

## EXPLORING EFL STUDENT TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES ON THE ROLES OF TEACHER MENTORS DURING TEACHING PRACTICUM

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### Abstract

Teacher mentors play a crucial role in supporting and guiding student teachers during their teaching practicum. While the benefits of teaching practicum and mentorship are well-documented, this qualitative study aims to delve deeper into the experiences of five EFL student teachers to understand the role of teacher mentor during student teacher practicum. Through in-depth interviews, the research explores the perceptions of student teachers towards the practicum and mentorship. The results reveal that the role of teacher mentors is positively perceived by most of the students, because most of the mentors play a pivotal role in providing guidance and motivation, desiging a lesson plan and giving constructive feedback. However, some students experienced lack of guidance, support as well as constructive feedback from the teacher mentors. In general, the mentorship aspect is particularly valued, as it offers essential support and professional growth opportunities. However, amidst the positive experiences, the study also uncovers various challenges encountered by student teachers such as lack of class management skill, limited student engagement and active involvement in the learning process, inadequate facilities, limited technology or classroom space and lack of sufficient preparation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The field of education has always recognized the critical role that student-teacher practicum plays in preparing future educators. The practicum experience serves as a bridge between theory and practice in the real context (Min et al., 2015; Yaacob et al., 2014) that typically occurs in the later stages of a teacher education program in enabling aspiring teachers to apply the knowledge and skills gained during their academic coursework in real-world classroom settings. This pivotal component of teacher education programs aims to foster the development of effective teaching practices, pedagogical strategies, and classroom management techniques. Teaching practicum can be claimed as the supervised teaching experience for student teachers in the real context of teaching and learning to support their entry into the teaching profession (Albakri et al., 2021). The teaching practicum program is a compulsory practice course credited by the faculty after students successfully enrolled in teaching-related courses. The main idea of having this annual program is to bridge the novice teacher (student teacher) with experienced teachers at school as their mentors. The mentorship program is expected to accelerate student teachers' skills as the proof of knowledge and skill gained during their study at the university. This program might foster self-esteem for beginning teachers through collaborative opportunities during the program (Karataş & Karaman, 2013).

The teacher education and mentorship programs play a critical role in preparing and supporting future educators. Mentorship can contribute to the development of a reflective

teaching approach among student teachers. Through regular meetings and discussions with mentors, student teachers are encouraged to reflect on their teaching practices, critically analyze their strengths and areas for improvement, and set goals for their professional development. This reflective process enhances their ability to make informed decisions and continuously improve their teaching methods (Ariawan, 2021; Damayanti et al., 2023). Mentors can provide valuable feedback and guide student teachers in self-assessment, helping them identify areas of growth and providing suggestions for further development including comprehensive understanding and skill to interact with school members and to get insight about students' behaviour (Tanjung et al., 2021).

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, teacher mentors significantly impact the professional development and growth of student teachers. Understanding the perspectives and experiences of EFL student teachers regarding the roles of their mentors is essential for enhancing mentorship practices and improving the overall quality of teacher education. Mentors play a critical role in helping student teachers navigate the challenges associated with teaching a foreign language, understanding diverse cultural contexts, and developing effective language teaching strategies. They not only provide subject matter expertise but also serve as role models, offering inspiration and fostering a sense of professionalism, exemplifying professionalism, dedication, and a lifelong commitment to learning, which can inspire student teachers to strive for excellence in their own teaching practice. Teacher mentors in EFL education have the responsibility of equipping student teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to address these challenges effectively (Rahman & Hatomi, 2021). However, it is pivotal to factually investigate student teachers' experience on their teaching practicum especially those closely relate to the role of teacher mentors at school toward effective teaching mentorship. The present research aims to reveal the findings on activities and roles from teacher mentor viewed from student teachers' eyes and highlight the problems encountered by the student teachers.

