




Bridging Theory and Practice: The Role of Experiential Learning and Mentorship in Enhancing the Transition from University to High-School Teaching for Pre-Service English Teachers

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Article abstract

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Bridging Theory and Practice: The Role of Experiential Learning and Mentorship in Enhancing the Transition from University to High-School Teaching for Pre-Service English Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates the transition of pre-service English teachers from university to high-school teaching, focusing on the challenges of applying theoretical knowledge in practical classroom settings. The research highlights how the integration of experiential learning and mentorship can effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice. Through a qualitative analysis of pre-service teachers in the Mekong Delta region of south-western Vietnam, this study identifies key challenges such as classroom management, student engagement, and the implementation of student-centred teaching methods. It also explores the transformative impact of hands-on teaching experiences and mentor guidance on the professional development of these teachers. The findings suggest that incorporating more experiential learning opportunities and structured mentorship into teacher-education programs can significantly improve pre-service teachers' preparedness for high-school teaching. This study underscores the need for educational reforms that emphasize practical training, alongside theoretical instruction, to enhance the effectiveness of teacher education.

Introduction

The transition from university to high-school teaching is a pivotal phase in the professional development of pre-service teachers. Universities traditionally emphasize comprehensive theoretical knowledge, equipping pre-service teachers with subject-matter expertise. However, high-school teaching requires the practical application of this knowledge in diverse and dynamic classroom settings. This dichotomy between theoretical knowledge and practical application poses significant challenges for pre-service teachers, particularly in the context of English-language teaching. The importance of bridging the gap between theory and practice in teacher education has been widely acknowledged (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023; Zeichner, 2010). Effective teaching in

high schools necessitates not only a strong foundation in pedagogical theories, but also the ability to implement these theories in real-world classroom environments. This involves classroom management, student engagement, and adapting teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students. However, the current teacher-education programs often fall short in providing sufficient practical training, leaving pre-service teachers ill-prepared for the realities of high-school teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

In the context of the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam, pre-service English teachers encounter distinctive challenges that have been underrepresented in existing research. While many studies focus on the integration of theory and practice in teacher education, there is a scarcity of research that specifically examines the unique circumstances faced by pre-service English teachers in this region. Existing teacher-education programs in Vietnam often emphasize theoretical knowledge, with limited opportunities for practical training (Nguyen, 2020; Trang et al., 2021). This theoretical-practical gap is further compounded by the short duration of internships, typically only two months. Most studies in the field have focused on contexts outside of the Mekong Delta, where the challenges of integrating theory and practice are well-documented (Huang & Wang, 2024; Ma et al., 2022; Maharani & Fithriani, 2023; Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021; Steadman, 2021). However, these findings may not fully capture the complexities faced by teachers in regions like the Mekong Delta. In Vietnam, socio-cultural dynamics, exam-focused teaching, and limited resources present unique challenges that are not adequately addressed in existing research. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the specific experiences and challenges of pre-service English teachers in the Mekong Delta, highlighting the need for localized curriculum reforms and enhanced practical training to better prepare teachers for the realities of high-school teaching in this context.

The motivation for this study stems from the recognition that current teacher-education programs often fail to equip pre-service teachers with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of high-school teaching. This is particularly evident in regions like the Mekong Delta, where educational resources and support mechanisms may be limited. Understanding the unique challenges and needs of pre-service teachers in this region is crucial for informing effective teacher-education policies and practices. This study seeks to explore the discrepancies between theoretical training and practical needs, emphasizing the necessity for curriculum reforms that balance extensive pedagogical knowledge with practical teaching skills. The objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, it aims to identify the main challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in applying theoretical knowledge to practical teaching in high-school settings. Secondly, it seeks to understand how experiential learning and mentorship can bridge the gap between theoretical training and practical needs in teacher education, identifying the most effective support mechanisms. This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the main challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in applying theoretical knowledge to practical teaching in high school settings?
2. How do experiential learning and mentorship help bridge the gap between theoretical training and practical needs in teacher education, and what specific support mechanisms are most effective?

Literature Review

From theoretical models to classroom realities: A conceptual framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines constructivist theories, experiential learning theory, the theory-practice nexus, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory to examine the challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in high-school settings, particularly in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. These theories, while distinct, are deeply interconnected, and collectively provide a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the complexities of teacher education.

