

Assessing Pre-Service Teachers' Competence in Teaching English to Young Learners

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess pre-service teachers' competency in teaching English to young learners, with a focus on essential pedagogical and communicative skills. A mixed-methods approach was applied, utilizing quantitative surveys, standardized tests, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. Data were gathered from 24 pre-service teachers in the English Education Department at the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Mataram. Quantitative findings from Likert-scale questionnaires and standardized assessments indicate moderate confidence in pedagogical skills but reveal significant gaps in practical application, especially in lesson planning, classroom management, and adapting teaching strategies. The study highlights the need for comprehensive training in crafting age-appropriate lesson plans, employing diverse teaching styles, and establishing effective classroom management. Regarding communication, pre-service teachers were generally comfortable giving instructions and promoting participation but needed improvement in clarifying complex topics, providing constructive feedback, and adapting communication to varied student needs. Qualitative insights reveal that pre-service teachers often feel unprepared for real-world classroom challenges, underscoring the importance of hands-on training that mirrors classroom dynamics. Classroom observations confirm these findings by reflecting variation in instructional and communicative effectiveness. These results emphasize the need for teacher education programs to intensify practical, hands-on training, enhancing readiness for teaching English to young learners and contributing to a more robust foundation in pre-service teacher preparation.

Keywords: Pre-Service Teachers; Competence; Teaching English; Young Learners

INTRODUCTION

The competence of pre-service teachers in teaching English to young learners is a critical factor in fostering effective language acquisition during the formative stages of education. Effective early language instruction can significantly impact young learners' linguistic development and enthusiasm for learning a new language (Garton & Copland, 2018). This research focuses on analyzing the pedagogical and communication skills of 24 pre-service teachers from the English Department at the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training at UIN Mataram. These participants, in their 6th semester, have completed essential coursework in Second Language Acquisition, Curriculum and Materials Development, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), grammar, and foundational English skills subjects.

The selection of these students as subjects is based on their advanced stage in the program and the completion of key coursework, which positions them well for assessment in teaching competencies. The curriculum at the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training is structured to equip students with both theoretical and practical knowledge of language teaching, preparing them for real-world classroom settings and responsive teaching practices. Teaching English to young learners requires a diverse set of competencies. Previous research identifies ten essential indicators of teacher competence in this context, including subject matter expertise, pedagogical skills, cultural awareness, technological proficiency, assessment practices, understanding of child development, reflective practice, communication skills, motivational strategies, and community collaboration (Mishra et al., 2022). Each of these indicators contributes to building effective, adaptive, and engaging teaching approaches.

This study narrows its focus to two crucial competencies: pedagogical skills and communication skills. Pedagogical skills include the ability to plan lessons, manage classrooms, and implement instructional strategies effectively, all of which are foundational to structuring a responsive and organized learning environment (Wotring et al., 2021). Effective pedagogical practices help teachers to integrate various teaching methods and adapt instruction based on student feedback and performance. Communication skills, conversely, are essential for ensuring instructions are clear, engaging, and comprehensible for young learners. Strong communication enables teachers to break down complex concepts, provide constructive feedback, and foster a positive learning environment that encourages participation and interaction—essential elements of an effective language learning experience. These competencies, pedagogical and communicative, are central to equipping teachers with the tools necessary for successful language instruction.

Despite the recognized importance of these competencies, a gap remains in understanding the extent to which pre-service teachers feel prepared to apply their knowledge in real-world classrooms, particularly regarding pedagogical and communication skills. This study seeks to address this gap by assessing pre-service teachers' strengths and areas needing improvement in these critical areas.