Previous research has explored various aspects of student teachers' practicum both in international and national level. Many of them have tried to connect relationship between the novice teacher with veteran teacher in the context of bringing student teachers move from micro teaching to macro teaching (Atay, 2007). On the other word, Gan (2013) viewed teaching practicum as an effort to practice the theory to a real experience at school that might avoid them from reality shock. Furthermore, it is also claimed as part of action to bridge the gap between theory and practice which remains as a continous discussion (Agudo, 2016). Furthermore, Carmi & Tamir (2023) called this as a substantive connection between a veteran and a novice teacher. In addition to pedagogical support, this connection is a crucial moment for student teachers in nurturing their personal and professional growth as a future teachers. Mentors should understand their roles because mentoring should involve two-way communication between mentors and mentees, so feedback seems critical for better teaching performance (Maphalala, 2013).

In addition, they can also provide emotional support and create a safe space to share their concerns and reflections. By fostering a supportive and trusting environment, the student teachers build confidence in their abilities and navigate the challenges they encounter in their teaching journey. This confidence is one of significant factors to face a real classroom situation because the main role of teacher is to help students understand the material easier through presenting such interesting and meaningful lesson rather than just teaching and explaining the content (Chasanah & Sumardi, 2022).

A study by Yuan & Lee (2014) revealed that teaching practicum is a process of belief change experienced by the student teacher where they have to adjust with many differences found in the schools. They suggested student teachers to follow several phases or approaches namely confirmation, realization, disagreement, elaboration, integration and modification.

This phases will bring the student teachers toward belief transformation. The change could happen if school mentors play influential pedagogical and sociocultural roles to inform student teachers about a subject matter, appropriate teaching method and assist them during the teaching practices (Gao & Benson, 2012). Another research also suggested student teachers to take an attempt in experiencing reflective activities to enhance their self-awareness and integrate it with pedagogical knowledge and supervisory aid that is beneficial for pedagogical and professional development (Al-Jaro, 2023).

Mentors should be involved in the preparation process before teaching, from designing the lesson plan, monitoring the teaching activities, and engaging in post-lesson reflection activities (Gebhard, 2009; Johnson, 2006). A narrative inquiry study by Gilliland (2015) is one of good examples to understand the role of teacher as a school mentor. She tried to reveal a self-reflected study on her mentoring program as a leading supervisor for an international practicum setting. he tried to reveal a self-reflected study on her mentoring program as a leading supervisor for an international practicum setting. She explained that the mentor should participate in lesson planning, class observation, and reflective activities after teaching. Despite being a teaching model, Gilliland also tried to be a good listener for student teachers and support them in resolving interpersonal or pedagogical problems. Moreover, experiences during the field practicum at school will expose student teachers to the reflective process where they can consider weaknesses and strengths to elevate their efficacy (Chiang, 2008). In this situation, feedback seems very pivotal for the student teachers.

Agudo (2016) addresses the importance of feedbacks toward supportive and effective nature. The students teachers perceive mentors' feedback very positively, especially written feedback that could provide very constructive suggestion toward better teaching performance (Ali & Al-Adawi, 2013). Another research also highlighted that mentors' feedback was perceived as especially constructive and emotionally encouraging (Agudo, 2016). Mentors should understand their roles because the concept of mentoring should necessarily involved two-way communication between mentors and mentees, so feedbacks seems very critical toward better teaching performance (Maphalala, 2013). A study by Keiler et al.,(2020) also indicated the benefits of feedback given by mentors where it might change not only pedagogical aspects but also positive attitudes from the mentees. Furthermore, they also claimed that students might provide constructive and structured feedback to the mentors as feedback should be used to improve teaching performance, class management, and better future mentoring strategies.