Constructivist theories, particularly Vygotsky's, emphasize that learners actively construct knowledge through interactions with their social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). This perspective is key to understanding how pre-service teachers develop pedagogical skills, advocating for learning environments that closely mirror real-world teaching contexts. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2017) complements this by emphasizing the importance of experience in learning, through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. This cycle supports the constructivist view that learning is active and contextual. The theory-practice nexus, as discussed by Korthagen (2010) and Zeichner (2010), addresses the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, advocating for their integration through reflective practice. This approach equips pre-service teachers to better manage the complexities of real classrooms. Additionally, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2011) highlights the psychological and social aspects of transitioning from university to high-school teaching, emphasizing the need for mentorship and practical experiences to ease this transition.

In this integrated framework, constructivist theories set the foundation by highlighting the importance of context and active learning. Experiential learning theory then adds the necessary process for how this active learning occurs, emphasizing the importance of real-world experience and reflection. The theory-practice nexus ensures that these experiences and reflections are systematically connected back to theoretical knowledge, creating a continuous cycle of learning and improvement. Finally, Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides insight into how these processes can be managed to support the personal and professional transition of pre-service teachers. Together, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding the challenges that pre-service teachers face, and for developing strategies to better prepare them for the realities of teaching. However, the literature reveals a gap in understanding about how these interconnected frameworks can be effectively applied, in the context of pre-service teacher education, in developing regions, such as Vietnam's Mekong Delta. Much of the existing research is based on educational contexts that differ significantly in terms of resources, support systems, and cultural expectations (Martin et al., 2012; Tekin & Baykara, 2023; Yasar, 2019). This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how the integration of constructivist theories, experiential learning, the theory-practice nexus, and transition theory can be tailored to support pre-service teachers in the Mekong Delta. The aim is to develop more effective and contextually relevant teacher-education programs that address the specific challenges of this region.

In summary, the integrated theoretical framework used in this study—comprising constructivist theories, experiential learning, the theory-practice nexus, and transition theory—forms a cohesive approach to analyzing the challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in the

Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This framework underscores the importance of linking theory with practice through hands-on, reflective learning experiences that prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of high-school teaching, and facilitate their transition into the profession.

Experiential learning and the role of mentorship in navigating transition challenges

Experiential learning is critical in teacher education, especially during the transition from university to high-school teaching, which poses significant challenges for pre-service teachers. Engaging in experiential learning helps pre-service teachers bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in classroom settings (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). By immersing themselves in teaching environments, pre-service teachers can contextualize theoretical concepts, making them more relevant and understandable. This is essential for managing classroom dynamics and addressing students' diverse needs, which are often underrepresented in traditional teacher-education programs.

The transition from university to high-school teaching involves adapting to classroom realities, including management, lesson planning, and assessment. Experiential learning provides a platform for continuous reflection and iterative improvement of teaching practices, allowing pre-service teachers to experiment with different instructional strategies and receive immediate feedback from mentor teachers (Arsal, 2014; Avalos, 2011; Sandvik et al., 2020). This reflective practice is vital for developing effective teaching methodologies and adapting to diverse classroom situations.

Mentorship plays a pivotal role in supporting pre-service teachers through this transitional phase. Hobson et al. (2009) define mentorship as a professional relationship where an experienced teacher (the mentor) supports the development of a less-experienced teacher (the mentee) through regular interactions. Effective mentorship significantly impacts professional growth by offering tailored advice based on the mentor's observations, fostering continuous growth during this critical transition period (Kang, 2021; Mathur et al., 2013). Mentors also provide practical examples and strategies, particularly in classroom management, instructional strategies, and student engagement. Integrating mentorship with experiential learning is crucial for addressing the challenges that pre-service teachers face during their transition. Zeichner (2010) argues that mentorship should be embedded within practicum placements and ongoing professional development, ensuring continuous support. This approach facilitates a smoother transition and enhances teacher-education programs by bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Effective models of mentorship include paired placements, where a mentor teacher works closely with a small group of pre-service teachers, and professional learning communities (PLCs), where mentors and mentees engage in regular discussions focused on professional growth (Goodnough et al., 2009; Wilson & Huynh, 2020). These models promote collaborative learning and improve key teaching skills, such as lesson planning, classroom management, and student assessment, ultimately preparing pre-service teachers for the complexities of classroom teaching (Sheridan & Young, 2017; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013).