Specifically, the research aims to provide insights that can guide the enhancement of teacher education programs, ensuring that pre-service teachers are better equipped to meet the challenges of teaching English to young learners and ultimately contribute to more effective, engaging early language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Study

The first is "Assessing the Readiness of Pre-service Teachers to Teach English to ESL Learners in Fijian Secondary Schools: A Study of Their Language Learning Experiences and Perceptions"(Tulomana et al., 2023). This study focused on pre-service English teachers' readiness to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to Fijian ESL learners. It used a mixed-methods approach to collect data from pre-service teachers and found that they lacked confidence in their language skills and pedagogical knowledge. The study also found that pre-service teachers needed more practical experience and support to be effective teachers of English to young learners. While Tulomana et al.'s study focuses on ESL learners in secondary schools, the present study examines pre-service teachers' pedagogical and communication skills specifically for teaching young learners in elementary settings. Both studies emphasize the importance of building practical teaching competencies, but this research narrows its focus to the foundational skills essential for engaging younger students in early English language education.

The next study is "Pre-service teachers' teaching performance in teaching English to young learners: instrumental case study approach"(Simanjuntak, 2018). This study explored the teaching performance of pre-service teachers in teaching English to young learners. It used an instrumental case study approach to analyze the teaching practices of four pre-service teachers. The study found that pre-service teachers had a good understanding of the importance of creating a positive learning environment and using engaging activities. However, they struggled with classroom management and differentiation. Although Simanjuntak's study focuses on teaching performance broadly, the present study specifically assesses pre-service teachers' pedagogical and communication skills, essential for effective interaction with young learners. Both studies highlight the importance of a supportive learning environment, but this research also examines how well pre-service teachers can adapt communication styles to meet young learners' needs.

And the last is "It's Exciting and Motivating": Pre-Service Teachers in Teaching English to Young Learners in Kurikulum Merdeka Implementation"(Khunaivi et al., 2023). This study investigated the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching English to young learners in the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation in Indonesia. It used a qualitative research design and collected data through interviews and observations. The study found that pre-service teachers were enthusiastic about teaching English to young learners and were motivated by the challenges and rewards of the profession. However, they also faced challenges

such as a lack of pedagogical knowledge and practical experience. Although Khunaivi et al.'s study focuses on pre-service teachers' motivation and challenges within the specific context of Kurikulum Merdeka, the present study takes a closer look at assessing specific competencies—pedagogical and communication skills—crucial for effective English teaching to young learners. Both studies acknowledge the importance of practical experience, but this research aims to provide a deeper evaluation of the foundational skills needed to succeed in early English education.

Pedagogical competence

Pedagogical competence encompasses a teacher's knowledge and skills in planning, managing, and delivering effective instruction. It goes beyond content knowledge, requiring teachers to adapt lessons to meet the unique needs of young learners. Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) is foundational here, as it combines subject knowledge with instructional strategies that make content accessible and engaging. This concept has evolved, as current research emphasizes practical skills in addition to theoretical understanding (Berry et al., 2021). For instance, effective pedagogy in TEYL requires understanding child-centered approaches and knowing how to integrate them into lessons to foster both cognitive and linguistic development. Pre-service teachers must be adept at creating age-appropriate lessons that sustain engagement and foster learning. Pedagogical competence in young learner contexts requires a dynamic, interactive approach that includes storytelling, music, and visual aids, which stimulate multiple senses and aid retention. These activities are crucial for young learners, who often need concrete examples and active participation to grasp abstract language concepts. Furthermore, pedagogical competence includes classroom management strategies, essential for maintaining a structured and supportive learning environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). For pre-service teachers, understanding how to handle classroom dynamics and manage young learners' attention spans effectively can significantly impact learning outcomes.

Additionally, reflective practice, as highlighted by (Oliver, 2016), is integral to pedagogical competence, encouraging teachers to assess and refine their methods continuously. By reflecting on their teaching practices and the feedback they receive, pre-service teachers can adjust their approaches to enhance engagement, comprehension, and participation. This reflective aspect of pedagogy ensures that instruction remains adaptive and responsive to the immediate needs of students, which is critical in TEYL where children's attention and learning capacities can vary widely.