Despite the benefits of teacher mentorship, there may be challenges and complexities in the mentor-student relationship within the EFL context. Understanding these challenges and finding strategies to address them are crucial in order to optimize the mentorship experience for student teachers (Sukmojati et al., 2023). From student teachers' side, it is supposed that they find it difficult to manage the classroom and time during the teaching activities which indicates a lack of pedagogical skill (Genç, 2016). Alhamad (2018) proposed other perceptible challenges dealing with pedagogical skill faced by the student teachers such as lack of implementing student-centered approach to effectively manage the class that is pivotal to handle individual differences. In a similar vein, Kabilan et al., (2020) reported four problems namely curriculum, planning of lesson, language proficiency and cultural differences. Student teachers could not comprehensively understand the concept of developing lesson plan and curriculum as well as the implementation of an appropriate approach toward cultural differences among students. Another research pointed the lack of classroom and time management, teachers' strategies and mentors' feedback appropriateness which have a serious impact in establishing supportive learning environment (Genç, 2016).

On the other hand, Chandran et al.,(2022) put the emphasis on the minimum support system with a professional mentoring assistance that causes the increasing workload and lack

of instructional design experienced by the student teachers. Another significant challenge is about the intercultural elements where the student teachers failed to implement intercultural teaching in EFL class (Nindya et al., 2022). It is due to the fact that learning English could not separate from learning culture of the language. Ideally, the EFL teachers should not reveal cross-cultural competence within English subject apart from the linguistic competences. A study by Widiati and Hayati (2019) also reported the same findings where the pre-service teachers were the lack of preparation for Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). It was partly seen from the curriculum of the teacher education institutions, very little of which has been devoted to explicitly developing pre-service teachers' ICC (Gilliland, 2015; Widiati & Hayati, 2018).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed to investigate the perspectives and experiences of student teachers on their teaching practicum. The primary data collection method used was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' thoughts and feelings. The participants consisted of five English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, 3 males and 2 females, enrolled at State Islamic University of Mataram, who had completed their teaching practicum in semester 7 for 3 months. Student teachers are usually assigned to schools, either senior high school, junior high school or elementary school level. There are three main duties of student teachers in this program, namely carrying out teaching practices, assisting educational administration and handling at least one student learning case. At the end of the practicum, they will make a report on these three things.

The use of qualitative interviews provided a rich and nuanced understanding of the student teachers' perspectives on various aspects of their practicum experience, including classroom management, lesson planning, and interactions with students and mentors. Through open-ended questions, the participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences, share personal insights, and offer suggestions for improvement. The qualitative data analysis in this study centered on analyzing students' comments gathered during the interviews. This involved a systematic and iterative process of coding and thematic analysis, allowing the researchers to identify recurring patterns, themes, and emerging insights (Miles & Huberman, 2014). By examining the students' own words and expressions, the study aimed to capture the authentic voices and experiences of the participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and successes they encountered during their teaching practicum. The analysis was conducted in a thematic basis where a similar theme gained from the respondents was coded

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Guidance and motivation**

Based on student teachers' practicum experience, they found that teacher mentors play an essential role in providing guidance and motivation to teach effectively. Four out of five interviewees reported that the teacher mentors provided advice and guidance in the practicum process. They also provided constructive comments during classroom observations in order to improve pedagogical competence. Furthermore, the teacher mentors also provided teaching schedule and told the students how to deal with the existing syllabus. The students perceive the motivation, guidance and support are significantly pivotal for them to grow as professional teachers in the future. The student teachers feel very fortunate interacting with supportive teacher mentors because most of them are not familiar with students'

characteristics and school environment in the beginning. However, the teacher mentors' aid especially in the form of constructive and motivational support is kind of help for the student teachers. They learn not only from suggestions, but also practical experience shown by the mentors during the observation.

R1:

*"Yes. my school mentor always gave me guidance very well and commented on the process I did in class for my improvement and could increase my teaching competence. He also gave me advices and motivation".*

R2:

*"My mentor was not good at guiding. He gave me a schedule and told me how to follow the schedule and syllabus. As a practicum student, I really needed support and guidance from my mentor."*

R3:

*"In the beginning, I felt stiff and had many shortcomings in teaching. I really needed motivation and guidance from my mentor teacher. She asked me to observe her class and understand the students' characteristics. I learned many things, especially managing the class and making students comfortable in learning."*

R4:

*"Because I felt very unfamiliar in a school, I needed motivation from my teacher mentor. They gave me direction and advice on how to teach well. She also helped me when I was struggling with students in the classroom."*

However, one respondent experienced different treatment and assistance shown by the teacher mentor. He highlighted the condition where the teacher mentor did not provide supervision and monitoring during the practicum. The mentor might come to the class but he/she did not comment on the student teachers' teaching performance.