While significant research exists on teacher education, much of it is based on educational systems with resources, support structures, and cultural expectations that differ significantly from those in developing regions like Vietnam (Buchbinder & McCrone, 2020; Izadinia, 2016; Jiang et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021). In particular, the Mekong Delta region presents unique challenges, such as limited access to resources, traditional teaching practices, and a strong emphasis on exam-

focused education, which are often overlooked in current studies. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how the interconnected frameworks of constructivism, experiential learning, and the theory-practice nexus can be adapted to support pre-service English teachers in the Mekong Delta. By examining these challenges and applying these theories in a contextually relevant manner, this research seeks to offer insights that can inform more effective teacher-education programs in similar developing regions. The integration of constructivist theories, experiential learning, and the theory-practice nexus in this study provides a robust framework for understanding the challenges faced by pre-service English teachers in the Mekong Delta. Constructivist theories emphasize the importance of context and active learning, suggesting that pre-service teachers benefit most from educational experiences that mirror the realities of the classroom. Experiential learning builds on this by highlighting the crucial role of hands-on experience and reflective practice in solidifying theoretical knowledge. The theory-practice nexus ties these elements together, ensuring that pre-service teachers can continuously apply and refine their knowledge through iterative cycles of reflection and practical application. These theoretical insights shape the research questions and objectives of this study, driving an investigation into how teacher-education programs can be reformed to better prepare educators for the specific challenges that they will face in developing regions.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2016) to explore the experiences and challenges faced by pre-service English teachers during their school-based internships across the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The internship program, which lasts for eight weeks (two months), takes place during the second semester of the fourth year of teacher education, annually from the end of February to mid-April. Pre-service teachers are assigned to local schools where they teach English, based on the national curriculum. During their internships, they not only engage in teaching activities, but also participate in various school activities and take on homeroom duties. Each pre-service teacher is typically mentored by one or two experienced teachers from the school, who are selected based on their expertise in subject teaching and classroom management. These mentors often have at least five years of teaching experience and substantial experience in handling homeroom duties. Typically, there is one mentor responsible for teaching-related guidance and another for homeroom responsibilities, although in some cases, a single mentor may fulfill both roles. These mentors play a critical role in supporting the pre-service teachers throughout their internships, by offering consistent feedback on their teaching practices and helping them to navigate the various challenges of the classroom environment. They observe the student teachers' lessons, provide detailed critiques, and suggest practical strategies for improvement, ensuring that feedback is aligned with the educational goals of the internship program. In addition to teaching observation and feedback, mentors assist pre-service teachers in understanding the broader school environment, including student behaviour management, participation in extracurricular activities, and engagement with parents and the wider school community. At the end of the internship, pre-service teachers are required to submit a comprehensive report detailing their experiences, the teaching strategies they employed, and the outcomes of their instructional practices. This report is then thoroughly evaluated by their mentor

teachers, who assess the pre-service teachers' performance based on several criteria, including teaching effectiveness, classroom management skills, and active participation in school activities. This systematic and structured mentorship process is designed to provide pre-service teachers with the robust support necessary to develop into competent and confident educators.

Participants

The participants in this study were 20 pre-service English teachers who had recently completed two-month internship at various high schools across Vietnam's Mekong Delta region in 2023. They were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure that all participants had recent, relevant experience of transitioning from university to high-school teaching. The sample consisted of an equal number of male and female participants (10 male and 10 female), all aged 22 years. The detailed demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Participant code	Gender	Age	School grade taught
P1	Male	22	10
P2	Male	22	11
P3	Female	22	11
P4	Male	22	10
P5	Female	22	10
P6	Female	22	11
P7	Male	22	10
P8	Female	22	10
P9	Female	22	11
P10	Male	22	11
P11	Male	22	11
P12	Male	22	10
P13	Female	22	11
P14	Male	22	11
P15	Female	22	10
P16	Female	22	10
P17	Female	22	10
P18	Male	22	11
P19	Female	22	10
P20	Male	22	11

