

Teaching Challenges and Reflective Practices of Preservice EFL Teachers during Teaching Practicum

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the teaching practices, challenges, and reflective thinking of seven preservice EFL teachers during their teaching practicum at SMPN 1 Majene, Sulawesi Barat. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through structured classroom observations and postteaching interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, in which observation notes and interview transcripts were systematically coded, categorized into recurring themes, and interpreted in relation to the study's research objectives. The findings reveal that while all participants demonstrated foundational instructional competencies including lesson review, ice breaking activities, and student assessment considerable variation existed in lesson structure, media use, classroom communication, and student engagement. Classroom management emerged as the most prevalent challenge, with difficulties ranging from low voice projection and student passivity to poor time management and ineffective game implementation. Most participants attributed these challenges to personal factors, particularly insufficient preparation. Postteaching reflections indicated meaningful self-awareness, as each teacher identified specific weaknesses and proposed contextually grounded improvements. Most notably, all seven participants unanimously selected gamification as their preferred instructional strategy for future teaching, signaling a shared recognition of the need for more interactive and engaging learning approaches. These findings suggest that preservice EFL teacher education programs should strengthen training in classroom management, instructional variety, and gamification-based pedagogy to better equip novice teachers for authentic classroom demands.

Keywords: Preservice EFL Teachers; Teaching Practicum; Reflective Practice; Classroom Management; Gamification.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a complex and dynamic profession that demands not only subject matter knowledge but also the ability to manage classrooms, communicate effectively, and

adapt instructional strategies to meet diverse learner needs. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, these demands are particularly pronounced, given the linguistic and cultural challenges inherent in teaching a foreign language. Preservice teachers face the unique challenge of transitioning from theoretical knowledge to practical classroom application, a process that is widely recognized as multidimensional, dynamic, and context dependent (Li et al., 2023).

Evidence suggests that while many preservice teachers possess adequate theoretical foundations, they often demonstrate significant gaps in practical application, particularly in lesson planning and classroom management (Jumrah & Sunra, 2024). The longstanding divide between theory and practice in language teacher education persists globally, resulting in many novice teachers feeling underprepared when they enter the field (Whitehead & Arslan, 2025). This transition is often accompanied by a range of difficulties, including limited confidence, insufficient command of classroom management, and uncertainty about pedagogical choices. Despite growing interest in teacher preparation, the dynamics of preservice teachers' learning to teach during practicum remain insufficiently understood (Li et al., 2023). Understanding the nature of these challenges and the ways in which novice teachers reflect upon and respond to them is therefore central to improving teacher education programs.

The teaching practicum, referred to as PPL (*Praktik Pengalaman Lapangan*) in the Indonesian context, is a critical component of preservice teacher education. It provides student teachers with the opportunity to apply pedagogical theories, develop professional competencies, and begin constructing their professional identities in real classrooms under the supervision of mentor teachers and university supervisors (Cai et al., 2022; Choi & Park, 2022). At the same time, the practicum is a site of considerable uncertainty, where novice teachers must navigate the gap between their prior expectations and the realities of classroom teaching (Cai et al., 2022; Choi & Park, 2022). These tensions are especially evident in the EFL context, where linguistic and pedagogical demands add further layers of complexity. Preservice teachers commonly encounter difficulties related to language proficiency, instructional planning, learner engagement, and the use of the target language in the classroom (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Romero Molina, 2022). Classroom management, in particular, has been identified as a primary source of stress, as novice teachers often struggle with unfamiliarity with the classroom environment and limited understanding of student behaviour (Massod et al., 2022).

Additionally, reflective practice has emerged as a key mechanism through which student teachers make sense of their experiences, identify areas for improvement, and develop more sophisticated pedagogical understanding (Almutawa & Alfahid, 2024; H. Li, 2025). In the Indonesian context, systematic reflection facilitated through daily journals and peer feedback has been shown to significantly enhance the effectiveness of novice teachers by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom reality (Hermansyah et al., 2024). However, a critical

gap remains: most existing research treats observed classroom performance and postteaching reflections as separate data points, often relying heavily on self-reported narratives without direct triangulation with actual classroom events. There is a lack of empirical evidence that synchronizes 'what actually happens' during the teaching process with 'how the teacher perceives it' immediately afterward within a single cohort. This disconnect limits our understanding of whether pedagogical failures are due to a lack of knowledge or a failure in reflexive application.