R5:

*"My mentor did not monitor and supervise what I teach in class. So it's like I was not being controlled by him. He sometimes asked me how the learning process was going but he was never in the class for longer time to provide comment".*

### **Designing Lesson Plan**

In a recent research study, five interviewees shared their perceptions regarding teacher mentors, and their responses revealed a consistent positive outlook towards these guiding figures. The interviewees, emphasized the significant impact of teacher mentors in their professional development. One of the most valuable aspects highlighted by the interviewees was the mentors' ability to provide invaluable advice and expertise in designing effective lesson plans. According to the interviewees, the mentorship experience was enriching as they gained essential skills and insights into crafting well-structured and engaging lesson plans. The mentor's guidance not only helped them develop a strong theoretical foundation but also enabled them to translate those concepts into practical classroom applications. The process of lesson planning, which initially seemed daunting to the student teachers, became more approachable and manageable under the watchful eye of their mentors. Moreover, the interviewees expressed that the mentor's support was instrumental in fostering their confidence as future educators. Knowing that they had a knowledgeable and experienced mentor to turn to for guidance reassured them, easing their anxieties and boosting their motivation to excel in their teaching journey.

R2:

*"Yes. my mentor taught me how to make lesson plans well and provided a guide to make it easier for me to design it. This experience is very valuable."*

R4:

*"I got very meaningful practical classroom applications from the teacher mentors because they have a lot of experience so they are able to transfer it to us, especially in terms of designing lesson plans that are interactive and engaging."*

R5:

*"I gained experience and knowledge on how to develop lesson plans that are well-structured and able to make students active. I feel that the presence of the teacher mentor is very meaningful in the practicum process."*

However, two student teachers perceived the mentorship negatively, stating that their mentors did not actively engage in correcting their lesson plans. Instead, the mentors only focused on the final outcome of the lesson plans without providing constructive feedback throughout the process. This lack of involvement and guidance left the student teachers feeling unsupported in their learning journey.

R1:

*"Yes. as I said. he gave me the lesson plan as an example. So I had to design my own lesson plan. He only saw the lesson plan I made, but no comment. If it's not good, I have to change (revise) it myself"*

R3:

*"My mentor just gave me the material book and then I took some photos of what I had to teach in class. For teaching materials, I prepare everything myself and design my own lessons. My mentor only provides material that I have to teach in class, he did not correct anything from my lesson plan which I was not unsure about the quality."*

### **Feedback and Evaluation**

The research findings based on interviews with five participants revealed that teacher mentors are perceived positively by student teachers due to their provision of constructive feedback and evaluation. The interviewees unanimously acknowledged that mentorship played a crucial role in their development as aspiring educators. One key aspect highlighted by the interviewees was the constructive nature of the feedback provided by the mentors. They expressed that the mentors' feedback was insightful and focused on specific areas for improvement. This constructive criticism was seen as invaluable in helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses as teachers, allowing them to make targeted improvements to their teaching practices. Moreover, the evaluation process carried out by the mentors was seen as highly beneficial. The interviewees appreciated the mentor's ability to assess their performance objectively and provide guidance for growth. This evaluation not only boosted their confidence but also gave them a clearer understanding of their progress in their teaching professional journey. The mentors, more technically, suggested them to use appropriate teaching strategies and media to support their class.