Data saturation was reached at 20 participants, meaning that no new themes or insights were emerging after this number of interviews, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced. Each participant was coded from P1 to P20 to maintain confidentiality. The purposive sampling approach, combined with achieving data saturation, ensured the robustness and reliability of the findings, allowing for a detailed qualitative analysis of the real-

time challenges that these pre-service teachers faced in applying their theoretical knowledge to practical teaching contexts.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit in-depth responses from the participants. The interview protocol was refined through a pilot interview to ensure clarity and relevance. Participants were initially approached via email, where the study's purpose and participation criteria were outlined. Interested participants were then invited to in-person interviews conducted at locations chosen by them to foster a comfortable environment for open dialogue. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes. While allowing participants to choose the venue helped to ensure their comfort, this choice also posed potential impacts on the data. For example, interviews conducted in public or familiar settings might have influenced participants' willingness to discuss sensitive topics, or affected the privacy of their responses. These considerations were taken into account to ensure the integrity and depth of the data collected. The interview questions were divided into three main sections: background information, discrepancies between theoretical knowledge and practical needs, and classroom management and homeroom duties. Questions focused on the participants' educational background, their experiences in the teacher-education program, the challenges faced in aligning university-taught theoretical knowledge with the practical demands of high-school teaching, and the difficulties in managing classrooms and performing homeroom duties.

Data analysis

The data-analysis process followed a thematic-analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It began with detailed manual coding, where significant units of meaning, key concepts, and emergent patterns were identified across the interview transcripts. For instance, codes such as “discrepancy between theory and practice” and “classroom management challenges” emerged from participants' descriptions of their teaching experiences. These initial codes were then refined, consolidated, and organized into overarching themes, such as “practical application barriers” and “support mechanisms in teaching.” Thematic analysis was conducted both inductively and deductively, integrating theoretical perspectives from the literature review with empirical data. To ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the data, several validation techniques were applied. Member checking was conducted with active participation from 80% of the participants, who reviewed their interview transcripts to confirm the accuracy of the recorded data and provide additional insights. Additionally, two faculty colleagues responsible for managing and overseeing the internship program reviewed the findings to ensure alignment with their observations and administrative perspectives. Triangulation involved cross-examining emerging themes with feedback from these colleagues, participant reflections, and established literature. This multi-faceted approach enhanced the consistency and reliability of the results, by validating the data across diverse sources.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, detailing the research objectives, participation requirements, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all identifiable information before analysis. Data were securely stored and accessed only by the research team to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Findings

Discrepancy between university studies and high school realities

The discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge provided at universities and the practical needs of high-school teaching emerged as a significant concern among pre-service teachers. Of the 20 participants, 17 expressed frustration with how their theoretical training at university did not align with the practical demands of teaching in high school. Pre-service teachers highlighted the mismatch between the extensive theoretical knowledge emphasized at universities and the practical teaching requirements in high schools. This gap was vividly illustrated by their personal experiences.

P2, an English student-teacher, shared his struggle with applying academic structures of paragraph writing as taught in university.

In university, we were taught to construct paragraphs with a clear structure, focusing on thesis statements and detailed support, but when I tried to implement this in the high school classroom, the students were confused. They were not focused on writing skills, because their exams did not emphasize this aspect. My mentor teacher advised me against spending too much time on it, as the exams were mainly multiple choice.

Similarly, P5 faced challenges with teaching pronunciation using IPA symbols.

I tried to include IPA symbols to teach students correct pronunciation, believing it would enhance their speaking skills. However, my mentor teacher told me that it was a waste of time, because students just followed the teacher's pronunciation. The focus was on mimicking, rather than understanding the phonetic details.

P9 encountered difficulties when attempting to extend reading materials beyond the prescribed textbook passages.

Besides the intensive reading passages in the coursebook, I wanted to include some exciting passages and news trends for extensive reading, but my mentor teacher said [that] the exam may not include those outside topics, so it wasn't necessary to spend time on them. This was disheartening, because I believed [that] it would have made the lessons more engaging.

P17 struggled with teaching grammar for communication and application, as opposed to formulaic learning.

At university, we learned how to teach grammar through conversation and practical application. However, when I tried to teach grammar by conversation in my internship, my mentor teacher was not satisfied. She preferred teaching grammar in a formulaic way that students could easily memorize for exams.

Adding to this, P18 tried to incorporate pragmatics into his lessons to teach students about the nuances of meaning and context in language.