This study directly addresses this gap by conducting a synchronized examination of the teaching practices and reflective experiences of seven preservice EFL teachers at SMPN 1 Majene, Sulawesi Barat. By employing structured classroom observations alongside immediate postteaching interviews, this research provides a more nuanced triangulation of how instructional dimensions such as communication, media use, and assessment interact with the teachers' self-identified challenges. Furthermore, this study explores a unique and under-researched phenomenon: the collective inclination of these novice teachers toward gamification as a reactive strategy to classroom disengagement. This aligns with previous findings where preservice teachers felt the need to exert extra effort in creating interactive and engaging media to maintain student focus during their practicum (Faizal & Miftakh, 2021). The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What instructional practices and challenges characterize the classroom teaching of preservice EFL teachers during their practicum? (2) How do preservice EFL teachers reflect upon their teaching experiences, and what strategies do they identify for improvement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Studies

Several studies have been conducted to explore the dynamics of the teaching practicum for preservice EFL teachers, specifically focusing on the multidimensional challenges they encounter and the reflective practices they utilize to navigate these obstacles. The following section reviews previous related studies that provide a foundational understanding of these variables and highlight the context for the current research. The First, Nababan & Amalia, (2021) investigated the challenges encountered by EFL preservice teachers during their teaching practice program using a narrative inquiry approach involving three preservice teachers in their eighth semester. Data were collected through narrative frames, narrative empty boxes, and interviews. The findings revealed that the preservice teachers faced difficulties in finding suitable teaching materials and maintaining students' motivation, and employed various strategies to overcome these challenges including peer consultation, preparing more engaging materials, and diversifying teaching activities.

The second, Kamila (2020) examined the challenges faced by EFL preservice teachers in developing teaching materials during their teaching practicum using a

qualitative case study approach with two preservice teachers as participants. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews. The findings identified three primary challenges: limited language comprehension, insufficient classroom management skills, and inadequate communication with mentor teachers.

The third, finding by Emyliana & Upa (2025) explored the challenges faced by EFL preservice teachers during their teaching practicum and the influence of those challenges on professional identity construction. Employing a qualitative approach with lived experience, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four participants. The findings revealed that participants encountered difficulties in applying appropriate teaching methods, classroom management, and limited facilities, which significantly impacted their professional identity formation as most participants reported feeling insecure and pressured by expectations of becoming an ideal teacher.

The fourth, Riski & Sakhiyya (2025) conducted a qualitative case study investigating the emotional geographies of EFL preservice teachers during their teaching practicum, involving four participants whose data were gathered through written reflections, interviews, and focus group discussions. Analyzed emotional geographies framework, the findings demonstrated that participants experienced both positive and negative emotions that had direct implications for the development of their professional and cognitive competencies, with emotional awareness identified as essential for navigating practicum challenges effectively.

The studies reviewed above collectively demonstrate that EFL preservice teachers consistently face multidimensional challenges during their teaching practicum, ranging from instructional and managerial difficulties such as material development, classroom management, and limited mentor communication (Kamila, 2020; Nababan & Amalia, 2021), to deeper psychological impacts on professional identity construction (Emyliana & Upa, 2025) and complex emotional responses triggered by school environment interactions (Riski & Sakhiyya, 2025). However, these studies tend to examine either the practical or the psychological dimensions in isolation, and none systematically investigates how reflective practices function as a mediating mechanism through which preservice teachers process challenges and develop professionally. Furthermore, limited research has been conducted in Sulawesi Barat, especially in Majene Regency, where unique sociolinguistic and institutional factors may produce distinct patterns of challenge and adaptation. Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by offering an integrated examination of both teaching challenges and reflective practices among EFL preservice teachers during their practicum, positioning reflection not merely as a coping strategy but as a transformative process that bridges practical experience and long-term professional development.

Teaching Challenges During Practicum

One of the most prominent difficulties faced by preservice teachers during the practicum involves instructional and pedagogical decision making. Preservice teachers frequently struggle with designing and finding suitable teaching materials that align with both curriculum requirements and the actual learning needs of their students (Kamila, 2020; Nababan & Amalia, 2021). The gap between what is taught in teacher education programs and the realities of the classroom often leaves student teachers feeling underprepared when it comes to selecting appropriate teaching methods or adapting their lesson plans in real time.

