



FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: REFLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF RURAL PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS DURING TEACHING PRACTICUM IN AN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The teaching practicum is a critical component of preparing pre-service teachers, bridging theoretical knowledge and authentic classroom experiences. Despite its importance, there is limited research on how rural pre-service English teachers reflect on their practicum experiences within Islamic educational contexts. This study investigated (1) the reflective processes of rural pre-service English teachers during their teaching practicum, (2) the challenges they faced, and (3) the practicum's contribution to their professional development and teacher identity formation. Utilizing a qualitative exploratory design, the study engaged three pre-service English teachers from an Islamic Higher Education Institution in South Sumatra, Indonesia. Data were collected through written reflective reports and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Four interconnected themes emerged: the development of professional teacher identity through experiential learning, the navigation of student diversity via adaptive teaching practices, the acquisition of ethical and relational teaching dimensions, and the adoption of a holistic teaching mission in Islamic schools. The findings indicate that the teaching practicum functioned as a transformative learning experience, enhancing participants' self-confidence, pedagogical awareness, reflective capacity, and professional competence. Major challenges included student diversity, low English proficiency, limited motivation, and restricted instructional time. Participants demonstrated adaptability by modifying instructional strategies and contextualizing learning materials to address learners' needs. The study also found that the Islamic school context contributed to the development of a holistic teacher identity, encouraging participants to view themselves as language instructors, character educators, moral role models, and facilitators of students' spiritual development. These findings underscore the significance of reflective practicum experiences in fostering adaptive, ethical, and holistic teacher development in rural educational settings.

Keywords: Pre-Service English Teachers, Reflective Practice, Rural Education, Teaching Practicum, Teacher Identity



A. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of English as a global language is driven by global pressures and diverse sociocultural conditions worldwide (da Costa & Rose, 2024; Risnawati et al., 2022). In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language and increasingly viewed as a valuable competence that enables individuals to participate effectively in the digital era and global workforce (Indriyani, 2025; Maria et al., 2026; Ramesh Bahadur Singh, 2024; Rasmin & Samsudin, 2024). In response to these demands, Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) play a crucial role in preparing future English teachers who possess not only linguistic competence but also the adaptability, professional expertise, and resilience required to navigate the complexities of contemporary educational settings (Du et al., 2020; Nakul & Murtafi'ah, 2024).

However, the preparation of pre-service English teachers cannot be reduced to a simple transfer of theoretical knowledge in university classrooms. Contemporary perspectives on teacher education emphasize the importance of experiential learning, whereby professional knowledge is constructed through authentic engagement with a real teaching environment (Mariyam et al., 2025). In this regard, teaching practicum serves as a critical component of teacher education, providing opportunities for pre-service English teachers to apply pedagogical theories, interact with diverse learners, and develop professional judgement through direct classroom experience (Farrol, 2026; Laila et al., 2023). Such experiences allow prospective teachers to test, adapt, and reconstruct their understanding of teaching in response to contextual realities (Fadilah et al., 2023; Rusdiansyah et al., 2025).

The significance of teaching practicum is particularly evident in rural Indonesian contexts, where geographical isolation, limited educational resources, inadequate technological infrastructure, and limited exposure to English pose distinctive challenges for both teachers and learner (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Saputri & Sukarno, 2024). These conditions often intensify the well-documented theory-practice gap in ELT (Kurniawati, 2025; Li & Peng, 2024; Whitehead & Arslan, 2025). While teacher education programs frequently promote innovative pedagogical approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and technology-enhanced learning (Syawallina & Suganda, 2023), pre-service teachers may encounter difficulties implementing these approaches in under-resourced rural classrooms (Candrawati & Purbani, 2025; Edgar & Lautenbach, 2022). As a result, they are required to negotiate tensions between pedagogical ideals and contextual constraints while maintaining their effectiveness as educators (Reynolds et al., 2022).

Although the critical role of teaching practicum in teacher preparation is widely recognized, pre-service English teachers often face considerable challenges in translating pedagogical theories into effective classroom practices, especially within rural school contexts. Throughout the practicum period, pre-service teachers are required to instruct students characterized by highly heterogeneous English proficiency levels, limited vocabulary, low learning motivation, and short attention spans. At the same time, they must navigate constraints such as limited instructional time, inadequate teaching resources, and the broader socio-cultural expectations prevalent in Islamic school communities. These contextual demands frequently compel pre-service teachers to adapt, simplify, or even abandon the instructional strategies acquired during their university coursework. As a result, many pre-service teachers encounter heightened uncertainty, diminished self-confidence, classroom management issues, and difficulties in bridging theoretical knowledge with the practical realities of the classroom. Such experiences

indicate that the teaching practicum constitutes not only a platform for skill application but also a complex process of negotiation, critical reflection, and professional identity formation. Therefore, a deeper understanding of how pre-service teachers perceive and interpret these experiences is essential for enhancing teacher education programs, particularly in underrepresented rural educational settings.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the transformative role of practicum experiences in fostering professional competence. For example, Prastikawati et al. (2024) found that teaching practicum significantly enhanced pre-service teachers' language assessment literacy, while Arrington (2023) reported improvements in self-efficacy and classroom management when working with diverse learners. Similarly, Triyoga et al. (2024) highlighted the role of the international teaching practicum in shaping teacher identity through emotional, pedagogical, and symbolic experiences.

