



Preservice Teacher Intercultural Experience During International EYL Teaching Practicum

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Abstract. This article describes the intercultural experience of the Dutch preservice English for young learner (EYL) teachers during their international teaching practicum abroad. The focus was to explore the student-teachers intercultural learning target, the support they received, the challenges they faced, and how to deal with them. This descriptive qualitative study involved seven Dutch student-teachers who taught English in an Indonesian elementary school in Indonesia. The data were taken from the student-teachers reflection notes, evaluation sheets, and focus group discussions. The result showed that the student-teachers intercultural learning targets were to get cultural and professional learning experiences. The study showed that the ITP helped them gaining both professional and intercultural learning experiences. The supporting human resources factors were supervising lecturers from the host university, the mentoring teachers at school, and the tutors. The supportive activities were training and consultation sessions before the teaching practicum and feedback provided by supervising lecturers and mentoring teachers. The cultural challenges reported related to school rules/norms, equipment/facilities, teaching-learning process, and the children. They employed strategies and approaches such as creativity, positive mindset, appreciation, and seeking help when they faced problems.

Keywords: international · EYL · teaching practicum · children · preservice · intercultural · experience

1 Introduction

Classroom demographics in many countries persistently reflect increasing cultural diversity at schools [1–3]. This phenomenon occurs due to the rapid change in citizen mobility for various purposes such as economy and education. Consequently, children studying English at elementary schools are also multicultural and multilingual; this demographic reality has required teachers to become more culturally aware and well prepared to work with diverse children. They need to understand self-cultures, learn about other cultures, and be mindful of cultural issues and biases. However, when they are lacking of intercultural competence to adjust with the changing contexts [4], they would be unready to work with diverse children.

Naturally, English language education is intercultural because the language studied connects the students to a different culture; therefore, the goal of language learning is

not limited to the mastery of communicative competence but also intercultural communicative competence (ICC) [5]. The ICC necessitates the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and critical cultural awareness needed to support intercultural communication [4, 5]. In line with this, since one of the English for Young learners (EYL) goals is to promote intercultural competence [7], its teacher education program must encourage intercultural awareness. One of the strategies is the international teaching practicum (ITP).

The ITP refers to temporarily teaching internships in a school outside of student-teachers home countries [6, 8]. Some terms referring to ITP are overseas student teaching, international student teaching, immersion, teaching abroad and international field experience. It provides student teachers an opportunity to foster intercultural teaching skills [9], sociocultural understanding, language learning, and professional learning [10–12]. International experiences for the student-teachers of English second language (ESL) are becoming an alternative program in teacher education [13] to promote intercultural competence.

Some studies had been done on teaching practicum on varied perspectives (e.g., [14–20, 12]), including on the ITP (see [6, 10, 19, 20]). Some studies reported the ITP's significant contributions to teacher candidates' multidimensional and professional skill developments [20, 21, 6] and challenges during the ITP [10]. Some studies reported the ITP conducted by student teachers across borders for example from Malaysia to Maldives [23], Hongkong to China [12]. However, little is known about the ITP in the EYL field done by European students in Indonesia, an Asian country.

In this paper, the author sought to understand the issues faced by Dutch international preservice teachers when they undertook the English practicum in Indonesia. English is a foreign language both in the Netherland and Indonesia. In line with the English as international language (EIL) perspective, teachers need to include children's local cultures and cross-cultural comprehensibility in the teaching-learning process [24]. The research questions are (1) what intercultural learning target did they set? (2). What helpful support did they get during the program? (3). What cultural challenges did they face, and how did they deal with them?

Cultural awareness is the consciousness that culture affects people's actions [7]. Intercultural competence (IC) is “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts”[25]. It means awareness of the relativeness of cultures and “there is no one “normal” way of doing things, but that all behaviors are culturally variable [26]. The IC involves three aspects: “one's intercultural knowledge [knowledge of self and others], skills [skills to interpret, relate, discover and/or interact] and attitudes [valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors, and relativizing one's self]” [27, pp. 247–249]. Behavior is influenced by thought and emotion, or intercultural “mindset and skillset” [25, p. 6].