Communication skills

Effective communication is a fundamental competency for teaching, especially when working with young learners who require clear, concise, and engaging instruction. Rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), communication

skills are essential because they enable teachers to scaffold learning in ways that match students' developmental stages. Language is seen as a central tool for learning, and interaction with knowledgeable individuals—such as teachers—facilitates children's cognitive development. In TEYL, this means that pre-service teachers need to simplify language, adapt their tone, and employ visual aids or gestures to make English accessible to young learners who may have limited exposure to the language. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become a widely adopted approach in language education, particularly for young learners, as it emphasizes meaningful communication and student participation (Hui & Yunus, 2023). In a CLT framework, pre-service teachers create activities that encourage interaction, such as role-plays, games, and discussions, to make language learning a social and enjoyable process. In CLT, teachers' communication skills are essential for creating an inclusive classroom environment where young learners feel comfortable and encouraged to participate. Effective communication not only makes instructions clearer but also helps build rapport, making the classroom a supportive space where students can experiment with language without fear.

In addition to basic clarity, communication skills involve the ability to give constructive feedback and respond to individual needs. This aspect is crucial for TEYL, where young learners benefit from positive reinforcement and clear, encouraging responses to their efforts. Effective communication by teachers can also promote student confidence and engagement, two key elements in language acquisition. Pre-service teachers must therefore master the art of providing feedback that is both supportive and specific, helping young learners understand their progress and areas for improvement.

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) is a specialized field that requires an understanding of child development and language acquisition processes unique to this age group. Children learn languages differently from adults; they benefit from immersive, playful, and interaction-based methods that feel natural to their cognitive stage. (Cameron, 2003) asserts that successful TEYL requires teachers to create language-rich environments through activities that integrate play, movement, and sensory experiences. These approaches cater to young learners' developmental characteristics, making language learning feel relevant and engaging. In a TEYL context, creating an engaging and supportive environment is paramount. (Garton & Copland, 2018) highlight the importance of activities like storytelling, songs, and hands-on games that align with young learners' cognitive development stages. Such methods not only support vocabulary acquisition but also help young learners build confidence and motivation. Because children learn more effectively through play and interaction, TEYL teachers must be skilled in designing and managing activities that make language learning enjoyable. The use of visual and tangible resources helps ground language in meaningful contexts, enhancing young learners' comprehension and retention. Further, TEYL teachers must be adept at incorporating Total Physical Response (TPR) and similar techniques that align with

children's need for movement and sensory engagement. TPR, developed by Freeman (Freeman et al., 2014) and still widely supported in modern TEYL, involves using physical actions to reinforce vocabulary, making it particularly effective for young learners who process language through action. Recent studies affirm that TPR remains a powerful tool in TEYL because it integrates language learning with physical response, appealing to young learners' natural learning preferences. For pre-service teachers, mastering TPR and similar methods is essential for creating a classroom that supports language acquisition through dynamic and interactive experiences.

Competency-based education theory

Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers a framework for evaluating pre-service teachers by focusing on skill mastery rather than traditional academic measures. CBE emphasizes measurable outcomes and real-world application, aligning well with the practical demands of teaching (Baartman & Prins, 2018). In the context of pre-service teacher education, CBE stresses the importance of specific competencies—such as lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional adaptation—as critical indicators of readiness for teaching roles. According to (Farrell, 2020), CBE encourages a formative assessment approach, allowing pre-service teachers to receive ongoing feedback and make adjustments throughout their training. This feedback loop is essential in TEYL, where teachers need to be flexible and responsive to young learners' developmental needs and diverse learning styles. By focusing on performance-based tasks and assessments, CBE ensures that pre-service teachers are prepared not just theoretically but practically, as they must demonstrate competence in key areas before entering classrooms. Competency-Based Education aligns well with the requirements of TEYL, where teaching skills like communication, adaptability, and lesson design need to be mastered and applied in context. CBE also emphasizes reflective practice, encouraging pre-service teachers to assess and refine their competencies over time. By focusing on specific, observable competencies, CBE supports the goal of equipping pre-service teachers with the skills necessary to manage real-world classroom challenges, making it an effective framework for teacher preparation in the TEYL field.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of pre-service teachers' competence in teaching English to young learners, focusing on their pedagogical skills and communication skills. The subjects of this research are 24 pre-service teachers who are 6th semester students in the English Department at the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training. These students were selected based on their advanced standing in the