Reflective practice has been widely recognized as a key mechanism by which pre-service teachers make sense of their practicum experiences. Research consistently shows that reflection contributes to professional learning, pedagogical awareness, and the development of self-efficacy. Harahap & Fithriani (2024) reported a positive relationship between reflective practice and professional growth among Indonesian pre-service English teachers. Likewise, Jonathans et al. (2025) found that critical reflection strengthened self-efficacy, pedagogical decision-making, and technology integration during online practicum. Nuraeni & Heryatun, (2021) further identified recollection, reflection in action, and mentoring as important reflective strategies that help pre-service teachers connect theory and practice while developing problem-solving and decision-making skills. From a teacher educator perspective, Cirocki & Widodo, (2019) emphasized the importance of systematic reflective activities in fostering reflective identities among EFL teachers.

Beyond professional competence, reflection also plays an important role identity formation. Studies have shown that teaching practicum serves as a crucial space where pre-service teachers negotiate and reconstruct their professional identities. Özüdoğru, (2021) demonstrated that video-based reflections facilitated the development of pedagogical, didactical, and subject-matter identities, while Ardi et al., (2023) revealed that Indonesian pre-service teachers constructed language, pedagogy, organization role, and spiritually driven identities through professional socialization during practicum. Similarly, Orlova & Kamenická, (2024 and Triyoga et al., (2024) highlighted the influence of emotional experiences, social interactions, and contextual challenges on teacher identity development. These findings suggest that reflective practice extends beyond instructional improvement and contributes significantly to how pre-service teachers understand themselves as future educators.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important gaps remain. First, most studies have been conducted in urban, suburban, international, or technologically supported educational settings. Consequently, little is known about how reflective practice operates in rural schools where limited infrastructure, scarce learning resources, and low exposure to English create significantly different teaching conditions. Second, although many studies have examined self-efficacy, reflective strategies, or identity development as separate constructs, few have explored how these dimensions interact simultaneously during teaching practicum. The dynamic relationship between reflective practice, professional development, emotional experiences, and teacher identity remains underexplored. Third, existing studies rarely explore



the everyday pedagogical dilemmas experienced by rural pre-service English teachers, such as adapting instructional strategies to mixed-ability classrooms, negotiating limited teaching opportunities, balancing classroom management with learner engagement, and responding to students' diverse motivational backgrounds. Fourth, previous studies have largely focused on general universities and mainstream school contexts, with limited attention given to pre-service teachers from Islamic Higher Education Institution (PTKI), whose professional preparation involves both pedagogical competence and moral-religious responsibilities. Finally, much of the existing research relies on quantitative surveys or mix-method designs that emphasize measurable outcomes, providing limited insight into the lived experiences, emotions, and meaning-making processes of pre-service teachers throughout their practicum journey.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the reflective experiences of preservice English teachers from an Islamic Higher Education Institution undertaking teaching practicum in rural Islamic schools in Ogan Komering Ilir, South Sumatra. Drawing on contemporary perspectives of reflective practice, professional development, and teacher identity formation, this study explores how pre-service teachers reflect on their teaching experiences, how they navigate the challenges encounters in rural practicum settings, and how these experiences contribute to their professional development and identity construction. By focusing on rural and religious educational context, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of reflective practice in underrepresented ELT settings and offer practical implications for strengthening teacher education programs in Indonesia. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do rural pre-service English teachers reflect on their teaching practicum experiences? (2) What challenges do they encounter during teaching practicum? (3) How does teaching practicum contribute to their professional development and teacher identity formation?

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how rural pre-service English teachers reflected on their teaching practicum experiences, the challenges they encountered, and how those experiences contributed to their professional development and teacher identity formation. The participants were three pre-service English teachers enrolled in the English Education Department at an Islamic Higher Education Institution in South Sumatra, Indonesia. Participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling. The selection criteria required participants to: (1) be enrolled in the English Education Department, (2) undertake a teaching practicum (PPL), and (3) complete the institutional reflection report at the end of the practicum period. The purpose of participant selection was not to achieve breadth but to obtain rich, reflective narratives that provide nuanced insight into the phenomenon under investigation.

The primary data source consisted of written reflection reports completed by participants at the end of their teaching practicum. As a compulsory component of the practicum programs, students were required to reflect on their overall teaching experiences and respond to a series of open-ended questions concerning the activities they conducted, challenges encountered, strategies employed to address those challenges, lessons learned, and perceived professional growth throughout the practicum period.

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) developed by Braun & Clarke (2021). The analysis followed six recursive phase: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the reflection reports; (2) generating initial codes related to practicum experiences, challenges, coping strategies, professional learning, and identity formation; (3) constructing preliminary themes by identifying meaningful patterns across participant's reflections; (4) reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and distinctiveness; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report supported by representative excerpts from participant's reflection. Throughout the process, the researchers engaged in continuous reflexive interpretation to ensure that themes accurately represented participants' experiences while acknowledging their active role in the analysis.

C. FINDINGS

The analysis of the reflective reports produced four interconnected themes that explain how rural pre-service English teachers experienced teaching practicum (PPL) in rural Islamic schools. The themes were: (1) Developing Professional Teacher Identity through Experiential Learning, (2) Navigating Student Diversity through Adaptive Teaching Practices, (3) Learning the Ethical and Relational Dimensions of Teaching, and (4) Embracing the Holistic Mission of Teaching in Islamic Schools. These themes address the three research questions and collectively demonstrate that teaching practicum functions as a transformative process through which pre-service teachers negotiate professional competence, contextual challenges, and identity formation.