Beyond pedagogical difficulties, pre-service teachers also face significant managerial and environmental challenges. Emyliana & Upa (2025) and Kamila, (2020) point out that classroom management is a recurring struggle—pre-service teachers often find it difficult to maintain discipline, establish clear expectations, and respond effectively to disruptive behaviors. In the context of this study, these managerial challenges are particularly relevant as the pre-service teachers at SMPN 1 Majene navigate a transition into a formal junior high school setting, where student passivity and classroom control often clash with their initial pedagogical expectations. Perhaps the most profound dimension of practicum challenges is the psychological and identity-related impact they have on pre-service teachers. The challenges are not merely practical obstacles; they deeply affect teachers' internal states, self-perception, and professional identity formation.

Drawing on theories of Professional Identity Construction, Emyliana & Upa, (2025) argue that navigating and overcoming these challenges is central to the transformation from student to educator. Preservice teachers often begin their practicum feeling insecure, uncertain, and overwhelmed. However, through sustained engagement with real classroom situations, they gradually develop a more stable and confident professional identity. This process is neither linear nor automatic—it requires active negotiation between the teacher's self-image, the expectations of the school environment, and the feedback received from students and supervisors.

Furthermore, the theory of Emotional Geographies, as discussed by Riski & Sakhiyya (2025), offers a compelling lens through which to understand these internal experiences. This theory proposes that the physical and social spaces of the school environment are not emotionally neutral. Rather, the interactions that occur within these spaces—between preservice teachers and their students, colleagues, mentors, and the institution itself—trigger complex emotional responses. These emotions can be both positive (such as joy, pride, and a sense of belonging) and negative (such as anxiety, frustration, or feelings of inadequacy). Crucially, these emotional experiences are not separate from professional development; they directly shape a teacher's cognitive functioning, decision making, and long-term professional competence. In this sense, the emotional landscape of the practicum is as important as its instructional content. This study adopts the lens of Emotional

Geographies to analyze how the participants' reported 'nervousness' and 'lack of confidence' are not merely personal feelings, but are shaped by their interactions within the specific social space of the practicum site. By linking these emotional responses to their observed teaching performance, this research illuminates how professional identity is negotiated in real time.

Reflective Practices

The underlying theoretical premise of reflective practice is that reflection bridges the gap between expectations and reality (Li, 2025). his study operationalizes this theory by using postteaching interviews as a form of 'self narrative' reflection. By focusing on the participants' immediate thoughts after their observed lessons, the research examines how these preservice teachers move beyond mere description of events toward a deeper analysis of their pedagogical choices and emotional resilience (Almutawa & Alfahid, 2024). This theoretical alignment ensures that the reflection gathered in this study serves as a catalyst for understanding their professional growth.

METHOD

Design and Samples

The participants consisted of seven preservice EFL teachers who were completing their teaching practicum (PPL) at SMPN 1 Majene, West Sulawesi. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, because all seven were enrolled in the same practicum placement and were therefore accessible, contextually relevant, and able to provide rich, firsthand data on the phenomenon under investigation. The sample size of seven is justified by the principle of "information power," which posits that a smaller, highly specific sample can provide sufficient depth for a responsible thematic analysis (Malterud et al., 2016). By focusing on this specific cohort, the study captures high-quality dialogue and rich descriptions necessary for professional pedagogical insights.

Ethical considerations were strictly implemented to protect the participants' rights. Before the data collection began, all seven participants provided written informed consent, having been briefed on the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms (Participant A to G) were used in all observation records and interview transcripts. Furthermore, all data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team to ensure the participants' professional standing at their practicum site remained protected.

Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected using two complementary instruments: structured classroom observations and postteaching interviews. The observations utilized a form synthesized from (Nilson, 2010) pedagogical framework, systematically documenting opening, core, and closing activities, as well as communication patterns, media use, and assessment practices across all seven sessions. This ensured consistency in capturing the objective realities of the classroom. Following each observation, individual semistructured interviews were conducted to elicit the participants' reflections (Gharehbagh et al., 2022). These sessions took place in a private setting at the school premises, lasted approximately 15–20 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent for verbatim transcription. The timing was intentional conducted immediately after teaching to ensure fresh insights and allow for the cross-referencing of specific classroom events with the teachers' real time perceptions.

