

Practicum Training: The Readiness of Early Childhood Education Trainee Teachers in Malaysia for Teaching the English Communication Strands in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Practicum training is a key component of trainee teachers' professional practice in the Bachelor of Teaching Programme (PISMP) in the Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia (IPGM). In the discipline of Early Childhood Education, trainee teachers are expected to complete two phases of practicum training: Phase I at Child Care Centre (TASKA) and Phase II at preschools under the Ministry of Education (MOE). The implementation of Phase II practicum in preschools is guided by the National Preschool Standard Curriculum 2017, which mandates the use of English as the medium of instruction for the English Language Communication Strand. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the preparedness of trainee teachers to plan and implement the English Language Communication Strand, as well as their readiness to use English as the instructional language in the classroom. This is a qualitative study with a case study design. Four participants were selected for the group through purposeful sampling. The PR2 Phase 2 Field Form (Preschool), lesson plan (RPS), interview methods, and a class timetable were utilised. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was employed to derive the findings. The findings indicated that the trainee teachers are well prepared to plan and implement instruction for the English Language Communication Strand. However, the findings suggested that they are less prepared to deliver instruction for the English Language Communication Strand by using English as the medium of instruction. Collaboration amongst various agencies is essential to enhance the English speaking skills of PISMP Early Childhood Education trainee teachers.

Keywords: Practicum Training, Readiness, Teaching The English Language Communication Strand, Early Childhood Education Trainee Teachers

Introduction

Practicum training at the Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia (IPGM) allows trainee teachers to apply knowledge, current pedagogy, soft skills, and theories in teaching and learning, as well as create new knowledge constructions, innovations, and unique teaching and learning theories. Practicum for trainee teacher in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is carried out at two locations based on the curriculum requirements of the Bachelor of Teaching Programme with Honours (PISMP) and the recommendations proposed by the Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA), namely Phase I practicum at Child Care Centres (TASKA) and Phase II practicum at preschools. Trainee teachers are completing phase II practicums in preschools by using the 2017 Revised National Preschool Standard Curriculum. To teach the English Language Communication Strand, trainee teachers must use English as the instructional language in any strand/activity/routine depending on interactions in the teaching and learning timetable. This is consistent with the prescribed use of English, which is 600 minutes for National Schools (SK) and 400 minutes for Chinese National-type Schools (SJKC) and Tamil National-type Schools (SJKT).

The use of English as the instructional language for teaching and learning is also consistent with IPGM's aim of producing Bachelor of Teaching Programme with Honours (PISMP) trainee teachers who are aware and experienced in the essential competencies of the teaching profession. One of the educational programme objectives that emphasises the importance of English as effective communication, while also preserving Bahasa Malaysia as the language of knowledge and strengthening English. This emphasises the importance of English proficiency amongst trainee teachers, as evidenced by IPGM's course offerings, which require trainee teachers to take several English subjects, such as 'English Language Proficiency,' 'English Language for Young Learners,' and 'Communicative English for the Teaching of Young Learners' to improve their knowledge and skills in English. By requiring trainee teachers to complete these English subjects, they will be better prepared to apply English teaching and learning during practicum and when they are placed in preschools following graduation.

Why is it important for trainee teachers to be well-prepared to implement English teaching and learning? This is because the emphasis on English proficiency began in early childhood education, with the implementation of the 2010 Revised National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010) and the policy to Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthen the English Language (MBMMBI). Schedule changes have occurred, with more time given to English teaching slots and an emphasis on instructional language in the KSPK. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has introduced 'The Roadmap 2015-2025: English Language Education Reform in Malaysia, which emphasises the implementation of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages beginning in preschools. The changes in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum highlight the need of PISMP PAKK trainee instructors being well-prepared to apply the English Language Communication Strand instruction in the classroom.

Problem Statement

Every trainee teacher must have integrated and robust pedagogical ability, as well as teaching professionalism (Deed et al., 2011). However, multiple studies have found that some trainee teachers do not put out their full effort and devotion when carrying out their obligations

(Yaakub & Ahmad, 2007; Billet, 2009; Paine & Zeichner, 2012). This could be due to a misalignment between the practicum setting and the pedagogical content taught in university courses (Billet, 2009; Paine & Zeichner, 2012). For example, at IPGM, trainee teachers receive extensive knowledge about early childhood education, including theories, approaches, strategies, teaching and learning (T&L) techniques, classroom management, and more, which they apply in microteaching, a type of teaching simulation. However, the implementation of microteaching remains inside the context of IPG's teaching and learning, rather than in a genuine classroom setting (Mailis, 2023). Although microteaching enhances trainee teachers' knowledge of identifying and addressing any deficiencies before entering real-world scenarios (Mohd Khairezan, 2019), situational misalignment in teaching environments may persist.