Table 1. Themes Generated from Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Research Questions	Categories	Theme
RQ1	Authentic teaching experiences; confidence; reflective awareness	Developing Professional Teacher Identity through Experiential Learning
RQ1	Professional ethics; relationship; collaboration	Learning the Ethical and Relational Dimensions of Teaching
RQ2	Student diversity; classroom challenges; adaptive instruction	Navigating Student Diversity through Adaptive Teaching Practices
RQ3	Teacher roles; Islamic educational values; identity formation	Embracing the Holistic Mission of Teaching in Islamic Schools

Developing Professional Teacher Identity through Experiential Learning

The first theme indicates that participants viewed the teaching practicum as a process of becoming a teacher, rather than merely fulfilling academic requirements. Authentic teaching experiences enabled the transformation of conceptual knowledge acquired at university into professional understanding through direct engagement with classroom practice. Participants' reflections suggest that professional identity is developed through three interconnected processes, as outlined below:

Assuming Authentic Teaching Responsibilities

All participants described their practicum as involving responsibilities beyond classroom teaching. Their reflections indicate that professional learning emerged from participation in the daily routines of school life, including lesson planning, classroom observation, student assessment, and school activities.

Participant 1 explained, *“During the practicum, I taught students in the classroom, delivered learning materials, guided students during learning activities, and assessed their learning outcomes”*. Similarly, Participant 2 reflected *“During the first week, I conducted classroom observation to understand students’ characteristics. Afterwards, I prepared lesson plans, taught the lessons, and assessed students’ assignments”*. Unlike the other participants, Participant 3 experienced broader involvement in school programmes *“I actively helped with many school activities because the school had numerous programmes. Besides teaching, I participated in activities outside the classroom together with teachers and students”*.

These thoughts indicate that participants gradually recognized teaching as a multidimensional profession encompassing instructional, administrative, and team-oriented responsibilities, rather than viewing it solely as classroom instruction.

Building Confidence through Authentic Teaching Experiences

Another significant finding relates to the gradual development of confidence. Participants consistently reported that confidence emerged through repeated interactions with students, rather than from prior university preparation.

Participant 1 stated, *“I became more confident when delivering learning materials. This experience improved my understanding of TEFL because I could apply what I had learned while teaching”*. Similarly, Participant 3 reflected, *“At first I felt stiff and confused about what to teach and what to say. Over time, my confidence gradually developed”*. Such reflections suggest that confidence evolved through authentic instructional engagement, permitting participants to become familiar with instructional practices and classroom communications. Participant 2 presented a different perspective by focusing on his own limitations. He stated, *“There are still many weaknesses in my teaching that require adjustment and more experience”*.

This reflection does not indicate unsuccessful teaching; rather, it demonstrates increasing professional awareness. The ability to recognize personal limitations reflects the emergence of reflective thinking, in which professional competence is understood as a developmental process rather than a fixed achievement.

Developing Reflective Awareness of Professional Growth

Participants consistently evaluated their strengths and weaknesses as pre-service teachers. Reflection extended beyond the description of classroom events and served as a means of recognizing areas for continuous improvement.

Participant 1 recognized communication as one of her strengths while identifying classroom management as an area requiring further development. She said, *“I can communicate well with students and create an enjoyable instructional atmosphere. However, I still find it difficult to manage the classroom when students become less conducive”*. Moreover, Participant 2 identified confidence and communication as his principal weaknesses. He stated, *“My strength is understanding English texts, while my weaknesses are confidence and communication skills”*. Besides, Participant 3 demonstrated more extensive self-evaluation. She stated, *“My strengths include adapting materials when teaching time is limited and engaging students through songs, games, and topics they enjoy. My weaknesses are time management, handling*



passive students, over-correcting speaking, and balancing attention between up and low learners”.

Across these three cases, participants showed increasing awareness that professional competence requires continuous reflection and improvement. Instead of measuring success solely by students’ learning outcomes, they evaluated their pedagogical decisions, classroom communications, and overall professional performance. In summary, participants regarded the teaching practicum as an experiential learning process that facilitated their transition from university students to beginning teachers. Authentic teaching responsibilities, repeated classroom interactions, and reflective self-evaluation enabled the construction of an emerging professional identity characterized by increasing confidence, pedagogical awareness, and commitment toward continuous professional development.

Navigating Student Diversity through Adaptive Teaching Practices

The second theme highlights the pedagogical and contextual challenges participants encountered during their teaching practicum. Across the three reflective reports, participants consistently described rural classrooms as heterogeneous learning environments characterized by differences in English proficiency, motivation, participation, vocabulary mastery, and learning speed. Instead of implementing lesson plans exactly as prepared, participants persistently adapted their training practices in response to classroom realities. Their reflections indicate that the teaching practicum became a process of pedagogical negotiation through which conceptual knowledge was transformed into context-sensitive instructional practice. Three interconnected subthemes emerged from the analysis, as follows:

Encountering Diverse Learner Characteristics

The most frequently reported challenge concerned the diversity of students' learning abilities. Participants regularly observed substantial differences in learners' language proficiency, learning pace, motivation, and classroom participation.