I tried to use some pragmatics to teach students how different attitudes could change the meaning of words, and how one word could have various meanings in different contexts. However, my mentor told me that this was too advanced. It made me realize that many courses I studied at university, from phonetics to discourse analysis, might not be applicable in the high-school context.

P20 faced resistance when trying to implement group work for speaking exercises.

For speaking practice, I asked students to work in groups and create new conversations based on the unit topics. They were reluctant, because they were used to just repeating sample conversations. This made it difficult to encourage practical use of English in real-life situations.

These narratives collectively underscore the frustration pre-service teachers feel when the theoretical knowledge they acquire at university does not translate into effective high-school teaching. The necessity to simplify complex concepts and make them engaging for younger students remains a significant hurdle.

Adding to the challenge of translating theoretical knowledge into practical teaching is the short duration of internships. All participants agreed that the typical two-month period was insufficient for acclimating to the high-school environment, building rapport with students, and effectively implementing and tracking teaching strategies.

P1 described the struggle with the brief internship period, stating,

The two-month internship was barely enough to get used to the school environment. By the time I felt comfortable with the school's routines, the internship was over. This short duration didn't allow me to fully acclimate and adapt my teaching methods to better suit the high-school setting.

Building rapport with students, a crucial element of effective teaching, was another area where time constraints proved problematic. P10 elaborated,

Building rapport with students takes time, which we didn't have during the internship. Trust and a good teacher-student relationship are crucial for effective teaching, but with only two months, I felt I was just beginning to connect with the students when it was time to leave. This made it difficult to create a supportive and engaging learning environment.

The inability to implement and refine teaching strategies due to time limitations was highlighted by P19.

I had several teaching strategies and action research plans that I wanted to implement during my internship, but two months was not enough time to see them through. Effective teaching strategies require time to be put into practice and evaluated, but the short internship period didn't allow for this. I left feeling that I hadn't been able to fully test and refine my approaches.

The current short-term approach leaves many feeling unprepared and rushed, undermining their potential effectiveness. P6 echoed these concerns, explaining,

The short duration of the internship meant that just as I was getting to know the students and their individual needs, the internship was ending. This limited my ability to implement more personalized and effective teaching strategies. I felt like I was only scratching the surface of what I could do as a teacher.

Similarly, P9 noted,

Two months is not enough time to establish a routine and build a rapport with the students. It takes longer to understand their learning styles and adapt my teaching methods accordingly. The brief internship period made it difficult to make a meaningful impact.

P13 shared her frustration, stating,

The short internship period meant that I couldn't see the results of my teaching strategies. I wanted to implement project-based learning and see how students responded over time, but there just wasn't enough time to do this effectively.

Finally, P17 emphasized the need for a longer internship to fully engage with the teaching process.

The two-month period was too short to fully engage with the students and see the results of my teaching methods. A longer internship would allow for more continuity and deeper engagement with both the curriculum and the students.

Pedagogical approaches

There is a noticeable contrast between the student-centred learning promoted at universities and the teacher-centred approaches prevalent in high schools. Of the 20 pre-service teachers interviewed, 19 agreed that this discrepancy posed significant challenges. Pre-service teachers struggle to implement interactive and engaging methods in environments where traditional lecturing is the norm. Furthermore, universities focus on building a broad set of teaching skills, while high schools often prioritize exam results. Pre-service teachers often find it difficult to apply the student-centered methods they learned at university in high school settings.

P1 attempted to apply reflective writing to boost learner autonomy.

At university, we were encouraged to use reflective writing to help students become more autonomous learners. However, in the high school where I taught, this approach was not practical. The students had too much homework, and adding reflective writing to their workload was overwhelming for them. They were more focused on completing their assignments than engaging in reflective practices.

P5 tried to use a flipped classroom approach to encourage independent study before class.

I wanted students to come to class prepared by studying materials at home, so I used the flipped classroom method. However, the students didn't read the materials beforehand. They only cared about what would be on the final exam and stuck to the coursebook. This made the flipped classroom approach ineffective.

P7 faced challenges when using role-play to teach speaking.

I thought role-playing would be a fun and effective way to improve students' speaking skills. But the other teachers commented that it wasn't necessary because the speaking section wasn't part of the exam. Additionally, the students struggled to follow my instructions in English, making the role-play sessions less productive.