Additionally, the mentorship relationship itself was seen as supportive and nurturing. The interviewees felt comfortable seeking guidance from their mentors, and they valued the mentor's willingness to share their own teaching experiences and insights. In conclusion, the positive perception of teacher mentors among the interviewees was rooted in their ability to provide constructive feedback and meaningful evaluations. The feedback is not only in the form of compliment, but also reminder or better suggestion to the teaching performance. This aspect of mentorship was recognized as essential for the professional development of student teachers, fostering an environment of growth, and equipping them with the necessary skills to become effective and confident educators

R1:

*"It is very useful for me with the feedback. it helps me to know my mistakes so that I can be better in the future. I was lucky to get feedback on my teaching techniques, strategies and media."*

R2:

*"Yes he always supervised me, especially how I should organize the class for improvement. Like every after teaching, he always reminded me not to use English and speak English too much and not to push the students too much"*

R3:

*"I loved this part because feedback is very meaningful, even though mentor just commented on me in general. He complemented me on the material, and sometimes he reminded me to engage students during the learning.*

R4:

*"I was very lucky that my mentor teacher evaluated my teaching practice after class so that I knew my strengths and weaknesses as well as the things I need to improve in the next meeting."*

R5:

*"The mentorship during this teaching practicum really shaped me into a future professional teacher. I had certain targets that I need to improve. At the end of the practicum, I felt that I knew my current teaching skills so I knew what I needed to improve. Mentorship was crucial."*

## Challenges

During their teaching practicum, five student teachers encountered a range of challenges that impacted their classroom performance. One prominent issue was the lack of pedagogical skills, making it difficult for them to effectively communicate complex concepts and engage students in meaningful learning experiences. Another common struggle was class management, as they grappled with maintaining discipline and order, leading to disruptions in the learning process. Moreover, some student teachers failed to adopt student-centered approaches, resulting in limited student engagement and active involvement in the learning process. Dealing with unruly and uncooperative students proved to be a recurring obstacle, causing additional stress and hindrance to the teaching process. The inadequate facilities, such as limited technology or classroom space, also added to their challenges, impacting their ability to create an optimal learning environment. Lastly, many student teachers faced issues due to their lack of sufficient preparation, affecting the quality and structure of their lessons. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure a more fulfilling and productive teaching practicum experience for future educators.

R1:

*"During my teaching practicum, I struggled with effectively explaining complex concepts to the students. I lacked the necessary pedagogical skills to make the material accessible and engaging."*

R2:

*"Class management was a big challenge for me. I could not maintain discipline and keep the students focused, which resulted in disruptions during my lessons."*

R3:

*"I realized that I wasn't incorporating enough student-centered approaches in my teaching. As a result, the students seemed disengaged, and I missed opportunities to tap into their interests and motivations."*

R4:

*"Dealing with unruly students was quite overwhelming. It affected my confidence and made it difficult to create a positive and inclusive learning environment."*

R5:

*"The lack of adequate facilities also posed challenges. Limited technology and classroom space hindered my ability to implement interactive activities, making it harder to deliver impactful lessons."*

These statements highlight some of the key challenges faced by the student teachers during their teaching practicum. Each student's experience sheds light on various aspects, such as pedagogical skills, class management, student-centered approaches, handling difficult students, and the impact of facilities on their teaching methods.

The present study delves into the perceptions of five student teachers regarding their experience with mentorship during their teaching practicum. The findings shed light on the positive aspects of mentorship, with the participants expressing a unanimous belief that the mentoring process was incredibly valuable and supportive. Through the guidance and support of their mentors, the student teachers felt empowered and encouraged to enhance their teaching skills, ultimately benefiting their professional development. The present study revealed a similar findings in terms of a positive perception reported by the student teachers. Teaching practicum can be claimed as an endeavor to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life

experiences in schools, aiming to prevent potential reality shock (Gan, 2013). Moreover, as what Agudo (2016) also mentioned that teaching practicum or mentorship program is posited as a means to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Additionally, Carmi & Tamir (2023) refer to this as a pivotal connection between an experienced and a novice educator. Apart from providing pedagogical support, this connection plays a pivotal role in fostering the personal and professional growth of student teachers, preparing them for their future careers as educators. Mentors play a role in transferring their expertise in areas such as designing lesson plans, managing classrooms, and implementing relevant teaching strategies and resources (Atay, 2007; Maphalala, 2013). Furthermore, Barrera et al.,(2010) reported that insightful experience and practice in the first-year teaching practicum is an essential key of success for student teachers because they will get support not only from experienced teachers dealing with teaching practice, but also they will be exposed to school administration and resources material.