The study was conducted at SMPN 1 Majene during the 2025 academic period. The participants (referred to as A–G for confidentiality) were seven preservice EFL teachers purposively selected for their direct engagement in the practicum (Gay et al., 2012). Their teaching topics included *Introducing Others*, *Simple Present Tense*, *Prohibition and Obligation*, and *Advertisement*, providing a diverse yet comparable dataset for analysis

Data Analysis

Data from both the observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Clarke & Braun (2017): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Observation notes and interview transcripts were read and re-read to identify recurring patterns across participants. Themes were derived inductively from the data, meaning that the categories emerged from the participants' responses and the researcher's observations rather than being imposed from pre-existing frameworks. To ensure coding reliability, a systematic constant comparison method was employed, where initial codes were continuously compared with new data segments to maintain interpretive consistency. Furthermore, the coding process and theme development underwent peer debriefing sessions with the research supervisors. This involved reviewing the codebook and discussing the links between the raw data and the emerging themes to minimize individual researcher bias and ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' actual experiences (Malterud et al., 2016). This rigorous thematic mapping allowed for a transparent audit trail of how the final themes were derived.

This inductive approach was chosen because it is aligned with the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study the aim being to let the data speak for itself rather than to confirm or disconfirm pre-formed theoretical propositions. To enhance the

trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was applied by cross-referencing observation data with interview responses for each participant. Discrepancies and consistencies between what was observed in the classroom and what participants reported in the interview were noted and discussed in the analysis. Member checking was not conducted as the study focuses on researcher interpreted observational data alongside self-reported reflections gathered immediately after each teaching session.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Instructional Practices and Challenges of Preservice EFL Teachers during Practicum

This section presents the findings derived from structured classroom observations and postteaching interviews conducted with seven preservice EFL teachers (A–G) during their teaching practicum in November 2025. The results are organized around four key dimensions of instructional practice: (1) instructional activities and lesson structure, (2) classroom communication and language use, (3) use of teaching media, and (4) assessment practices. This is followed by findings from the postteaching interviews, which capture the participants' self-reported challenges and reflective responses. Table 1 provides a cross-participant summary of observed instructional practices, while Table 2 summarizes each teacher's identified challenges, perceived causes, and proposed improvements.

Table 1.

Summary of Observed Instructional Practices Across Seven Preservice EFL Teachers

Teacher	Topic	Media Used	Assessment	Communication	Class Management
A	Introducing Others	Blackboard	Oral conversation (no pronunciation review)	Mixed L1/L2; low voice; low interaction	Weak; teacher-focused
B	Nice to Meet You	Blackboard, Worksheet	Fill in the blank worksheet	Mostly L1; no student feedback	Monotone; no lesson closure
C	Taking Leave	PPT/LCD, Blackboard, Video	Conversation performance	Mixed L1/L2; pronunciation correction	Moderate; drilling effective
D	Simple Present Tense	PPT/LCD, Video, Worksheet	Fill in the blank; sentence creation	Mixed L1/L2; interactive	Moderate; game management issue

E	Advertisement	PPT/LCD, Video	Advertisement analysis; group project	Mixed; positive feedback given	Good; structured activities
F	Prohibitions	PPT/LCD, Worksheet	True/false; fill in the blank	Mixed L1/L2; non-standard L1 use	Weak; students roaming mid-lesson
G	Obligation & Prohibitions	PPT/LCD, Worksheet	Translation; fill in the blank (5 items)	Mixed L1/L2; pronunciation correction	Moderate; TGT game unclear to students

Note: L1 = Bahasa Indonesia; L2 = English; PPT/LCD = PowerPoint presented via projector

As shown in Table 1, there is considerable variation in the instructional practices of the seven participants, particularly in the areas of media use, assessment design, and classroom management. While all teachers used some form of mixed-language communication (L1 and L2), the degree of English use and the quality of interaction with students differed notably across the cohort.

