

Exploring Pedagogical Challenges Faced by EFL Teacher Candidates: A Qualitative Analysis in the English Laboratory

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Abstract

Teacher candidates play a strategic role in ensuring the quality of future educational systems, yet many continue to encounter significant challenges during their teaching practicum, particularly related to pedagogical competence. This study investigates the pedagogical obstacles faced by EFL teacher candidates during their teaching performance in the English Laboratory of Muhammadiyah University of Metro. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis involving 12 assistants and 5 key informants. The findings reveal that teacher candidates commonly struggle with selecting appropriate teaching methods, managing students' diverse learning abilities, and utilizing instructional media effectively. Moreover, the mismatch between chosen teaching strategies and students' learning conditions often leads to ineffective learning processes. This study highlights the importance of strengthening pedagogical competence, including mastery of teaching methods, classroom management, and instructional media integration, to improve the teaching readiness of future teachers. The implications emphasize the need for more comprehensive pedagogical training and ongoing mentorship during teaching practicum programs.

Keywords: teacher candidates, pedagogical competence, teaching performance, instructional media, EFL education.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education programs are expected to prepare prospective teachers who possess strong pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competencies. In contemporary educational contexts, teacher competence is recognized as a decisive factor influencing teaching quality, learning effectiveness, and overall student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Teacher candidates, particularly those studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), must acquire a comprehensive understanding of teaching methods, instructional media, classroom management, and learner diversity prior to entering the real teaching environment

(Comprendio & Jindapitak, 2025). However, empirical evidence across various teacher education contexts shows that many teacher candidates still struggle to apply their theoretical knowledge into effective teaching practices (Conrad et al., 2024).

As mandated by the Indonesian Teacher and Lecturer Act No. 14 of 2005, educators are required to demonstrate pedagogical, social, personal, and professional competence (Achir et al., 2024). These competencies are essential in enabling teachers to meet the increasing demands of 21st-century classrooms, where learners come with diverse learning needs, preferences, and backgrounds (Avdiu et al., 2024). Despite these formal requirements, many teacher candidates entering teaching

practicum programs are not fully prepared to implement pedagogical principles in practice (Çelik & Zehir Topkaya, 2024). Studies in Indonesia reveal persistent gaps in pedagogical competence, such as difficulties in selecting appropriate teaching methods, designing lesson plans, integrating learning media, and managing classroom dynamics (Puspitasari & Rusmalinda, 2025).

The transition from theoretical coursework to actual teaching practice is often challenging. Teacher candidates must perform various professional roles, including being facilitators, motivators, evaluators, and classroom managers (Perry & Booth, 2024). Yet findings commonly show that many candidates struggle to adjust their chosen teaching strategies with students' learning abilities, leading to ineffective or less engaging lessons (Hidayat et al., 2024). This gap between pedagogical theory and practical teaching performance has been highlighted in previous research on practicum-based teacher preparation (Cabaroğlu & Öz, 2023).

Preliminary observation in the English Laboratory of Muhammadiyah University of Metro also indicates that teacher candidates still experience notable obstacles in implementing appropriate teaching methods and utilizing instructional media effectively. While some candidates demonstrate adequate preparation, others show insufficient readiness in classroom management, student engagement, and lesson delivery. Data from laboratory teaching assistants further reveal variations in performance levels, ranging from low, sufficient, to high performance. These variations suggest that pedagogical competence is not yet evenly mastered among teacher candidates.

Moreover, teacher candidates frequently report difficulties in dealing with students' diverse learning abilities. While some students can grasp instructional content quickly, others require more time and support. For novice teachers, managing

such differences can be challenging, especially when they have not yet developed adequate instructional flexibility or differentiated teaching strategies. When teaching methods do not align with students' learning needs, the teaching-learning process tends to become less effective and less interactive.