P13 organized a speaking contest with various topics from social media to environmental protection to engage students in speaking activities.

I thought [that] a speaking contest would be a great way to encourage students to practice their English. However, out of hundreds of students, only five registered. The lack of interest was disappointing and made me realize how focused students were on exam preparation, rather than developing their speaking skills.

P18 tried to foster critical thinking by asking a lot of questions during a reading class.

I asked the students many questions to encourage them to think critically about the text. However, they answered based solely on the coursebook and struggled without explicit vocabulary support. At the end of the class, they asked how they could learn vocabulary, since they were used to simply writing down what was on the board. This highlighted the gap between the critical thinking skills [that] I was trying to develop, and their accustomed learning practices.

Classroom management and homeroom duties

Classroom management is a significant challenge for pre-service teachers. Although they study basic psychology courses at university, these courses are often theoretical, lacking practical demonstrations or authentic school-context applications. This gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application leads to difficulties in maintaining discipline and engaging students. The following narratives illustrate the challenges and how pre-service teachers overcame them, with guidance from their mentor teachers.

P2 shared his experience with managing a large, noisy classroom.

In high school, classrooms are large with about 40 students. They were all noisy and did not hear what I was talking about. Though I expressed my dissatisfaction, it did not have much impact. Day by day, I tried to adapt. One day, I stopped teaching while they were talking, and suddenly the room went silent as they realized something was wrong. This strategy of pausing helped me [to] gain their attention, and I learned to use silence as a tool for managing the classroom.

Similarly, P4 struggled to establish authority.

As a new teacher, establishing authority in the classroom was challenging. The students saw me as a temporary figure, and some took advantage of my inexperience. There were instances where students would talk back or ignore my instructions. In one case, a student repeatedly used their phone during my lesson. I felt helpless and unsure of what to do. My mentor suggested starting each class by outlining clear expectations, such as, 'phones should be off and out of sight' and 'no talking when the teacher is speaking.' We also introduced a policy where phones would be confiscated, and parents informed if rules were broken. Additionally, I kept a behaviour log to track repeated offenses, which helped me consistently enforce the rules and improve classroom behaviour.

P8 found that being too friendly with students could backfire.

At the beginning, I tried to be friendly to build [a] rapport with [the] students, but they saw me as their peer and showed no respect. I consulted with my mentor teachers, who advised me to maintain a certain distance and establish clear principles. I introduced a set of rules, including respecting the teacher and classmates, and implemented consequences, like extra homework for rule-breaking. The situation improved, but the students did not fully respect me as they should. This experience made me realize that I had only learned theoretical aspects of student behaviour at university, with no practical training.

P11 faced a particularly tough situation with student behaviour.

Managing classroom behavior was tougher than I expected. During my second week, a fight broke out between two students in the middle of a lesson. I was caught off guard and struggled to intervene effectively. My mentor later explained the school's protocol for such incidents, which included separating the students involved, sending them to the principal's office, and documenting the incident in a behaviour report. At the moment, I felt completely unprepared and overwhelmed by the situation. After this incident, I took the time to familiarize myself with the school's policies on handling conflicts, and practiced calming techniques to stay composed during crises.

P15's role as a homeroom teacher added another layer of complexity.

Being a homeroom teacher added another layer of responsibility. I had to manage attendance, monitor student behaviour, and address any issues that arose during homeroom periods. One morning, I discovered that a group of students had skipped homeroom to hang out in a café near the school. Handling this without prior experience was challenging, and it was hard to enforce rules, while trying to build a rapport with the students. My mentor

advised me to have one-on-one conversations with the students involved to understand their reasons and reinforce the importance of attending homeroom.

P17 shared her struggle with a disruptive student.

Adjusting to the high school environment was difficult, especially when it came to dealing with student misbehaviour. I had a student who constantly disrupted the class by making jokes and distracting others. Despite my efforts to engage him, the behaviour continued. My mentor advised me to be firmer, and suggested implementing a behaviour contract. The contract outlined specific expectations, such as 'no talking out of turn' and 'complete assignments on time,' with clear consequences for each infraction, including loss of privileges, extra assignments, and parent-teacher meetings. This structured approach helped me [to] manage the student's behaviour more effectively.

P19 experienced challenges with engaging students using interactive methods.