program and successful completion of key coursework in second language acquisition, curriculum and materials development, TEFL, grammar, and foundational English skills.

Instrument and Procedure

This study used a mixed-methods approach to assess pre-service teachers' pedagogical and communicative competencies. Data collection involved surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. A Likert-scale survey questionnaire measured self-reported confidence in areas such as lesson planning, classroom management, instructional adaptability, and communication skills. Semi-structured interviews offered deeper insights into the survey results, focusing on issues like training sufficiency and personal teaching experiences. Focus group discussions fostered peer support, where participants shared classroom management strategies, lesson planning ideas, and feedback methods in a 60-minute session with 5-6 participants. Finally, classroom observations captured real-time teaching practices, using a checklist to evaluate lesson structure, classroom management, instructional techniques, and communication clarity.

Data Analysis

The data analysis utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods for a comprehensive view of pre-service teachers' pedagogical and communication skills. Data from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations were analyzed independently and then triangulated for consistency and reliability. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on percentages and mean scores to assess self-confidence in competencies like lesson design and communication clarity. The results, illustrated in a bar chart, highlighted patterns for future improvement. Qualitative interview and focus group data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed, revealing key themes such as "classroom management challenges" and "peer support in lesson planning," which provided deeper insights into practical issues faced by pre-service teachers. Classroom observation data were collected via a checklist to document behaviors like lesson pacing and communication, then compared to self-reported survey data for accuracy. Triangulating these results enhanced validity, with survey data showing general confidence levels, while interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations added depth, ensuring a thorough understanding of competency levels among pre-service teachers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations provided a comprehensive understanding of the pre-service teachers' competence in pedagogical skills and communication skills. The

quantitative results from the survey revealed varied levels of confidence among the 24 pre-service teachers regarding their pedagogical skills. The majority (75%) felt confident in their ability to design engaging lesson plans, though a quarter of the participants struggled with aligning activities to learning objectives. In terms of classroom management, 60% felt competent in maintaining a productive learning environment, while 40% expressed concerns about effectively handling disruptive behaviors. Additionally, 80% of the participants reported confidence in employing a variety of instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs, though 20% admitted difficulties in adapting teaching methods based on student feedback, echoing the findings of recent studies on teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, Lisa Schachner et al., 2022).

Regarding communication skills, most participants (85%) felt they could provide clear and understandable instructions, yet 15% reported challenges in ensuring all students comprehended the tasks. Only 65% felt confident in breaking down complex language concepts for young learners, indicating a need for improvement in this area. Around 70% believed they could provide helpful feedback, while 30% found it challenging to give feedback that was both constructive and encouraging. A high percentage (90%) felt they could encourage student participation, though maintaining engagement was sometimes challenging.

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into these survey results. Participants who struggled with lesson planning often cited a lack of practical experience and real-time feedback during their training, a finding that aligns with recent calls for more experiential learning in teacher preparation programs (Hattie & Clarke, 2020). Those who found classroom management challenging typically pointed to insufficient exposure to actual classroom dynamics in their coursework. Regarding communication skills, participants expressed a need for more focused training on simplifying complex concepts and providing feedback. Many indicated that, while their theoretical knowledge was strong, practical application was where they faced difficulties.