In microteaching, several basic teaching skills must be prepared, including induction set skills, explanation skills, stimulus variation skills, questioning skills, verbal and nonverbal reinforcement skills, and closure skills (Tutiariani, Fitri, Ridwin, Nanda & Herman, 2023), as well as soft skills, such as communication skills, critical problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, and information technology skills (Ahmad & Majid, 2018). Weaknesses in acquiring these skills amongst trainee teachers have an impact on the teaching profession's ability to produce productive and knowledgeable teachers, which can be readily identified during the practicum phase. The soft skills component includes communication abilities, which are highly valued by trainee teachers at IPGM. They must be fluent in both their native tongue and a second language.

Ahmad and Majid (2018), conducted a study on the level of soft skills amongst trainee teachers at a Malaysian public university's practicum programme. The soft skills components studied were communication skills, critical problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, and information technology skills. The findings revealed that communication skills were the least mastered component, with trainee teachers feeling less confidence in utilising English during presentations or the teaching and learning process. This issue is also common amongst PISMP early childhood education trainee teachers at the Institute of Teacher Education Campus (IPGK). Despite having to take several English subjects that emphasise additional input and skills related to children's language development, pedagogy, approaches, strategies, T&L techniques, and language systems (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2021), PAKK trainee teachers do not have many opportunities to practice speaking English, resulting in less satisfactory proficiency in English, particularly productive skills (speaking and writing).

Insufficient preparation of trainee teachers in speaking skills is a critical concern since, following graduation, they will be assigned in KPM preschools, where they will act as agents to ensure curriculum compliance. PAKK trainee teachers bear a considerable duty for developing children who are fluent in a second language, namely English. This requires not just mastering listening, reading, and writing skills, but also speaking English with confidence. Can the expectation of raising children who can comfortably speak English be met? The response is determined by the trainee teachers' level of preparation. If trainee teachers do not have strong English speaking skills, children will lack role models when studying English. Furthermore, trainee teachers will be unable to properly conduct English teaching and learning, particularly in terms of speaking abilities. This is consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which claims that learning necessitates the use of a "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO) to implement scaffolding in speaking abilities.

Furthermore, the use of English as the instructional language in teaching the English Language Communication Strand emphasises the need of PISMP PAKK trainee teachers developing English speaking abilities. Several scholars have studied the use of the KSPK to implement English teaching and learning in kindergartens or preschools. The findings indicated that teachers themselves admit to lacking the skills to teach English (Mardziah Abdullah et al., 2017). The implementation of English as the instructional language is frequently replaced with the children's mother tongue due to the teachers' lack of proficiency in speaking English (Mustafa et al., 2018), and teachers do not practice effective strategies in teaching English, which consequently leads to weak English proficiency amongst children. Although these studies focus on early childhood education teachers who have been teaching in kindergartens or preschools for a long period, the same issue may arise for PISMP PAKK trainee teachers if the problem is not addressed early on during their teacher training at IPGM. As a result, this study aimed to investigate PAKK trainee teachers' readiness to implement the teaching of the English Language Communication Strand, as well as their willingness to use English as the instructional language during the teaching of the English Language Communication Strand.

Research Objective

The two primary goals of this study are:

- i. To investigate the preparedness of PISMP PAKK trainee teachers from the June 2020/2024 intake in terms of English Language Communication Strand instruction planning.
- ii. To Investigate how readiness of PISMP PAKK trainee teachers from the June 2020/2024 intake to use English as the instructional language when teaching the English Language Communication Strand.

Research Question

To address the entire study, two research questions are formulated based on the stated objectives of the study:

- i. To what extent are the June 2020/2024 PISMP PAKK trainee teachers prepared to plan the English Language Communication Strand's instruction?
- ii. To what extent are the June 2020/2024 PISMP PAKK trainee teachers prepared to teach the English Language Communication Strand by using English as the medium of instruction?

Methodology

Research Design

This is a qualitative study with a case study design. The case study explains what distinguishes a certain research design, as well as the experiences and knowledge gained from it (Lebar, 2022). The researchers' goal in this study is to look at the readiness of PISMP PAKK trainee teachers from the June 2020/2024 intake at IPGM Kampus Tengku Ampuan Afzan to implement the teaching of the English Language Communication Strand, as well as their willingness to use English as the instructional language when teaching the English Language Communication Strand.

Data for this study were gathered through field research, including face-to-face interviews with research participants and direct observations. Data collecting instruments included documentation (class schedules and teaching slot plans), images, audio and video tapes, field notes, conversation recordings, and recordings of teaching and learning presentations in the

English Language Communication Strand. According to Robson (1993), the data gathering strategy should take into account a number of criteria, including what is to be observed, who is engaged, and in what conditions.