Another significant problem concerns the underutilization of instructional media. Although current EFL teaching encourages the use of multimodal and interactive instructional media to foster engagement and comprehension (Puspitasari et al., 2025), many teacher candidates in this study rely primarily on traditional methods such as lecturing. This indicates limited technological and media literacy, which is an increasingly important component of modern pedagogical competence.

Based on the gaps identified above, this study aims to explore in depth the pedagogical obstacles faced by EFL teacher candidates during their teaching performance. Unlike previous studies that often focus on general practicum experiences, this research specifically analyzes:

- (1) difficulties in selecting and implementing teaching methods,
- (2) challenges in utilizing instructional media, and
- (3) the impact of students' learning diversity on teacher candidates' performance.

Understanding these pedagogical obstacles is essential to improving the structure of teacher preparation programs, especially in practicum settings. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of pedagogical training modules, supervision strategies, and professional development programs for teacher candidates. Ultimately, enhancing teacher candidates' pedagogical competence will contribute to building a more effective, responsive, and learner-centered educational environment.

METHOD

1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design aimed at exploring and interpreting the teaching performance of teacher candidates (laboratory assistants) in the English Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Metro. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because it allows the researcher to examine natural behaviors, competencies, and challenges experienced by participants within authentic teaching situations. This design emphasizes understanding processes rather than testing hypotheses, enabling the study to identify pedagogical readiness, instructional choices, and classroom behaviors exhibited during teaching practice sessions (Chand, 2025).

2. Research Setting (Place and Time)

The research was conducted at the English Education Laboratory of Universitas Muhammadiyah Metro, a facility where teacher candidates regularly carry out microteaching, teaching simulations, and practicum activities. The laboratory setting provided a realistic context for assessing lesson planning, method implementation, instructional media usage, classroom interaction, and pedagogical decision-making. Data collection took place during the 2024/2025 academic year, corresponding with the scheduled teaching practice assignments for laboratory assistants.

3. Research Subjects / Informants

The study involved participants who were directly engaged in microteaching and teaching assistance activities. The main subjects were laboratory assistants, selected because of their active role in preparing lesson plans, conducting teaching simulations, and receiving feedback. Additional insights were gathered from laboratory staff who oversee teaching activities, as well as other relevant individuals such as lecturers or peer observers who were familiar with the participants' teaching performance.

Subjects were chosen using purposive sampling, a technique commonly applied in qualitative research to select individuals who possess specific knowledge and relevance to the research focus. Only laboratory assistants who were actively involved in teaching practice during the data collection period were included.

4. Data Sources

Data were derived from three primary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of participants' performance. Observation served as a key source for capturing teaching behaviors, including planning, instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement during microteaching. Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into the participants' challenges, pedagogical readiness, method selection, confidence levels, and perceptions of their competencies.

Documentation complemented the other data sources and consisted of lesson plans, teaching evaluation sheets, laboratory schedules, and microteaching performance records.

5. Instruments

Data collection employed several instruments that were developed based on indicators of teacher performance and pedagogical competence. An observation sheet was used for recording teaching behaviors and difficulties encountered during practice. A semi-structured interview guide facilitated systematic yet flexible exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. A documentation checklist helped ensure consistent examination of relevant documents, including lesson plans and evaluation forms.

6. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process began with securing permission from the English Education Department and coordinating schedules with the laboratory staff. Instruments were prepared prior to fieldwork to ensure clarity and suitability for

qualitative inquiry. During the field stage, observations were conducted during teaching sessions, followed by interviews with the participants shortly after their teaching activities. Relevant documents such as lesson plans and evaluation sheets were collected to support the triangulation process. Afterward, data were organized through interview transcription, arrangement of observation notes, and systematic categorization of documentation materials.

7. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves continuous engagement with the data throughout the research process. The first stage, data condensation, included coding interview transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and summarizing significant findings related to teaching performance and challenges. Data were then displayed through thematic descriptions and matrices, allowing the researcher to organize results across performance categories. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by integrating themes across all data sources and conducting triangulation to ensure accuracy and consistency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an expanded analysis of the findings derived from classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving five key informants teacher candidates (laboratory assistants) at the English Education Laboratory of Universitas Muhammadiyah Metro. The analysis is structured thematically according to the research questions. Each finding is followed by an integrated discussion supported by relevant theories and contemporary literature.