Participant 1 explained that students required different levels of instructional support. She stated, *“Every student is different. Some respond quickly, while others need repeated explanations before they understand the lesson”*. This reflection demonstrates that classroom instruction requires continuous differentiation rather than uniform delivery of learning materials. Similarly, Participant 2 observed that students' limited English proficiency and short attention span influenced classroom interaction. He reported, *“Students are easily distracted, and their English ability is still limited”*. Unlike Participant 1, who emphasized differences in comprehension, Participant 2 highlighted behavioral engagement as an important classroom challenge. His reflection indicates that maintaining students' attention became an essential part of instructional practice. Besides, Participant 3 identified students' varying learning motivation as another major challenge. She said, *“Students have different levels of motivation. Some actively participate in learning activities, while others are less motivated”*. Participant 3 further explained that many students possessed limited vocabulary, making communication in English particularly difficult. She reported, *“Students' vocabulary is still limited, so I focused on teaching vocabulary repeatedly until they gradually understood the material.”*

Cooperatively, these thoughts indicate that learner diversity exceeded language proficiency to include cognitive, behavioral, and motivational differences. Participants therefore recognized

that effective instruction required responsiveness to individual learners' needs rather than reliance on standardized teaching procedures.

Confronting Contextual Teaching Challenges

In addition to learner diversity, participants encountered contextual constraints that influenced instructional practice. These problems reflected the realities of teaching in rural Islamic schools, where classroom instruction was closely connected to the wider learning context.

One important challenge concerned classroom management. Participant 1 acknowledged difficulties in keeping a successful learning environment. She stated, *"My weakness is managing the classroom when students become less conducive"*. Her insight suggests that successful teaching depended not only on content knowledge but also on the ability to organize and manage classroom interaction effectively. Additionally, Participant 2 emphasized the challenge of developing teacher confidence. He stated, *"The challenge is not only the students. Teachers themselves must be confident and able to explain lessons clearly"*. This statement demonstrates that participants interpreted teaching challenges as involving both learner-related and teacher-related factors. Rather than attributing instructional difficulties solely to students, Participant 2 recognized his own professional readiness as an important determinant of classroom effectiveness. Participant 3 described another contextual constraint associated with limited instructional time. She stated, *"There were many school activities, so classroom learning time was limited. As a result, my interaction with students was also limited."* Her assessment reveals how institutional schedules influenced instructional opportunities. Because considerable time was allocated to school programmes and religious activities, teachers were required to make the most of the limited classroom time.

For all participants, teaching challenges appeared from interactions among learner characteristics, institutional conditions, and the development of beginning teachers' professional competence.

Developing Adaptive Pedagogical Practices

Although participants experienced numerous challenges, their reflections reliably demonstrated adaptive responses. Rather than viewing contextual constraints as barriers to teaching, they modified instructional practices to accommodate students' needs and classroom realities.

Participant 1 simplified her explanations and connected learning materials with students' common experiences. She reported, *"I simply explained the material and gave examples from students' daily lives"*. This strategy enabled students to relate English learning to familiar contexts, therefore facilitating comprehension. Similarly, Participant 2 pointed out the importance of simplifying instruction. He said, *"Teachers should explain lessons simply and efficiently so that students can understand them more easily."* Although expressed differently, Participant 1 and Participant 2 shared the notion that effective instruction required clarity, simplicity, and responsiveness to students' abilities. Participant 3 reported employing a wider range of adaptive approaches. She stated, *"I focused only on the essential material, used ice-breaking activities, games, quizzes, and rewards, and connected lessons with students' hobbies."* She also explained that repetition became an important instructional strategy. She wrote, *"I repeatedly reviewed previous lessons until students understood the material, even if not everyone mastered it completely."* Her statement illustrates that learning was viewed as a

gradual process that demanded continuous reinforcement rather than a one-time explanation. Another notable finding concerns participants' implementation of TEFL principles. When asked how they applied approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching or Task-Based Learning, participants rarely referred explicitly to formal pedagogical methodologies. Instead, they described contextual instructional decisions grounded in students' actual learning conditions. Participant 1 explained, *"I changed my teaching according to students' abilities because many of them had not fully understood the previous lesson."* Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized repetition and recycling. She said, *"For beginner learners, repetition and recycling are more appropriate because students need continuous practice before understanding the material."* These thoughts suggest that participants increasingly relied on classroom evidence instead of theoretical prescriptions when making instructional decisions. Their pedagogical knowledge became progressively contextualized through experience.

Although participants completed their practicum in different Islamic schools, their experiences manifest remarkable similarities. Participant 1 primarily focused on instructional adaptation, particularly on simplifying explanations and differentiating instruction to match students' learning rhythms. Participant 2 reflected more analytically on his own professional readiness, emphasizing confidence, communication skills, and effective explanation as prerequisites for successful teaching. Participant 3 reported the widest variety of adaptive instructional strategies, including games, rewards, vocabulary recycling, and interest-based learning activities, largely because her practicum context involved limited classroom time and extensive school programmes. Despite these individual differences, all participants showed a significant shift in pedagogical thinking. Initially, teaching was viewed as delivering prepared lesson plans. By the end of the practicum, effective teaching was increasingly understood as the skill of interpreting classroom situations, responding flexibly to learners' needs, and modifying instruction according to contextual realities.

The findings show that student diversity constituted the main challenge experienced by rural pre-service English teachers during their teaching practicum. Participants encountered substantial variation in students' language proficiency, motivation, classroom participation, and learning rhythm, while simultaneously negotiating contextual constraints, for example, limited instructional time and developing professional confidence. Instead of rigidly applying university-based pedagogical theories, participants exhibited adjustable teaching practices by simplifying explanations, contextualizing learning materials, implementing games and rewards, and consolidating learning through repetition and recycling. These flexible responses illustrate the development of practical pedagogical judgement grounded in authentic classroom experience and reflective decision-making.