2 Method

2.1 Setting

The program described in this article is called a credit transfer program, a partnership initiative between two universities in the Netherlands and Indonesia that agreed to conduct a joint cooperative program to give student-teachers some international experiences. The

general aim of the courses are: (1) to introduce and open the students' intercultural adaptability, communication, learning, and self-development, and creative problem solving; (2). to give students insight into the diversity of ethnic and culture of Indonesia. It is expected that the international student-teachers will improve their intercultural competence after working in a different culture in the university, the primary school, and the environment.

Various academic and cultural activities were arranged to reach the aims of the program. First, the student-teachers attended the academic and cultural orientation week to discuss academic targets and activities and learn about cultures. They observed the schools and classes and got to know all faculty staff involved in the program. Students were given explanations related to academic subjects such as class schedule, rules of conduct, lecturers and tutors, evaluation, and other problems in terms of academic subjects. They also had a chance to observe the school. They made the first contact with the mentoring teachers, headmaster, and the students during the observation. They were required to write a reflection of what they learned from the schools. They were also introduced to cultural aspects such as life in university, school, and city.

Second, they learn EYL (English for young learners) course, focusing on managing an EYL class in the Indonesian context. Three EYL lecturers facilitate the class and help them with the teaching preparation. They acted as a supervising lecturer during the teaching practicum. Third, they participated in Indonesian language classes and cultural programs facilitated by lectures and student volunteers. They studied Bahasa Indonesia once a week for about 2 h. They also learned traditional dances, arts, and crafts (like making *batik*), cooked conventional local dishes, visited cultural landmarks and heritages (temples, rice fields, etc.), and interacted with local families. Tutors, or student buddies, were provided to assist them in learning about cultures, mainly outside of the classes/universities.

Finally, they conducted the teaching practicum in an elementary school near the university. This activity lasted for about four months. They were obliged to teach children in lower and upper grades independently or in pairs (team teaching). The English teacher mentored them during the practice, supervised by the university lectures, and assisted the tutors. The tutors and mentoring teachers would accompany them in the classes, primarily in the first two weeks of the practice. Before practicing, the student teachers needed to consult their lesson plan with the supervising lecturers and the mentoring teacher.

2.2 Participants

The participants were 7 Dutch student-teachers doing the English teaching practicum in an elementary school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They were arranged to teach in 10 grades 1–5, sometimes independently and most of the time collaboratively. Grade 6 was excluded because the student was preparing for the national examination.

2.3 Procedures

This study is descriptive qualitative. The data were taken from the student-teachers reflection notes, evaluation sheets, and focus group discussions. Because this study

focuses on investigating the cultural issues, the irrelevant data were excluded. Following this, the data gathered were classified based on data types, recorded in an analytical table, and then specified.

3 Findings and Discussions

3.1 Target Learning

Student-teachers need to know their learning goals and target of joining an intercultural program like international teaching practicum. Understanding goals/targets will form a certain level of mental readiness to face cultural differences that sometimes could lead to a culture shock.

This study found that the student-teachers have already known their targets, which can then be classified into two: cultural experience and professional experience. At the end of the program, they all reported reaching their targets and learning a lot from the culture and the schools.

In terms of **cultural experience**, they expected to learn about a new culture (i.e., Indonesian culture and language) and adjust to it to improve their communication skills. The culture includes the system of school and higher education or universities.