Obstacles Encountered By Teacher Candidates In Teaching Performance

1. Difficulty in Selecting Teaching Methods Aligned with Students' Learning Ability

Across the interviews, teacher candidates consistently expressed difficulty in choosing teaching methods appropriate for the students' learning levels. Although many candidates understood that methods such as cooperative learning, role-play, and discovery learning could be used, they frequently defaulted to lecturing.

An informant stated:

"Sometimes I want to use another method, but I am afraid the students will not follow the activity. So I just explain the material like usual." (Informant 2)

Observation data confirm this statement. In several teaching sessions, candidates explained lessons at length, with minimal student participation. As a result, students became passive and interaction decreased significantly. This finding aligns with (Diab & Green, 2024), who note that novice teachers often struggle with methodological adaptability due to insufficient experience and limited understanding of learner diversity. According to (Wood et al., 2024), selecting instructional methods requires a mastery of PCK something teacher candidates often have not fully developed. The present study reinforces these insights: limited pedagogical preparation leads to teacher-centered instruction, reducing opportunities for meaningful learning.

2. Underutilization of Instructional Media

Another prominent obstacle is the minimal use of instructional media. Teacher candidates reported that although they recognized the importance of creative media, they often lacked the time, skill, or confidence to prepare them. Instead, they relied mostly on whiteboards, verbal explanations, or simple printed handouts.

As one informant explained:

"I know media can help, but I don't know how to make good media. And sometimes I feel afraid that the media is not suitable." (Informant 4)

Observations confirm that lessons using simple media tended to be monotonous, causing students to appear less motivated. (Giomboni, 2025) argue that preservice teachers' limited exposure to media training contributes to weak media integration skills. (Rohi & Nurhayati, 2024) emphasize that instructional media increase engagement and support multimodal learning. The study's findings indicate that the teacher candidates have not yet achieved functional TPACK competence (Septi et al., 2025), resulting in reduced instructional variety and creativity.

3. Inconsistent Application of Motivational Strategies

Teacher candidates also demonstrated inconsistent motivational practices. They tended to give encouragement only when students appeared disengaged, rather than as part of planned instructional routines.

One informant admitted:

"I give motivation if the class looks noisy or when students don't focus. If they look fine, I don't give motivation because I think it's unnecessary." (Informant 3)

This reactive approach resulted in fluctuating levels of student engagement. Based on self-determination theory (Shen et al., 2024), continuous motivation strengthens students' autonomy, competence, and intrinsic engagement. (Abdelhalim & Alsehibany, 2025) found that novice teachers often lack consistent motivational strategies due to limited teaching experience. The present findings affirm this challenge, emphasizing the need for affective pedagogy training.

Influence of Pedagogical Competence on Teaching Performance

1. Lesson Planning and Mastery of Teaching Materials

Teacher candidates with higher pedagogical competence demonstrated well-organized lesson plans, clear learning objectives, and coherent sequencing of activities. Their explanations were more

structured and aligned with the planned procedures.

Conversely, some candidates struggled to relate objectives, materials, methods, and assessments. Lesson plans often appeared incomplete or overly general. An informant explained:

"Sometimes I just make the lesson plan quickly. I know what I want to teach, but I don't write the details." (Informant 5)

(Jibril & Adedokun-Shittu, 2023) PCK framework emphasizes the need for deep integration between content and pedagogy. (Sulastri et al., 2025) similarly that effective lesson planning is a key indicator of teaching readiness. The results clearly show that pedagogical competence strongly shapes planning quality, which ultimately affects teaching delivery.

2. Classroom Management Skills

Classroom management was one of the most influential competencies shaping teaching performance. Candidates with stronger pedagogical competence were able to maintain class order, guide transitions between activities, and control behavior more effectively. Candidates with weaker competence often appeared overwhelmed, especially during group work or when learning shifts between individual and collaborative tasks.