Learning the Ethical and Relational Dimensions of Teaching

The third theme highlights that participants' professional learning reached beyond pedagogical competence to include ethical values and interpersonal relationships. Throughout the practicum, participants increasingly recognized that effective teaching does not involve only delivering instructional content but also exhibiting professional character, building meaningful relationships, and serving as positive role models within the school community. Their reflections reveal that the teaching practicum functioned as a process of ethical socialization through which they internalized the values, behaviors, and professional norms expected of teachers in Islamic schools. Three interrelated subthemes emerged from the analysis:

Developing Professional Character

Participants consistently identified professional character as one of the most valuable lessons gained during the practicum. Instead of defining effective teaching solely in terms of instructional competence, they emphasized personal qualities that influence teacher–student interactions and the fulfilment of professional responsibilities.

Participant 1 reflected that patience and responsibility were essential characteristics of teachers. She stated, *“I learned that a teacher must have great patience and responsibility. In addition, teachers ought to maintain good communication with students.”* Her report demonstrates that professional competence was closely associated with emotional management and responsibility rather than merely classroom performance. Similarly, Participant 2 highlighted several professional values that he believed should guide teachers' daily practice. He stated, *“Teachers should be patient, disciplined, and honest while continuing good relationships with students, fellow teachers, and the principal.”* Unlike Participant 1, whose reflection focused primarily on teacher–student interaction, Participant 2 extended professionalism to include ethical conduct within the wider school community.

Participant 3 provided a more detailed description of the professional character demonstrated by teachers in her practicum school. She argued, *“Teachers here are flexible and sincere in carrying out their responsibilities. They are disciplined, maintain proper manners, and dress appropriately.”* She further observed that teachers balanced firmness with gentleness when interacting with students. Participant 3 stated, *“Teachers are firm and warm toward student”*. These thoughts indicate that participants constructed their understanding of professionalism through direct observation of experienced teachers. Rather than learning professional values from formal instruction alone, they internalized ethical behaviors that were consistently modelled in everyday school life.

Building Professional Relationships within the School Community

Another important finding concerns participants' growing awareness of the relational nature of teaching. Across the three cases, participants recognized that successful teaching depends not only on effective interaction with students but also on collaborating with colleagues and communicating constructively with school leaders.

Participant 1 recognized the importance of establishing positive communication with students to create an encouraging learning environment. She said, *“Teachers ought to maintain good communication with students.”* Although brief, this examination indicates that effective classroom interaction involves mutual understanding and trust rather than one-way transmission of knowledge. Participant 2 similarly pointed out the crucial nature of maintaining harmonious relationships across the school community. He argued, *“Teachers ought to maintain good relationships with students, fellow teachers, and the principal.”* His reflection suggests that professional conduct reaches beyond classroom instruction to include collaboration and institutional cooperation. Participant 3 offered a richer description of interpersonal relationships observed during her practicum. She stated, *“Teachers collaborate, remain friendly, and support each other. Their relationship with the principal is engaged and goal-oriented.”* Her commentary demonstrates that collaboration was viewed as a normal and essential aspect of teachers' professional practice. Participants also recognized that effective relationships with students require balancing authority and empathy. Teachers were expected to maintain discipline while simultaneously establishing an atmosphere in which students felt

respected and supported. Collectively, these reflections illustrate those participants increasingly perceived teaching as a collaborative profession embedded within a wider community of practice, rather than as an individual classroom activity.

Understanding Teaching as an Ethical Commitment

The practicum also transformed participants' comprehension of the broader purpose of teaching. Initially, they associated teaching primarily with lesson delivery and classroom instruction. By the end of the practicum, they increasingly viewed teaching as an ethical responsibility to support students' academic, personal, and moral development.

Participant 1 reflected on this transformation by recognizing that teachers have responsibilities extending above academic instruction. She reported, *"An English teacher not only teaches subject matter but also guides students to become better individuals by developing discipline and responsibility."* This reflection demonstrates an expanded conception of teaching in which education involves nurturing students' character alongside academic achievement. Participant 2 similarly acknowledged the demanding nature of the teaching profession. He stated, *"Being a teacher is a heavy responsibility. Many things still need to be learned and improved."* Rather than portraying competence as something already achieved, he interpreted teaching as a profession requiring continuous learning and self-improvement. Participant 3 also expressed a strong commitment to lifelong professional development. She reflected, *"Although my current skills are still limited, I believe I will continue improving my English proficiency and build professional networks so that I can teach students more effectively in the future."* Her reflection indicates that ethical responsibility encompasses not only commitment to students but also commitment to continuous professional growth.

For all participants, ethical commitment emerged as a defining feature of their developing professional identities. Becoming a teacher was understood as an ongoing process of self-improvement aimed at better serving learners and the wider school community.

Despite differences in their practicum contexts, participants demonstrated remarkable consistency in their understanding of professional ethics. Participant 1 primarily emphasized patience, responsibility, and caring communication as essential characteristics of teachers. Participant 2 highlighted honesty, discipline, confidence, and lifelong professional learning. Participant 3 described professionalism more holistically, integrating sincerity, collaboration, discipline, respectful interaction, and continuous self-development. These differences reflect varying practicum experiences; however, they converge in portraying professionalism as a combination of pedagogical competence, ethical values, and interpersonal responsibility. Importantly, participants did not describe ethical learning as a separate component of teacher education. Instead, ethical understanding developed naturally through observation, participation, and reflection within the daily life of the school community. The teaching practicum, therefore, functioned as a form of professional enculturation in which participants gradually adopted the values and norms of the teaching profession.