Observations revealed a significant pedagogical divide within the cohort regarding how lessons were structured and delivered. As illustrated in Table 1, participants primarily fell into two categories: "traditional dependent" and "digital integrative." Teachers A and B represented the traditional dependent group, relying exclusively on blackboards and student copying. This approach proved inefficient, as it consumed up to 20 minutes of instructional time and resulted in predominantly passive learning environments. In contrast, Teachers C through G demonstrated a digital integrative approach by successfully incorporating PowerPoint presentations and video content. While this multimedia integration generally increased student engagement, it also revealed a "proficiency gap" in teacher preparation; for instance, Teacher D's experience showed that despite using digital tools, the selected materials were occasionally too complex for the students' current linguistic level, hindering overall comprehension.

While all participants employed pedagogical code switching (L1/L2), the quality and purpose of these interactions varied significantly across the cohort. As summarized in Table 1, Teachers C and E demonstrated a more professional linguistic model by using English for instructions and pronunciation modeling. In contrast, Teacher F's frequent reliance on colloquial Bahasa Indonesia tended to undermine the formal classroom register.

Furthermore, Table 1 (Column 6) identifies classroom management as a universal struggle, albeit manifesting in different forms. These ranged from Teacher A's low

audibility and lack of student engagement to Teacher G's logistical confusion during game-based activities. Collectively, these instances suggest that despite having structured lesson plans, the preservice teachers struggled to navigate the "real time" unpredictability of student behavior and the complexities of classroom dynamics.

The assessment methods, detailed in the 'Assessment' column of Table 1, moved from basic fill in the blank tasks (Teachers B, F, G) to authentic, project based analysis (Teacher E). Despite these varying levels of performance, Table 2 reveals a high degree of "internalized accountability." Rather than blaming students, the participants identified their own lack of preparation as the root cause of instructional failures. The most significant finding, however, is the unanimous identification of gamification as a future strategy to mitigate student passivity.

Preservice EFL Teachers' Reflective Thinking and Strategies for Improvement

Table 2.

Summary of Self-Reported Challenges, Causes, Proposed Improvements, and Future Strategies

Teacher	Main Challenge	Perceived Cause	Proposed Improvement	Future Strategy
A	Low voice; poor class control	Lack of self-preparation	Be more communicative; add games	Gamification
B	Weak content mastery; monotone teaching	Personal lack of preparation	Vary activities; reduce talk time	Gamification
C	Students' limited vocabulary	Insufficient student practice	More engaging ice breaking with movement	Gamification
D	Game management; time management	Poor time planning	Redesign game mechanics and spacing	Gamification
E	Students' vocabulary; repeat explanations	Lack of student practice	Better time management for group tasks	Gamification
F	Student discipline; poor attention	Student character	Overhaul entire lesson structure	Gamification

G	Running out of ideas mid-lesson	Insufficient reading/preparation	No change perceived necessary	Gamification
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Note: All seven participants unanimously identified Gamification as their preferred strategy for future teaching.

Analysis of Table 2 reveals a direct correlation between the teachers' perceived failures and their corrective strategies. For example, Teacher A, who identified 'low voice and poor class control' as a Main Challenge, proposed 'becoming more communicative' as a primary Improvement. This alignment across all seven participants suggests a high level of self-awareness regarding their pedagogical shortcomings.

The observation data paint a picture of preservice EFL teachers who possess foundational instructional knowledge but who have not yet achieved consistent pedagogical competence across all dimensions of teaching. The observed divergence in instructional practices among the participants suggests that the 'theory practice gap' is not merely a lack of knowledge, but a struggle with pedagogical fluency. The heavy reliance on traditional board-copying by some participants (A and B) indicates a 'safety-first' survival mechanism where novice teachers revert to passive, teacher-centered methods to maintain a sense of classroom order. This reflects what Phan et al. (2024) describe as a failure to translate conceptual understanding into dynamic enactment. The reliance on board-copying by Teachers A and B corroborates the persistent 'traditionalism' found in many Indonesian EFL contexts, but extends the argument by suggesting that this is not merely a lack of creativity, but a calculated survival strategy used by novices to manage high-anxiety environments. This disconnect is further evident in the findings of Emyliana and Upa (2025) who observed that EFL preservice teachers in rural Indonesian primary schools held clear ideals about the kind of teacher they wanted to be humble, firm, creative, and caring yet consistently struggled to enact these ideals in practice due to limited preparation and the absence of structured mentoring, revealing a persistent gap between professional self-concept and actual classroom performance.