“In the school, I have learned a lot and definitely achieved the target. I learned a little bit about Bahasa Indonesia. I wish I could speak the language better, Indonesia and its culture. I learned new things every day and never feel homesick.” (Rs)

“I achieve my targets, and I really want to stay longer to achieve my target better. I think because I totally let me go in a new culture, language, and people. The way I saw the children in my class, I also got the feeling that they felt safe in my class. For some children, it takes longer to accept. For me, it is important to give attention to the children.” (Cl)

They learn Bahasa Indonesia and use this language to communicate with people, especially children in the class. They enjoy this process and appreciate how local people communicate and treat them as novice language users. They also notice that in addition to the national language, people in Indonesia also use some local languages; for example, in Yogyakarta, the locals use Javanese, and while in other regions, the local languages are different. The fact that Indonesia has approximately 300 local vernaculars amazes them, and they understand why the national language needs to be mastered and why English in primary schools is considered a non-priority subject. In addition to the Indonesian language, they perceived that their English was getting better. Because nobody speaks Dutch, they must use English every day to communicate with lecturers, teachers, students, children, and people in general. They also realized that they must adjust themselves to the ‘Indonesian English’ dialect. Besides, they also learn some new words, especially culture-related words, i.e., things and activities closely related to local traditions, occupations, and foods.

In terms of **professional experience**, they expected to get better in English, improve the way to teach English, understand teaching children having different mother tongues with them, and enhance creativity in communication.

“.... I feel a big difference in confidence in the last week of the teaching compared to the first week. I met a lot of people, maybe being open-minded” (El).

“I think I have experience teaching in a new setting. I think I have become a stronger teacher and have a lot of ideas for English classes in the Netherlands.”(Ssn)

“... I’d learned how to teach children with flexibility because I had to think about how can do things in this country.” (Z)

Professionally, they perceived that their teaching skills improved. They learned and tried to understand the local curriculum and the local textbooks; managed and organized the class, resolved conflicts appearing in the class, selected and chose materials and teaching resources suiting the local context. They knew the power of body language and facial expressions when teaching children of different cultures. They believed they could help the children learn English although they do not speak their mother tongue/national language. Nevertheless, they realized that sometimes Bahasa Indonesia and the local language play a role in the classroom, especially when they had to explain difficult concepts or deal with students’ misbehaviors.

3.2 Cultural Challenges

The student-teachers cultural challenges during the practicum were found to align to three themes: school culture, equipment/facilities, the children and language. **First**, they were aware that the school cultures, especially rules and norms, were different from theirs in some ways. Since the beginning of the program, the student-teachers have noticed some cultural differences they faced during the program. They were surprised by some school cultures, such as the “*salim*” (kissing the teacher’s hand) tradition, early school hours, dress codes, and body language. The duration of the lesson is longer. They perceived that the way the home teacher taught was very passive and a little bit boring.

The school’s norms and rules in the two counties are different. In Indonesia, the schools start earlier in the morning, i.e., 7.00 a.m., which means the student’s teachers must get up very early in the morning, which is not part of their habits when they have to teach in the first session. The meeting duration is only a week, so they were less able to meet with students intensively. However, the period of English teaching in Indonesia was longer than in the Netherlands.

Another issue is clothing. According to the rules, all teachers must dress properly and wear certain types of uniforms. During the school program, student-teachers are required to wear a formal dress, which sometimes puts them into trouble; for example, wearing long pants and clothes when the weather is very hot makes them feel uncomfortable in the class as they feel hot and sweaty. However, they could adjust to the new situation well after a while, and they did not mind following all the school norms/rules.

In terms of seating arrangement, students sit in a group while students sit in rows and pairs in Indonesia. Then each time they want the children to work collaboratively, the student-teachers must rearrange the order of this seat. They found that the children sat in pairs and lines, while in the Netherlands, the kids sat in groups of four. Nevertheless, changing the classroom setting was not easy to do and time-consuming.

Second, they reported that learning facilities and resources at school were challenging. The classrooms were not equipped with multimedia, only a whiteboard and board markers/chalks. Because of the conditions, They could not implement the ICT-based teaching. Instead, they needed to adjust with small tables, no air conditioning classes, small-size classrooms, and limited technology. They said that the classrooms in their

country were very different. In most schools in the Netherlands, computers and digital boards are available; books and notes are kept at school, not brought home. Some private schools in Indonesia have similar facilities, but not in this school.

