surveys, mentor evaluations, and reflective journals. Findings suggest that school-based practicum significantly enhances pedagogical skills, classroom management, language use, and reflective thinking. The study emphasizes the importance of structured mentoring and school-university collaboration in supporting pre-service teachers' transition from theory to practice.

**Keywords:** Pre-Service Teacher Education, Professional Competence, School-Based Practicum, English Language Teaching, Reflective Practice, Classroom Management, Pedagogical Skills, Didactic Perspective, Mentor Support, Teacher Development

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in teacher education from theory-oriented instruction to practice-oriented learning. For English language teachers, professional competence entails not only linguistic knowledge and pedagogical skills but also the ability to reflect, adapt, and function effectively in real classrooms. School-based practicum is widely regarded as a cornerstone in teacher preparation, providing opportunities for pre-service teachers (PSTs) to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). However, in many developing contexts, including Uzbekistan, the effectiveness of practicum remains under-researched. This study explores the role of school-based practicum in developing the professional competence of future English teachers by analyzing the outcomes of a structured teaching internship program implemented during the 2023–2024 academic year.

Professional competence encompasses content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management, communication skills, and reflective abilities (Shulman, 1987; Richards & Farrell, 2005). In the context of English teaching, it also includes intercultural sensitivity and the use of English as a medium of instruction.

Practicum is seen as the "bridge" between coursework and real-world teaching (Allen & Wright, 2014). Research shows that practicum provides critical exposure to classroom dynamics and fosters professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Effective practicum is typically structured, mentored, and reflective (Hudson, 2010). A growing body of literature supports the role of mentoring and feedback in shaping pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices (Hudson & Hudson, 2011; Ambrosetti, 2014). Despite its importance, practicum programs face challenges such as inconsistent mentorship, lack of feedback, insufficient time for observation and reflection, and weak partnerships between universities and schools (Tang, 2003; Le Cornu, 2012). These issues affect the depth and quality of learning during the practicum.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of how pre-service English teachers develop professional competence during a school-based practicum. The primary aim was twofold: first, to measure changes in their professional competence before and after the practicum; and second, to explore their perceptions and lived experiences throughout the process. The study involved 42 fourth-year pre-service English teachers enrolled at the Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages. All participants had completed their theoretical coursework and were subsequently assigned to public schools across the Namangan region for an eight-week practicum.

To collect quantitative data, pre- and post-practicum surveys were administered using a modified version of the Professional Teaching Competence Scale (PTCS) developed by Eginli and Solhi (2021). This scale assessed four key domains of teacher competence: pedagogy, classroom management, language use, and reflective practice. In addition to the surveys, mentor observation forms were used to document each student teacher's teaching performance. These were completed twice during the practicum: once during the early phase and once during the final weeks. To gather qualitative insights, each participant maintained a weekly reflective journal in which they documented their teaching experiences, challenges, and moments of professional learning. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of the study population—10 student teachers and 5 school-based mentors—at the conclusion of the practicum.

For data analysis, the quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Paired-sample t-tests were performed to examine statistically significant changes in the four competence domains from pre- to post-practicum. The qualitative data, derived from journals and interviews, were analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes related to professional growth, the application of theory to practice, classroom realities, and perceived challenges in the school context. This combined analytical approach provided both measurable outcomes and nuanced insights into the developmental journey of pre-service teachers during their practicum experience.

## Result and Discussion

These findings confirm the transformative effect of practicum on teacher development, aligning with studies by Darling-Hammond (2006) and Hudson (2010). The results of this mixed-methods study revealed compelling evidence supporting the positive impact of school-based practicum on the professional competence of pre-service English language teachers. The findings are presented and discussed in relation to four main areas of competence: pedagogical skills, classroom management, language use, and reflective practice. One of the most notable outcomes of the study was the marked improvement in participants' pedagogical skills. Pre- and post-practicum survey responses showed a statistically significant increase in confidence and ability to design and implement coherent lesson plans aligned with curriculum goals. Many student-teachers reported gaining a clearer understanding of lesson sequencing, the importance of setting clear objectives, and selecting appropriate instructional strategies tailored to learners' language proficiency levels.

**Table 1.** Analysis of the pre- and post-practicum surveys in the table below revealed statistically significant improvements in all four domains:

Competency Area	Pre-Practicum	Post-Practicum	p-value
	Mean	Mean	
Pedagogical Skills	3.1	4.3	< 0.001
Classroom Management	2.9	4.1	< 0.001
Language Use	3.4	4.5	< 0.001
Reflective Practice	2.7	4.2	< 0.001

These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the vital role of authentic teaching contexts in translating theoretical knowledge into classroom practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Allen & Wright, 2014).