I used Kahoot to review vocabulary, when I practiced teaching with my university counterparts, and everything went smoothly. However, when I applied this in high schools, students were ignorant and sleepy, not actively involved in the activities. My mentor asked me to tell [the] students that the words in Kahoot would be part of the vocabulary lessons, and that if they did not study, they would not be able to write them on the board again and would struggle with the exams. This made students take the activities more seriously.

P20 also dealt with the complexities of homeroom duties.

Taking on homeroom duties was a new experience for me. I had to organize classroom activities, communicate with parents, and address students' personal issues. One of my students was dealing with family problems, and he was frequently absent from classes and inattentive in class. After noticing that his parents worked far away and he lived with his grandmother, I tried to care for him by asking if he needed help, and encouraging him to share his problems with me. My mentor and I also contacted his mother to politely ask her to call him regularly, and emphasize the importance of education.

Discussion

Challenges in pre-service teacher education: Bridging the gap between theory and practice

The findings of this study reveal a significant and persistent gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired by pre-service teachers at university and the practical demands of high-school teaching. This discrepancy, widely documented in the literature, underscores a critical area for improvement in teacher-education programs. Scholars like Korthagen (2010) and Zeichner (2010) have long emphasized the need for integrating theory and practice in teacher education, but this study adds novel insights by examining these challenges within the specific cultural and educational context of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

Pre-service teachers frequently reported feeling unprepared to manage the practical aspects of teaching, such as classroom management and student engagement, despite their strong theoretical foundation. This misalignment can be attributed to the traditional model of teacher

education, which often separates theoretical learning from practical application. Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that this separation is a fundamental flaw in teacher-education programs, as it fails to prepare teachers for the dynamic and unpredictable nature of classroom teaching. Korthagen (2010) suggests that bridging this gap requires a more integrated model where theoretical and practical learning are closely linked. This study supports this approach, highlighting the need for teacher-education programs, to provide more opportunities for pre-service teachers to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. The study's contribution lies in its specific focus on the challenges faced in the Mekong Delta, offering contextually relevant insights that can inform curriculum reforms aimed at balancing widespread pedagogical knowledge with practical teaching skills. Another key finding of this study is the limitation posed by the short duration of internships. Pre-service teachers reported that the typical two-month internship period was insufficient for acclimating to the high school environment, building a rapport with students, and effectively implementing and refining teaching strategies.

The study also identifies the difficulties pre-service teachers face in implementing interactive and student-centred teaching methods in high school settings. This challenge is compounded by the traditional teacher-centred approach, prevalent in many high schools, and the emphasis on exam results. These findings align with the work of Zeichner (2010), who discusses the tension between progressive educational theories and traditional teaching practices. To enhance pedagogical approaches, teacher-education programs must provide training in a variety of instructional strategies that promote student engagement and active learning. This includes training in the use of technology, collaborative learning techniques, and differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of students (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Silva et al., 2021). The theoretical framework for this study draws on constructivist theories, which emphasize the active role of learners in constructing knowledge (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). By integrating these theories with practical training, teacher-education programs can help pre-service teachers develop the skills needed to create engaging and effective learning environments. Classroom management is another critical area where pre-service teachers often feel unprepared. Effective classroom management is essential for creating a positive learning environment and ensuring that students remain focused and engaged. The findings of this study highlight the need for comprehensive training in classroom management techniques, including strategies for establishing clear expectations, building positive relationships with students, and addressing disruptive behaviour. These findings are consistent with the work of Freeman et al. (2014), Hudson (2013) and Pottinger et al. (2019) who emphasize the importance of practical training in classroom management for pre-service teachers.

The role of experiential learning and mentorship

Experiential learning and mentorship emerged as critical components in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Zeichner (2010) advocates for a more integrated approach to teacher education that includes extended periods of practicum placements. This study's findings support this approach, showing that extended internships and practicum placements provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real classroom settings, receive feedback, and refine their teaching practices. By embedding experiential learning into the curriculum, teacher-education programs can provide pre-service teachers with continuous support and guidance throughout their professional journey.