Another challenge had to do with teaching materials. Some of the exercises in the book were too difficult for students. The course books required them to teach objects only found in Indonesia. They needed more time to understand them before teaching them to the children. Another challenge was finding the right material for each level which is also fun for students. They often made their own teaching materials.

Next, regarding the children, they found a big difference between boys and girls. Boys are so loud, most of the girls are shy. The children were excited when the teacher was a foreigner. Some children had little expressions of their thoughts and feelings. Students in Indonesian elementary schools are mostly very shy and reserved. They start to be brave and more active in class after several meetings. Even though the children were sometimes very crowded in class, they were not courageous enough to share their opinions individually. They preferred to answer questions together so that the class became very noisy.

They found that children's names were difficult to memorize. The difficulty in recognizing and remembering this name affects the closeness between the student and the student. They must take the time to get to know the students better and make them confident to discuss all the problems encountered during teaching. Sometimes there are one or two students who are very difficult to understand.

Last, the most noticeable difference is language. Of most concerns were sociocultural barriers and the ability to communicate in the classroom effectively [10]. English is a foreign language for student-teachers also for the children. Most of the children only speak Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese; only a few could speak English well. The student-teachers recognize that they need a little longer to understand the children. Problems experienced by student-teachers occur when they have to clearly explain the exercises that must be done by the children or when they have to manage the class. Because students cannot speak English and student-teachers cannot speak Indonesian at certain moments, they find it difficult to understand concepts or commands correctly. Moreover, because of this language barrier, some students seem to learn only a little throughout the lesson. Another hard thing to deal with was facing students who suddenly cried in the classroom for no apparent reason.

3.3 Efforts and Supports

Handling 25–30 children in a class is not easy, especially when the teacher and pupils do not speak a similar language. During the ITP, student teachers faced multiple challenges in making a cultural adaptation, knowing and playing their roles, and dealing with local language and communication [10]. However, this situation did not discourage them. To manage problems, they employed strategies and approaches categorized into two: creativity, a positive mindset, appreciation, and seeking help.

First, they forced themselves to explore their creativity to solve problems. For example, they explained the exercise with examples and body language rather than a long explanation. They also attempted to improve the following lessons and modified the exercise that was too difficult. Moreover, they used many fun activities such as games

and songs and made some rules to manage the class better. They also the local language, although very limited, to manage the class. For example, they used the local word 'tidak' (No) to prevent children from doing something unwanted or annoying. They indeed faced many problems, but they successfully handled them and got the children's attention in many attempts.

Second, they tried to be very positive and happy, so children felt comfortable and confident. The student-teachers perceived that all reality must be received with patience and awareness. The emphasis of intercultural communication is the intercultural mindset, which usually involves cultural self-awareness, frameworks for making helpful cultural contrasts, understanding cultural generalizations without stereotyping, and maintaining positive attitudes (e.g., curiosity and tolerance of ambiguity) [25]. Such attitudes make intercultural learning become a more meaningful experience.

Third, they appreciated all efforts shown by the children in the class and rewarded the children doing good things with compliments. They believed that they had to trust and accept the children. Understanding and appreciation for differences are the core of a respectful climate that will lead to mutual adaptation and communication [25].

Last, when they could not handle certain issues in the class, they asked for help. They usually communicated with the mentoring teachers who sometimes stay inside the class, especially in the first two weeks of the teaching practicum sessions. When the situation was out of control, they called the 'mentoring teacher.' Language and cultural constraints made it difficult to handle a problem between children.

There are several components that they perceived as supporting factors: human resources and activities. They found that supervising lecturers, mentoring teachers and tutors provided them with a great help. The supervising lecturers helped them understand the local curriculum, facilitated local language learning, assisted with lesson planning, observed and monitored the practice, and provided feedback and evaluation. The mentoring teachers at school helped them with the lesson planning and class management, observing and monitoring the course, and giving feedback. The third was tutors (student volunteers from the host university) who helped and supported local culture adaptation and teaching preparation.