Focus group discussions further revealed that peer support and collaboration were essential for overcoming teaching challenges. Participants highlighted the benefits of sharing lesson plans and classroom management strategies with peers and noted that role-playing and simulation exercises during training were beneficial. However, they suggested the need for more frequent and varied practical teaching experiences, supporting recent findings on collaborative learning in teacher development (Körkkö, 2021). The implications of peer collaboration on pedagogical skills are significant; exchanging ideas and learning from one another fosters a cooperative learning environment that strengthens pre-service teachers' ability to manage classrooms and devise flexible lesson plans. Additionally, peer support creates a collaborative space where pre-service teachers can refine their skills, receive constructive criticism, and adapt based on collective experiences, ultimately enhancing their overall teaching competence.

Classroom observations confirmed the self-reported data from the surveys and interviews. Participants who reported confidence in lesson planning and instructional strategies generally delivered well-structured and engaging lessons. However, those who had indicated difficulties were observed to struggle with pacing and maintaining student interest. In terms of communication skills, those confident in giving instructions and encouraging participation effectively managed student interactions and kept the class engaged. Conversely, those who reported difficulties were observed to have lapses in clarity and struggled to maintain consistent engagement, particularly when explaining complex concepts or giving feedback.

These results highlight a mixed level of competence among pre-service teachers in both pedagogical and communication skills. While there is a strong theoretical foundation, practical application remains a significant area for improvement. Confidence in lesson planning and instructional strategies suggests the curriculum provides a solid theoretical understanding, but gaps in classroom management indicate a need for more practical, hands-on training. These findings align with Shulman's concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Park & Chen, 2012), underscoring the importance of integrating theory with practice.

The ability to give clear instructions and encourage participation reflects effective initial training. However, the difficulties in simplifying complex concepts and providing constructive feedback highlight areas where Vygotsky's sociocultural and formative assessment approaches can be applied more rigorously in teacher training programs.

To address these gaps, it is recommended that teacher education programs increase practical teaching experiences, such as extended classroom placements and simulations, to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Encouraging collaborative learning among pre-service teachers through peer reviews and group projects can enhance their pedagogical skills. Additionally, targeted workshops on simplifying complex concepts and providing effective feedback can improve communication skills. Role-playing and real-time feedback during these sessions can be particularly beneficial.

Although the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by the sample size of 24 pre-service teachers from a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, as the data was collected through self-reporting and classroom observations, there may be subjective biases in participants' responses. Future research could involve larger, diverse samples and incorporate longitudinal studies to measure the development of competencies over time.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for a balanced approach in teacher education programs, emphasizing both theoretical knowledge and practical application. By addressing the identified gaps, pre-service teachers can be better

equipped to meet the challenges of teaching English to young learners, ultimately enhancing the quality of education they provide.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that while pre-service teachers possess a solid theoretical foundation in pedagogical and communication skills, there are notable gaps in their practical application. The mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, highlighted that the participants feel confident in lesson planning and instructional strategies but struggle with classroom management and adapting their teaching methods based on student feedback. Similarly, while they are adept at giving clear instructions and encouraging student participation, they face challenges in simplifying complex concepts and providing constructive feedback. These findings suggest that the current teacher training programs need to incorporate more hands-on, practical experiences to better prepare pre-service teachers for real classroom settings. To address these issues, it is essential for teacher education programs to increase opportunities for practical teaching experiences, such as extended classroom placements, simulations, and role-playing exercises. Encouraging collaborative learning among pre-service teachers through peer reviews and group projects can further enhance their pedagogical skills. Additionally, targeted workshops focusing on communication skills, particularly in simplifying complex concepts and providing feedback, can help bridge the gap between theory and practice. By implementing these recommendations, teacher education programs can better equip future educators to meet the challenges of teaching English to young learners, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes. In the context of Indonesia's educational landscape, these findings underscore the need for teacher training programs to evolve toward more experiential, skill-based approaches. Such adjustments can significantly enhance the readiness of pre-service teachers, thereby contributing to the development of a more competent and adaptable teaching workforce across the country.

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