One significant aspect highlighted by the participants was the effectiveness of the mentorship in aiding them in the design of lesson plans. The mentorship provided a nurturing environment where the student teachers could experiment with various teaching strategies and implement innovative lesson plans (Genç, 2016; Gilliland, 2015). This practical experience allowed them to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and its real-world application. Consequently, the student teachers gained valuable insights into the complexities of lesson planning, ensuring that their future teaching endeavors would be well-prepared and engaging.

Another crucial factor mentioned by the participants was the provision of constructive feedback by their mentors. The mentors' role extended beyond mere supervision; they actively engaged in assessing the student teachers' teaching practices and offering valuable feedback for improvement (Hudson, 2016). This constructive critique was instrumental in helping the student teachers identify their strengths and areas for development. It is in accordance with study by Chiang, (2008) and Agudo (2016) who believed that feedback can be utilized as a gauge to measure strengths and weaknesses in teaching. This is very relevant for a more successful and professional teaching performance in the future. The feedback mechanism facilitated a reflective teaching practice, encouraging continuous growth and refinement of their teaching skills.

Another significant finding deals with challenges faced by the student teachers. The research findings on the challenges faced by five student teachers during their teaching practicum reveal a comprehensive set of obstacles that can impact the effectiveness of their teaching experiences. The identified challenges include difficulties in employing pedagogical skills, managing classroom behavior, incorporating student-centered approaches, handling disruptive students, and coping with inadequate facilities and preparation. These findings underscore the significance of providing comprehensive training and support for student teachers to better equip them for real classroom situations. Comparing these results with previous studies, there are consistent patterns in the challenges encountered by student teachers during their practicum. Earlier research has also highlighted similar issues related to pedagogical skills, classroom management, and student engagement (Alhamad, 2018; Genç, 2016). Moreover, they struggle with disruptive students and the importance of adequate facilities have been recurring themes in multiple studies (Masadeh, 2017).

These collective findings emphasize the need for teacher preparation programs to address these challenges proactively. Incorporating targeted training sessions on pedagogy, classroom management strategies, and student-centered teaching can better prepare student teachers. Additionally, supporting student teachers in handling behavioral issues and ensuring access to appropriate facilities can significantly enhance their overall teaching practicum experiences. By learning from past research and implementing evidence-based strategies,

teacher education programs can better equip aspiring educators for successful classroom experiences.

Comparing these findings with previous studies in the field of mentorship and teaching practicum, the present research corroborates the consistent positive impact of mentorship on student teachers' professional growth. Several past studies have also reported similar outcomes, attesting to the enduring value of mentorship in teacher preparation programs. The consistency in the findings reinforces the significance of effective mentoring practices in shaping the teaching pedagogy and instilling confidence in aspiring educators.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research findings presented herein reaffirm the invaluable role of mentorship in student teachers' teaching practicum experience. The positive perceptions of the participants shed light on the benefits of mentorship, particularly in giving a guidance and support, facilitating the design of effective lesson plans and fostering a reflective teaching approach through constructive feedback. These findings align with previous research in the field, emphasizing the significance of mentorship in teacher preparation programs. However, some students also claim that they experience mentorship negatively due to lack of guidance and constructive feedback provided by the teacher mentors. Furthermore, the result of the present research also highlight the challenges encountered by the student teachers namely lack of class management skill, limited student engagement and active involvement in the learning process, inadequate facilities, limited technology or classroom space and lack of sufficient preparation that might affect the quality and structure of their lessons. Such insights are vital for the continuous enhancement of teacher education and the cultivation of proficient educators equipped to meet the challenges of the ever-evolving educational landscape. However, the present study involved small-scale research with five student teachers, so wider-scale research is needed to gained a more comprehensive picture of student teachers' perception on mentorship programs.

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