Supporting activities that they found useful were culture and EYL training and consultation sessions before the teaching practicum and feedback provided by supervising lecturers and mentoring teachers after the teaching sessions. The culture orientation week plays an important role in preparing the student-teachers to face cultural differences inside and outside the classrooms. They are aware that in teaching English to children in Indonesia, they should consider local cultures. The feedback helped them notice their strengths and weaknesses and make a further plan for improvement. In addition to people and activities, the friendly and warm atmosphere and the freedom and trust contribute to their teaching practicum success.

This study showed that the student-teachers had already aware of the importance of having intercultural competencies for their future career. They joined the ITP program with clear intercultural learning targets. Their mental readiness to face different cultures contributes to their success in accomplishing the program's goals. Without mental readiness, one who enters a new culture is likely to experience a culture shock that would negatively affect the performance during the program.

The international teaching program has given the student-teachers a meaningful life experience that is useful for their professional career. The exposure to “innovative learning styles, educational materials and curricula contribute to developing their teaching skills [11]. Indonesia has its unique local wisdom and innovation as a developing country, especially in English teaching for young learners. Given limited resources and facilities, Indonesian teachers have their ways to make the learning run well. This thing is what the student-teachers see as a worthy life experience that changes how they see the world. They see how people speak about their own cultures and how they overcome obstacles in their ways. So, by witnessing these, the student-teachers get new skills and knowledge that can be integrated into their teaching strategies [11]. With ITP, student-teachers can compare the two countries, reflect, and take the best part to become their belief about teaching a diverse class.

Unarguably the ITP allows student teachers to put the theories they studied in the English education program into practice. It was their first real teaching experience and their first contact with diverse students in schools in a new role, i.e., as a teacher. In schools, they experience things that they do not predict. What they possibly face in schools during the teaching practice does not always resemble the theories studied in universities. The student-teachers were happy to know that they could deal with all challenges, find some improvement and changes, and become more confident, stronger, and open-minded. Furthermore, they see that flexibility and creativity are important, especially when facing children in the classroom. They tried their best to make the children feel safe with them, although it was not very easy in the beginning. They believe that all knowledge, skills, insight, inspiration they get during the program could be implemented in their home countries.

4 Conclusion

Teaching practicum is one of the important phases of teacher education; therefore, student-teachers should work hard to prepare for it. Some students may find themselves ready while others not due to various factors such as psychological readiness, English competence, and pedagogical competence. Teaching practicum could be a stressful and challenging experience for less capable students, but it might be less stressful but still challenging for the capable ones. Teaching practicum could be a moment in life that could change the students in many ways, for example, their belief about teaching and learning, their capability, their goal of life, their motivation to be or not to be teachers.

Overall, the student-teachers feel that ITP program provides opportunities to improve their intercultural skills and other professional aspects. The program enables them to interact with a new culture and see people presenting their own cultures and speaking for their own culture. They see how they are similar also how they are different as human beings. They also learned how to handle problems caused by cultural differences. Furthermore, they experience various dimensions of one of the host cultures, leading to better understanding and awareness.

To sum up, the ITP helps them understand people and children of different cultures and opens their global perspective useful for their personal and professional lives. All children from whatever cultures need to be given trust, the feeling of safe, attention,

and equal opportunity in the classroom. People have values and beliefs that are worth respecting. In other words, the ITP also develops cultural empathy and sensitivity to different cultures and people [11]. In schools, the student-teachers have to deal with different things resulting from cultural differences. Therefore, the feelings resulting from doing ITP might vary; some students feel a sense of success, and others feel a sense of failure in some aspects. However, the people in charge of EYL teacher education needs to ensure the ITP's success by providing necessary and relevant pre-practicum preparation program that addresses intercultural issues.

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