Several teachers spent excessive instructional time on passive activities such as board copying and prolonged conversation performances without feedback, a pattern similarly documented by Ramadhani and Fithriani (2025) whose study of Indonesian EFL preservice teachers found that students' passive behavior in class was partly a reflection of teachers' overreliance on transmission-based instructional methods, with preservice teachers themselves acknowledging that their lessons often felt one-sided, with the teacher doing most of the talking while students listened without meaningful engagement. This pattern is further corroborated by Nguyen and Nguyen (2021), whose study of Vietnamese EFL preservice teachers revealed that participants themselves recognized the imbalance between theory and practice in their training, explicitly recommending that teacher education programs provide more time and opportunities to practice language and teaching

skills beyond theory-based instruction. This has implications for teacher education programs, which must provide preservice teachers with a broader repertoire of classroom activity types and explicit practice in pacing and time management.

Across both the observational and interview data, classroom management emerged as the most pervasive challenge, manifesting through diverse technical and logistical hurdles. Specifically, Teacher A struggled with audibility and maintaining student attention, while Teacher B faced student passivity and silence. Teacher F encountered active disengagement with students roaming the classroom, and Teachers D and G struggled to manage the complex logistics of game-based activities. While these manifestations align with Maharani and Fithriani (2023) findings that management remains a universal practicum hurdle, the true significance of this data lies in the internalized accountability shown by the participants. Rather than externalizing blame onto student misbehavior or environmental factors, the teachers' tendency to attribute these failures to their own lack of preparation reveals a developing professional conscience. This 'internal locus of control' represents a critical stage in identity formation; it suggests that while their management techniques remain rudimentary as evidenced by the logistical struggles in games their psychological readiness for professional growth is high, aligning with Nababan & Amalia (2021) view of critical self-analysis as the first step toward teacher responsibility.

The interview data provide strong evidence that all seven participants engaged in postteaching reflection, a cornerstone of professional teacher development. As Li (2025) asserts, reflective practice is instrumental in developing practitioners' self-knowledge, understanding situational contexts, and making principled informed decisions. Each teacher was able to identify not only what went wrong, but also why, and what they would do differently. This capacity for systematic self-examination is consistent with Li's (2025) observation that preservice teachers who engage in reflective activities identify what is effective and ineffective about their teaching practices and how those practices shape their future professional performance. This capacity for self-evaluation even when it led to uncomfortable conclusions, as in Teacher B's frank acknowledgment that "everything needs improving" is precisely the kind of reflective stance that teacher education programs seek to cultivate. Indeed, Maharani and Fithriani (2023) emphasize that self-reflection is very important for preservice teachers in teaching practicum, as it enables them to overcome the problems they face and find their own solutions, while Li (2025) further notes that encouraging a reflective disposition in preservice teachers could stimulate their professional development and mitigate their unprofessionalism.

The lessons drawn by participants are particularly instructive Li (2025) observes that by systematically examining their teaching experiences what worked, what did not, and why preservice teachers learn to adapt and refine their methods, turning practical difficulties into learning opportunities. This is precisely what is evident in the reflections of the present study's participants. Teacher C's recognition that

drilling is highly effective for vocabulary-limited learners, Teacher D's insight into the need for better spatial planning in game-based activities, and Teacher E's awareness of the link between clear instructions and time efficiency all demonstrate contextually sensitive pedagogical reasoning. Such insights reflect what Li (2025) describes as reflective practice leading to the renovation of teaching methodologies and the adaptation of teaching practices in response to real classroom conditions. Taken together, these reflections suggest that the participants are not merely cataloguing their difficulties, but are actively constructing practical theories of teaching grounded in their lived classroom experience—a process that Nababan and Amalia (2021) describe as reflection on action, and one that Maharani and Fithriani (2023) identify as the critical bridge between theoretical preparation and the realities of professional practice.