Mentorship plays a crucial role in supporting pre-service teachers as they navigate the complexities of the classroom. Effective mentorship practices, as identified by Liu (2014), include regular and structured meetings, constructive feedback, and emotional support. Mentors provide personalized guidance and feedback, helping pre-service teachers identify their strengths and areas for improvement. This individualized support fosters continuous professional growth and helps pre-service teachers develop the resilience needed to overcome challenges. The findings of this study highlight the importance of mentorship in bridging the discrepancy between theory and practice. Pre-service teachers who received regular and structured mentorship reported higher levels of confidence and competence in their teaching abilities. These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which underscores the positive impact of mentorship on pre-service teachers' professional development (Asuo-Baffour et al., 2019; Hudson, 2013; Liu, 2014).

Contributions and implications for teacher education

This study makes several significant contributions to the field of teacher education. By focusing on the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam, it provides a contextualized understanding of the challenges faced by pre-service teachers, highlighting both the universal nature of these issues and the unique regional contexts. The findings underscore the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, reinforcing existing concerns, while adding depth through the exploration of these issues within a specific cultural and educational setting.

The emphasis on the short duration of internships as a critical limitation extends the discourse on the need for longer, more immersive teaching experiences. However, while this would be beneficial, it also presents potential challenges, such as increased financial costs, logistical complexities, and the risk of mentor teacher burnout. These concerns suggest that a balanced approach is necessary when considering internship reforms. Furthermore, the study's exploration of the difficulties in implementing interactive and student-centred teaching methods adds to the discourse on the tension between progressive educational theories and traditional teaching practices. The findings highlight the need for teacher-education programs to train pre-service teachers in a variety of instructional strategies that promote student engagement and active learning, thus contributing to the constructivist framework. The findings underscore the critical role of mentorship in supporting pre-service teachers, highlighting its positive impact on their professional development. However, the potential challenges, such as inconsistencies in mentorship quality, must be addressed. This calls for the integration of more structured and consistent mentorship within teacher-education programs to ensure that all pre-service teachers receive the necessary comprehensive guidance for their growth.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the significant challenges that pre-service English teachers face in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in high-school settings. A prominent theme that emerged from this research is the disparity between theory and practice, which manifested in the difficulties pre-service teachers experienced when trying to make complex academic concepts accessible to students who were focused primarily on passing exams. Another major finding revolves around the difficulties in classroom management, where the challenges of maintaining discipline and student engagement underscored the insufficiencies of current teacher-

education programs. The study also highlighted the critical role of mentorship in helping pre-service teachers navigate these complexities, underscoring its transformative potential in bridging the gap between theoretical training and practical needs.

The implications of this study extend beyond teacher-education programs to impact students and the entire educational system. Well-prepared teachers, equipped with practical skills and robust mentorship, are essential for enhancing student outcomes and promoting educational equity. Teachers who are adept at translating theory into practice can foster more engaging and effective learning environments, which, in turn, can lead to improved student performance and a more equitable distribution of educational resources. However, the study also acknowledges potential challenges, particularly concerning the establishment of extended internships and the consistency of mentorship quality. Longer internships may face logistical and financial hurdles, and inconsistencies in mentorship can undermine the benefits of these programs. These considerations highlight the need for a balanced approach that addresses both the opportunities and challenges in reforming teacher education.

Despite its limitations, including the focus on the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam, the reliance on self-reported data, and the small sample size, typical of qualitative research, the findings of this study have broader applicability. The challenges encountered by pre-service teachers in this study, particularly regarding the theory-practice gap, classroom management, and the need for effective mentorship, are likely to be applicable in other contexts of pre-service teacher training. These findings can serve as a basis for reforming teacher-education programs in other regions facing similar educational challenges.

In conclusion, this study advocates for urgent reforms in teacher-education programs to better prepare pre-service teachers for the practical realities of high-school teaching. Teacher education institutes and policymakers must take immediate action to implement the recommended strategies, including more experiential learning opportunities, longer and more immersive internships, and comprehensive mentorship programs. These changes are essential to enhancing the readiness and effectiveness of future educators, ultimately improving the quality of education provided to high school students and contributing to a more equitable and effective educational system.

Author Bio

Mai Phuc Thinh is a researcher with a focus on international education, intercultural competence, student mobility, migration, and the internationalization of higher education. His work explores how educational environments influence student experiences and facilitate the development of the skills necessary for effective cultural navigation and adaptation. He is interested in strategies that help students transcend their comfort zones, enhancing their global perspectives and resilience.

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