The findings demonstrate that the teaching practicum contributed substantially to participants' ethical and relational development. Through continuous interaction with students, mentor teachers, colleagues, and school leaders, participants learned that effective teaching depends not only on pedagogical expertise but also on patience, responsibility, honesty, discipline, collaboration, empathy, and lifelong learning. Professional identity was therefore shaped

through the internalization of ethical values and interpersonal practices that characterize teachers' everyday work in rural Islamic schools.

Embracing the Holistic Mission of Teaching in Islamic Schools

The fourth theme demonstrates that the Islamic school context significantly shaped participants' understanding of what it means to become an English teacher. Although participants initially expected the practicum to focus primarily on English-language instruction, their reflections reveal that teaching in Islamic schools entailed broader responsibilities, including students' academic, moral, behavioral, and spiritual development. Through participation in classroom activities, school programmes, and religious routines, participants gradually reconstructed their professional identities as holistic educators rather than solely as subject specialists.

Expanding the Teacher's Role Beyond Language Instruction

Participants consistently reported that English teachers in Islamic schools were expected to perform multiple educational roles extending beyond classroom instruction. Participant 1 reflected, *"I realized that an English teacher not only teaches English but also guides students to become better individuals by developing discipline and responsibility."* Her reflection indicates a significant shift from viewing teaching as language instruction to understanding it as character formation. Participant 3 described an even broader range of responsibilities: *"Teachers do not only educate students academically but also guide them in Qur'an recitation, Al-Ma'tsurat, memorization, and obligatory as well as voluntary prayers."* This reflection demonstrates that English teachers were actively involved in the school's broader educational mission, participating in religious and character-building activities alongside academic instruction. Across participants, the practicum broadened their understanding of teaching from a subject-specific role to a multidimensional educational responsibility.

Integrating Moral and Spiritual Responsibilities into Professional Practice

Another important finding concerns participants' growing awareness that academic teaching was closely connected with students' moral and spiritual development. Participant 3 observed that teachers consistently supported students' religious practices and daily behaviors. She stated, *"Teachers are involved in guiding students' religious practices and helping them develop good behaviors throughout daily school activities."* Similarly, Participant 1 recognized that teachers help shape students' attitudes, discipline, and responsibility, as well as their academic success. These reflections indicate that participants increasingly viewed education as a holistic process in which language learning, character development, and spiritual guidance were integrated instead of treated as separate domains.

Constructing a Holistic Teacher Identity

The practicum ultimately encouraged participants to reconstruct their professional identities. Rather than identifying themselves solely as future English teachers, they increasingly perceived themselves as educators responsible for multiple dimensions of students' development. This transformation was evident in participants' future professional aspirations. The data analysis revealed that Participant 1 planned to improve both her English proficiency and teaching skills. Participant 2 emphasized the development of confidence, communication skills, and classroom management. Participant 3 highlighted continuous professional learning and professional networking to become a more effective educator.



Although each participant emphasized different developmental goals, all viewed professional growth as a lifelong process oriented toward serving students more effectively. Notably, these aspirations were grounded not only in improving pedagogical competence but also in becoming educators who could contribute positively to students' academic, personal, and spiritual development.

In summary, the four themes demonstrate that the teaching practicum constituted a multidimensional process of professional transformation. Participants' reflections reveal that becoming an English teacher was not limited to the application of pedagogical theories acquired at university. Rather, professional learning emerged through continuous interaction with authentic teaching experiences, contextual adaptation, reflective self-evaluation, ethical engagement, and participation in the broader educational culture of Islamic schools. Across the three research questions, participants consistently portrayed the practicum as a space for negotiating learner diversity, strengthening professional competence, developing adaptive pedagogical judgement, internalizing ethical values, and gradually reconstructing their identities as future English teachers. The findings further indicate that the rural Islamic school context played a distinctive role in shaping teacher identity by integrating pedagogical, moral, and spiritual responsibilities into participants' understanding of the teaching profession. Consequently, the teaching practicum should be understood not merely as a field-based academic requirement, but as a critical site of reflective professional identity formation through which rural pre-service English teachers develop the capacity to become reflective, adaptive, ethical, and holistic educators.

Discussions

Reflection as Professional Learning: Learning to Become a Teacher through Authentic Experience

The findings demonstrate that the teaching practicum functioned as a transformative professional learning experience through which rural pre-service English teachers reconstructed their understanding of teaching and their roles as future educators. Rather than perceiving the practicum as merely an academic requirement, participants regarded it as an opportunity to engage directly with authentic classroom realities, undertake professional responsibilities, and critically evaluate their own development. Reflection, therefore, became more than a post-teaching activity; it served as a mechanism through which participants interpreted experience, constructed professional meaning, and developed their emerging teacher identities.

A key finding is that participants' reflections were grounded primarily in authentic teaching experiences rather than university-based theoretical knowledge. Although they acknowledged that TEFL courses provided an important pedagogical foundation, they consistently reported that professional understanding became meaningful only when theory was tested in real classroom contexts. Activities such as lesson planning, classroom instruction, assessment, and interaction with students enabled participants to appreciate the complexity of teaching in ways that could not be fully anticipated during university study. This finding suggests that professional learning is situated within authentic educational practice, where teachers continuously interpret classroom events, make pedagogical decisions, and respond to contextual demands.