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the unanimous identification of gamification as the preferred future teaching strategy by all seven participants. This consensus was not prompted by the researcher but emerged independently in response to the interview question about future strategies. The unanimous, unsolicited turn toward gamification as a future strategy represents a collective pedagogical response to classroom passivity. This consensus suggests that preservice teachers perceive 'fun' not as a secondary element, but as a necessary survival tool to bridge the communicative gap in low proficiency EFL settings. This finding indicates a shift in the participants' professional identity: they are moving away from being 'deliverers of content' toward becoming 'designers of experience.' This collective intuition proves that novice teachers are acutely aware of the 'boredom threshold' in modern EFL classrooms, making gamification a reactive but strategic intervention to reclaim student attention. This finding carries significant theoretical and practical weight.

Gamification defined as the application of game design elements such as points, competition, challenges, and rewards in educational contexts has received increasing attention in language education research. The preservice teachers' convergence on gamification as a solution suggests an intuitive recognition that their current lessons lacked the engagement and interactivity needed to sustain student attention—a recognition corroborated by the observation data, which frequently documented student passivity, distraction, and non-responsiveness. This is in line with Hustiana et al. (2025) who noted that prospective teachers also reported increased creativity through innovative methods like games, which engage students. Therefore, gamification acts as a practical intervention to address these management hurdles. While previous studies like (Zhang & Hasim, 2023) focus on the effectiveness of gamification for student outcomes, this study contributes a new perspective by revealing gamification as a perceived 'lifeline' for preservice teachers struggling with classroom management and student passivity.

This finding also has implications for pre-service teacher education curricula. If novice teachers are independently identifying gamification as a critical instructional need, then teacher preparation programs should provide structured training in game-

based and gamified instruction, including practice in designing, implementing, and debriefing game activities within EFL lessons.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest three key implications for the design of preservice EFL teacher education programs. First, classroom management training must be embedded and practical rather than merely theoretical, as preservice teachers need repeated, supervised practice in managing student behavior, pacing lessons, and responding to low-engagement scenarios before they enter the practicum. This is crucial because the longstanding divide between theory and practice in language teacher education persists globally, resulting in many novice teachers feeling underprepared when they enter the field (Whitehead & Arslan, 2025). Second, instructional variety and media literacy must be explicitly taught and practiced. The gap between teachers who used only a blackboard and those who incorporated video, PowerPoint, and interactive tasks reflects a training gap that programs should address through modelling, observation, and microteaching. This is particularly important given that multimedia tools have been shown to increase learner engagement and comprehension in EFL settings (Abdulrahman et al., 2020). Third, gamification and active learning strategies should be formally incorporated into teacher education curricula. Given the unanimous endorsement of gamification by all participants and the growing evidence base for its effectiveness in EFL settings, there is a compelling case for systematic instruction in game based teaching methods. A systematic review of forty empirical studies by Zhang and Hasim (2023) confirmed that gamification has been widely utilized across more than ten non-English-speaking countries and has demonstrated benefits including improving students' English language skills, positively affecting their attitudes and emotional responses, and providing an authentic language learning environment (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). These implications extend beyond the Indonesian context and are relevant to any EFL teacher preparation program seeking to equip novice teachers with the skills, confidence, and pedagogical range needed to succeed in real classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the teaching practices, challenges, and reflective thinking of seven preservice EFL teachers during their practicum at SMPN 1 Majene, Indonesia. The findings reveal a significant pedagogical divide: while participants demonstrated foundational knowledge, their classroom enactment fluctuated between "traditional dependent" survival strategies and "digital integrative" efforts. Classroom management emerged as the most pervasive challenge, yet the participants' tendency to attribute these hurdles to their own lack of preparation—rather than student behavior—demonstrates a high level of internalized accountability and a developing professional conscience. A localized but significant finding is the unanimous turn toward gamification as a future instructional strategy. This collective intuition suggests that preservice teachers perceive game based elements not merely as supplementary "fun," but as a critical pedagogical lifeline to bridge the communicative gap and overcome student

passivity in low-proficiency EFL settings. These reflections indicate that while technical skills are still rudimentary, the participants possess the systematic self-examination necessary for professional growth. Based on these findings, it is recommended that teacher education programs shift from purely theoretical instruction to more embedded, practical classroom management training and explicit modeling of gamified active learning. For future research, it is suggested to involve a larger and more diverse cohort across various school contexts to enhance generalizability. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to track whether the expressed intention to adopt gamification is sustained in full-time teaching roles and to evaluate its long-term impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

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