These findings align with Marzano's Classroom Management Theory, which states that structured routines and active supervision are central to successful instruction (Emmer & Stough, 2001). (Dangkulos et al., 2025) also note that classroom management is one of the strongest predictors of preservice teachers' performance. The data highlight that inadequate management skills reduce instructional effectiveness and contribute to classroom disruption.

3. Instructional Media Utilization Capability

Teacher candidates with higher pedagogical competence integrated instructional media more creatively and confidently. They used pictures,

manipulatives, or simple digital resources to support student understanding. However, candidates with lower competence relied heavily on textbooks or verbal explanations, resulting in less engaging lessons.

The TPACK framework (Nasution et al., n.d.) emphasizes media integration as an essential teaching competency. Limited media use demonstrates that some teacher candidates have not yet achieved the integration between technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge. This impacts students' motivation and reduces learning opportunities.

4. Ability to Synchronize Student Needs with Teaching Approach

A consistent pattern identified from interviews is that candidates struggled to synchronize instructional goals with students' cognitive and emotional conditions. Candidates often expected students to adapt to the lesson rather than adapting the lesson to students. One informant noted:

"Sometimes I know the students are not ready, but I must continue the lesson because of the time." (Informant 2)

This reflects limited reflective teaching competence. (Arefian et al., 2024) argues that reflective practice is essential for adaptive teaching. Candidates' inability to adjust instruction in real time indicates an area that requires further development.

5. Ability to Provide Ongoing Student Motivation

Candidates with higher pedagogical competence integrated motivational elements throughout the lesson praising effort, acknowledging progress, or encouraging participation. Those with weaker competence viewed motivation as a corrective tool rather than a fundamental component of instruction. Motivation is integral to effective teaching (Alneyadi & Wardat, 2023). The study confirms that candidates' motivational competence influences overall teaching quality and student engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the obstacles encountered by teacher candidates in performing teaching tasks and examined how pedagogical competence influences their overall teaching performance. Based on the findings derived from observations, interviews, and documentation, several major conclusions can be drawn.

First, teacher candidates experience significant challenges in selecting appropriate teaching methods that correspond to students' learning abilities. Many candidates rely on traditional, teacher-centered methods due to limited confidence and insufficient understanding of learner diversity. This condition leads to low instructional adaptability and reduced student engagement.

Second, the study highlights a limited use of instructional media. Although teacher candidates acknowledge the role of media in facilitating learning, they tend to employ only simple or minimal media. A lack of creativity, confidence, and experience contributes to this underutilization, which subsequently affects the vibrancy and effectiveness of the learning process.

Third, teacher candidates face notable difficulties in managing diverse student abilities. The inability to provide differentiated instruction or targeted scaffolding results in uneven learning outcomes, benefitting only students with higher achievement levels. This issue indicates that candidates require further development in classroom management and responsive teaching strategies.

Fourth, the study reveals that teacher candidates provide inconsistent motivational support to learners. Motivational strategies are often applied only when students appear disengaged, rather than being integrated systematically throughout the lesson. This inconsistency leads to fluctuating levels of student participation and learning enthusiasm.

Most importantly, the findings collectively demonstrate that pedagogical competence plays a central and determining role in teaching performance. Teacher candidates with higher pedagogical competence show stronger skills in lesson planning, classroom management, instructional media utilization, and communication. Conversely, those with lower competence exhibit weaker performance in nearly all aspects of teaching. Thus, pedagogical competence is not merely an attribute but a critical foundation that shapes teaching readiness and instructional quality.

Overall, this study emphasizes the urgent need for strengthened pedagogical training within teacher preparation programs. Structured opportunities for micro-teaching, media development, classroom management practice, and reflective teaching are essential to prepare teacher candidates for real classroom challenges. Future research may explore intervention models or training frameworks that enhance pedagogical competence more effectively.

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