Another important finding concerns the gradual development of professional confidence. Participants reported that confidence emerged through repeated teaching experiences rather than existing before entering the classroom. Initial uncertainty regarding instructional delivery, communication, and classroom management gradually diminished as they became more familiar with students and classroom routines. At the same time, participants demonstrated strong self-awareness by recognizing their limitations in classroom management, communication skills, pedagogical competence, and English proficiency. Rather than interpreting these limitations as failures, they viewed them as opportunities for continuous learning and professional improvement, reflecting a developmental perspective in which teaching competence evolves through experience and reflection.

These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of reflective practice in teacher education. Harahap & Fithriani (2024) argue that reflective practice strengthens teachers' ability to evaluate instructional experiences critically and improve their pedagogy, while Nuraeni & Heryatun, (2021) found that reflection helps pre-service teachers connect theoretical knowledge with classroom realities and supports informed instructional decision-making. Similarly, Cirocki & Widodo, (2019) emphasized that reflection contributes not only to pedagogical improvement but also to the formation of professional identity. The present study extends these findings by showing that reflective learning is particularly significant in rural educational contexts, where limited resources, heterogeneous learner abilities, and low exposure to English require continuous adaptation and reflective judgement.

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in its rural context. Contrasting many previous studies conducted in urban or well-resourced schools, participants experienced classrooms characterized by diverse proficiency levels among learners, limited instructional resources, and restricted opportunities to use English. These contextual realities shaped their reflections and encouraged them to negotiate the gap between pedagogical knowledge acquired at university and the practical demands of rural classrooms. Interestingly, participants rarely evaluated their practicum based on the successful implementation of specific teaching methods. Instead, they emphasized meaningful interactions with students, increasing confidence, professional responsibility, and continuous self-improvement. This finding suggests that novice teachers construct professional knowledge primarily through authentic teaching experiences and reflective engagement rather than through the application of predetermined instructional methods.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that reflection acted as a bridge between classroom experience and professional development. Participants went beyond describing classroom events by analyzing why certain instructional decisions were effective, identifying the causes of challenges, and considering strategies for future improvement. Reflection, therefore, transformed experience into professional knowledge that informed subsequent teaching decisions. This demonstrates that meaningful professional learning depends not simply on accumulating teaching experience but on critically interpreting that experience.

Overall, the findings suggest that teaching practicum should be understood as a dynamic professional learning environment in which pre-service teachers progressively develop pedagogical understanding, professional confidence, and reflective capacity through authentic classroom engagement. Reflection serves as the central mechanism linking experience, interpretation, and professional growth, enabling pre-service teachers to construct increasingly

sophisticated understandings of teaching within the realities of rural education. Accordingly, teacher education programmes should integrate systematic reflective practice into the practicum through guided mentoring, structured reflective activities, and collaborative dialogue to strengthen sustainable professional learning.

Negotiating Rural Classroom Challenges through Adaptive Teaching Practices

The findings indicate that the challenges encountered by rural pre-service English teachers during teaching practicum were multidimensional, encompassing instructional, personal, contextual, and institutional factors. Rather than facing isolated classroom problems, participants navigated teaching environments characterized by learner diversity, limited exposure to English, varying levels of motivation, restricted instructional time, and their own developing professional competence. These findings suggest that the rural practicum is a continuous process of negotiating pedagogical expectations with contextual realities.

A major challenge involved the diversity of students' English proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, motivation, participation, and learning speed. Such heterogeneity required participants to adapt their instruction beyond their original lesson plans by simplifying explanations, repeating material, and modifying classroom activities in response to students' responses. This finding is consistent with Baharuddin & Burhan (2025) and Saputri & Sukarno (2024), who argue that learner diversity in rural classrooms requires flexible and responsive teaching while shaping teachers' reflective practices. Contextual constraints further influenced instructional implementation. Limited teaching hours, competing school programmes, and numerous extracurricular and religious activities reduced opportunities for sustained language learning. At the same time, participants experienced personal challenges, including low confidence, classroom management difficulties, communication problems, and uncertainty in explaining learning materials. Similar concerns have been reported by Arrington (2023) and Mariyam et al. (2025), suggesting that these challenges represent a normal stage of professional development rather than inadequate preparation.

Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated considerable adaptability. They simplified instructional explanations, used examples from students' everyday lives, recycled learning materials, incorporated games and quizzes, and connected lesson content with students' interests. These strategies illustrate the emergence of adaptive teaching competence, whereby teachers continuously interpret classroom situations and adjust instruction according to learners' needs. Rather than developing through the mechanical application of teaching methods, this competence emerged through authentic classroom experience and reflective practice.

The findings also contribute to discussions on the theory–practice gap in English language teacher education. Although participants had learned approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) at university, implementing these methods in rural classrooms required substantial adaptation because of students' limited English proficiency and contextual constraints. This finding supports Reynolds et al. (2022), Li & Peng (2024), and Whitehead & Arslan, 2025, who argue that adapting pedagogical theories to local contexts reflects professional responsiveness rather than deficiencies in teacher preparation.



Mostly, participants came to understand effective teaching as a process of contextual responsiveness rather than simply applying predetermined instructional methods. The rural practicum, despite its limited resources, became a valuable environment for developing flexibility, creativity, reflective judgement, and professional resilience. Therefore, the challenges encountered during practicum should be viewed not merely as obstacles but as important opportunities for professional learning. These findings highlight the need for teacher education programmes to prepare future English teachers not only with sound pedagogical knowledge but also with the adaptive competencies required to teach effectively in diverse and resource-constrained educational settings.