Qualitative data from reflective journals reinforced these findings. Students described their initial struggles with time allocation, task variety, and balancing teacher talk with student interaction. Over the course of the practicum, however, they developed an intuitive understanding of how to scaffold learning effectively. One journal entry stated: *"In the beginning, I was unsure how to transition between stages of my lesson. After observing my mentor and experimenting in class, I learned how to build lessons that keep students active and engaged."* This evolution of planning and instructional delivery skills underscores the value of situated learning experiences in teacher education (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Another area where participants demonstrated significant progress was classroom management. Prior to the practicum, many expressed apprehension about managing large, mixed-ability classrooms—a common feature in Uzbekistan's public school system. By the end of the practicum, however, mentor evaluations and journal reflections indicated substantial gains in the ability to maintain discipline, manage group dynamics, and create a positive learning atmosphere. Mentors noted that student-teachers who initially struggled

to assert themselves grew more confident in giving instructions, maintaining attention, and handling disruptions with calm authority.

One recurring theme in the journals was the importance of establishing routines and setting clear expectations. A participant reflected: *“At first, I felt overwhelmed by noisy students. I learned to use non-verbal signals and consistent routines, which helped create structure in the classroom.”* These practical insights illustrate how direct classroom exposure helps novice teachers develop situational awareness and responsive classroom behavior, which cannot be fully acquired through coursework alone (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Moreover, participants also highlighted the role of mentor modeling in this domain. Observing experienced teachers in action provided valuable lessons in how to balance firmness with empathy—especially in managing reluctant learners or mediating peer conflicts. The interplay of observational learning and experiential trial-and-error allowed student-teachers to internalize effective classroom management strategies organically.

Given the focus on English language teaching, the practicum also served as a platform for improving participants' own language proficiency and communicative competence in instructional settings. Post-practicum survey scores showed considerable increases in self-reported confidence using English in real-time interactions, such as giving instructions, eliciting responses, and providing feedback. This improvement can be attributed to the immersion in English-speaking environments during the practicum and the necessity to use English as the medium of instruction in various classroom activities.

Several participants reported initial discomfort with spontaneous speaking and code-switching. One journal entry noted: *“I often switched to Uzbek when I couldn't find the right words in English. Over time, I forced myself to stick to English, and I noticed students began using more English too.”* This self-regulation of language use, prompted by authentic communicative demands, echoes the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) and highlights the role of context in language development—not only for students but for teachers as well (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Mentors also observed that as students became more confident, their English became more fluent and classroom interactions more natural. This finding underscores the dual benefit of practicum: it enhances both pedagogical and linguistic competence, which are deeply intertwined in EFL contexts. Moreover, students reported improved pronunciation, increased use of functional language for classroom management, and better error correction techniques—all crucial components of professional language teaching.

Perhaps the most transformative impact of the practicum was on students' reflective thinking. Reflective journals and interviews revealed that the practicum served not only as a test of their teaching skills but also as a mirror that encouraged deep self-examination. At the beginning of the practicum, most reflections were descriptive, focused on what happened in the classroom. As the weeks progressed, entries became more analytical and evaluative. Students began to question their own assumptions, evaluate the effectiveness of their methods, and propose improvements for future lessons.

A particularly telling reflection read: *“After my third lesson, I realized I was over-explaining grammar. My students looked confused. I changed my approach the next time by giving*

*more examples and using visuals, and they understood better.*" Such critical reflections signal a shift from novice to emerging professional identity—a transition supported by structured mentoring and dialogic feedback sessions.

This aligns with Schön's (1983) theory of reflective practice, which positions reflection as central to professional growth. The practicum offered an environment where reflection was not only encouraged but institutionalized through mentor meetings and journal writing. The opportunity to reflect on real classroom events, rather than hypothetical scenarios, gave student-teachers a meaningful basis for developing adaptive expertise.

Furthermore, the reflective process seemed to promote emotional resilience. Several students wrote about how they initially felt discouraged by poor lesson outcomes, but learned to view failure as part of the learning process. This mindset shift is crucial in preparing future teachers to navigate the uncertainties and emotional labor of the profession (Day & Gu, 2010).

### **Challenges and Implications**

Despite the overwhelmingly positive outcomes, the study also revealed several challenges that must be addressed to optimize practicum effectiveness. A recurring issue was mentor availability. While most mentors were supportive, some were too busy to provide consistent feedback. In such cases, student-teachers relied on peer feedback or self-assessment, which, while useful, lacks the depth of expert guidance. Furthermore, some practicum schools lacked adequate resources, such as English teaching materials or technological tools, which limited the scope of innovative teaching practices. Another challenge was the lack of standardization in mentor training. Differences in mentoring styles and expectations sometimes led to confusion among student-teachers. This finding points to the need for mentor professional development programs that ensure alignment with university training goals and evidence-based mentoring strategies (Hudson, 2010). Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of strong collaboration between universities and practicum schools. Coordinated planning, regular communication, and shared assessment frameworks can enhance the coherence and impact of school-based practicums.

### **Conclusion**

This study affirms the critical role of school-based practicum in enhancing the professional competence of pre-service English teachers. Structured support, mentor feedback, and reflective tools contribute to meaningful development across pedagogical, managerial, and linguistic domains. Teacher education programs should strengthen university-school partnerships and integrate reflective components to maximize the benefits of practicum. Further research is recommended on long-term impacts of practicum and strategies to support mentor training. Creating communities of practice among pre-service and in-service teachers can also enrich the learning process.

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