Teaching Practicum as a Facilitator for Professional Development and Teacher Identity Formation

The findings demonstrate that the teaching practicum contributed to participants' professional development beyond the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and instructional skills. Participants described the practicum as a transformative experience that strengthened their professional confidence, reflective awareness, ethical commitment, and understanding of the responsibilities of becoming English teachers. Professional development, therefore, emerged as a holistic process encompassing pedagogical, interpersonal, cognitive, and personal growth through authentic participation in school life.

A significant outcome of the practicum was participants' recognition that teaching requires continuous learning. Although they acknowledged limitations in classroom management, instructional delivery, communication skills, and English proficiency, they viewed these weaknesses as opportunities for future improvement rather than signs of failure. Their reflections revealed a commitment to enhancing pedagogical competence, communication skills, English proficiency, and teaching experience, indicating a lifelong learning orientation. These findings are consistent with Harahap & Fithriani (2024), who argue that reflective practice promotes sustainable professional learning, and Jonathans et al. (2025), who found that reflection enhances self-efficacy and pedagogical decision-making through continuous evaluation of teaching practice.

Beyond professional competence, the practicum played a crucial role in shaping participants' teacher identity. Throughout the practicum, participants gradually shifted from perceiving themselves as university students to recognizing themselves as teachers responsible for students' learning, development, and well-being. This transformation was reflected in their growing sense of professional responsibility, ethical commitment, and continuous self-improvement. The findings support Ardi et al., (2023) and Özüdoğru, (2021), who emphasize that teacher identity develops through professional experience and reflective interpretation rather than through formal teacher education alone. The present study extends this literature by showing that teacher identity is continuously negotiated within the contextual realities of rural schools.

A distinctive contribution of this study is its examination of the influence of the Islamic school context on teacher identity formation. Participants recognized that English teachers were expected not only to teach language but also to guide students' moral, religious, and character development through activities such as Qur'anic recitation, daily prayers, and other religious programmes. Consequently, they began to perceive themselves as facilitators of learning, character educators, moral role models, mentors, and lifelong learners. This finding extends



previous studies on teacher identity (Ardi et al. (2023); Orlova & Kamenická, (2024); Triyoga et al., (2024)) by demonstrating that, within Islamic educational settings, teacher identity also incorporates ethical and spiritual responsibilities alongside pedagogical competence.

The findings further indicate that identity formation was shaped through participants' interactions with experienced teachers, school leaders, and students. By observing teachers' patience, discipline, professionalism, sincerity, and collaboration, participants gradually internalized these professional values into their own understanding of effective teaching. Reflection also played a central role in this process, enabling participants to interpret classroom experiences beyond instructional concerns and connect them with their professional beliefs and future aspirations. Thus, teacher identity emerged not automatically from teaching experience but through continuous reflective interpretation of that experience.

Overall, the findings suggest that teaching practicum should be understood as a multidimensional process of professional transformation. Through authentic teaching experiences, reflective practice, and participation in the educational culture of rural Islamic schools, participants simultaneously developed professional competence, reflective awareness, ethical understanding, and teacher identity. These findings reinforce the importance of positioning teaching practicum as a professional learning environment where future English teachers develop not only instructional expertise but also the reflective, adaptive, ethical, and holistic identities required to teach effectively in diverse educational contexts.

D. CONCLUSION

This study explored how rural pre-service English teachers reflected on their teaching practicum experiences, the challenges they encountered, and how the practicum contributed to their professional development and teacher identity formation. The findings revealed that the teaching practicum served as a transformative learning experience through which participants developed professional competence, negotiated contextual challenges, and constructed their emerging identities as teachers.

First, participants reflected on the practicum as a process of becoming a teacher. Through direct engagement with classroom instruction, lesson planning, assessment, and school activities, they developed greater self-confidence, professional awareness, and reflective capacity. Their reflections demonstrated that professional growth was achieved not only through successful teaching experiences but also through critical evaluation of their strengths and limitations. Furthermore, participants recognized the importance of ethical values and interpersonal relationships, highlighting that effective teaching requires patience, responsibility, professionalism, and meaningful engagement with students and the broader school community.

Second, the study identified student diversity as the most significant challenge encountered during the practicum. Participants varied in English proficiency, motivation, participation, and learning readiness, particularly in rural educational settings. These challenges were further compounded by limited instructional time and participants' own novice status as teachers. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrated that pre-service teachers responded adaptively by modifying instructional strategies, contextualizing learning materials, and implementing learner-centered activities to address students' needs. Such experiences enabled them to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired at university and the practical realities of classroom teaching



Third, the practicum made a substantial contribution to participants' professional development and identity formation. Authentic teaching experiences strengthened their pedagogical awareness, self-efficacy, and understanding of professional responsibilities. More importantly, the Islamic school context shaped a holistic conception of teacher identity that extended beyond academic instruction. Participants came to view themselves not only as language teachers but also as character educators, moral role models, lifelong learners, and facilitators of students' spiritual development. This finding highlights the contextual nature of teacher identity formation and underscores the influence of religious educational environments in shaping teachers' professional self-concepts.

Generally, the study concludes that teaching practicum should be understood as a multidimensional process of professional transformation rather than merely a compulsory component of teacher education programs. The interaction among experiential learning, reflective practice, contextual adaptation, ethical awareness, and identity construction enabled participants to become more reflective, adaptive, and holistic educators. These findings suggest that teacher education programs should strengthen reflective activities, provide greater preparation for teaching in diverse rural contexts, and support the integration of pedagogical, ethical, and contextual dimensions of teacher development. Future research may further investigate teacher identity formation across different educational contexts and examine how practicum experiences influence pre-service teachers during their early years of professional practice.

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