Research Sample

The study population comprises 29 trainee teachers from the June 2020/2024 intake of the PISMP Early Childhood Education programme at IPGM Tengku Ampuan Afzan campus. From this demographic, the researcher chose a sample of four trainee teachers from two preschool classes for the study. However, the study's final findings cannot be applied to all PISMP Early Childhood Education trainee teachers at other IPGM campuses because the population and sample size were limited to the June 2020/2024 intake at IPGM Tengku Ampuan Afzan Campus.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, there are 'no hard and fast' rules for choosing the sample size, but a small sample size of one to seven individuals is usually sufficient as long as they meet all sampling requirements (Darusalam & Hussin, 2018). As a result, the study sample was chosen by using the purposive sampling, which allowed the researchers to focus on chosen research respondents with certain characteristics based on the specific research objectives. The selected respondents have the following characteristics:

- i. The trainee teachers completed courses in "English Language Proficiency," "English Language for Young Learners," and "Communicative English for the Teaching of Young Learners."
- ii. The trainee teachers were concerned about speaking English during the "English Language for Young Learners" course in the June-July 2023 semester.

Research Instrument

Interview protocols were used as research instruments, with two aspects: readiness for planning the implementation of the English Language Communication Strand teaching and readiness to use English as the instructional language in teaching the English Language Communication Strand. The tools used were interview protocols, teaching slot plans (RPS), class schedules, and Form PR2 Phase 2 Core Area for Early Childhood Education (Preschool). The experts reviewed the interview questions to verify whether they were appropriate for the subject and language, including spelling and sentence structure. The tools utilised during interviews, observations, and document analysis used triangulation approaches to explore a phenomenon by collecting several forms of data.

Data Analysis

This study's data analysis was carried out thematically, with manual methods used throughout. The researchers recorded audio during the interviews and later uploaded these recordings to transcription software to obtain full transcripts of the interviews with the four study participants. The researchers next asked the study participants to examine their replies and verify the interview transcripts whether they were pleased with the responses supplied in the conducted interview script. This study investigated data by using numerous case studies that required narrative and descriptive writing. All data analysis techniques aimed to produce a study summary.

Research Finding

Interview Question: How do teachers arrange for teaching English Language slots before class? The first data from this study were used to answer the first research question, which is the readiness of PISMP PAKK trainee teachers in June 2020/2024 intake to design the implementation of English Language Communication Strand teaching. The study findings for the first interview question were analysed. Based on the transcription analysis of the interviews, the researcher organised the first interview findings into few major themes. Amongst the areas identified for trainee teachers' readiness for teaching implementation planning are the creation of teaching slot plans (RPS), the selection of teaching aids (BBM), and the selection of assessment instruments to measure learning objectives. All four study participants (PK) indicated strong readiness to organise and implement lessons. This is supported by statements or codes associated with passages from these interviews:

PK 1: "We need to create a lesson plan before we start teaching... I usually look for engaging activities on 'YouTube' and get feedback from the supervising teacher. Planning activities can be challenging because we also need to take the expense of making teaching aids into account. When I show kids the Teaching Aids I've made, they usually get really excited about them. In addition, I have to think of techniques to gauge if the goals are being met. Usually, I'll draft a checklist in accordance with the established learning objectives."

PK 2: "When planning PdP, I must have a lesson plan... I will make a comprehensive lesson plan as per the format provided by IPG... when planning activities sometimes it's difficult to create suitable objectives... another thing is to think of making Teaching Aids...sometimes I don't have ideas... because in writing the RPS, we need to prepare pictures of the Teaching Aids that we want to use... once the RPS is ready, I have to think of a checklist to assess the activities... to find out whether the children have mastered the PdP or not."

PK 3: "Normally, we have to prepare the RPS beforehand. It's confusing because there are a lot of things to consider, like the topic, theme, learning standards, objectives, skills, teaching aids, and values. Additionally, because I'm not very good at writing in English, I have to ask 'Google' to translate. Since I always engage in hands-on learning, simplifying the activities would make it easier for me to conduct the class period after the RPS is finished."

PK 4: "You must first create a lesson plan. My difficulty is that I'm not very creative, therefore I often don't have ideas for activities, objectives, teaching aids, instructional steps, and other things. Usually, I would ask other friends. I only write in Malay because I'm not good at writing in English."

The English Language Communication Strand teaching plan is well-planned by trainee teachers, according to observation and document analysis data involving schedules, teaching slot plans (RPS), and Form PR2 Phase 2 Core Area for Early Childhood Education (Preschool). RPS writing follows the pattern and is written in English, with the exception of PK4, who wrote RPS in Bahasa Malaysia. The preparation of RPS complies with the schedule, and the learning objectives are formulated to complement the activities. For PK1, PK2, and PK3, the introduction, teaching progression, and closure all demonstrate the methodical and consistent use of English as the instructional language. However, for PK4, there is some confusion in the planned activities, which breaks the continuity, and English is only used in

the question and answer section. While PK3 and PK4 did not provide evaluation tools to quantify learning objective achievement, PK1 and PK2 developed evaluation checklist forms for each learning objective.

Interview Question: To what extent is the English Communication Strand taught by using English as the instructional language?

The research findings for the second interview question, on the readiness of PISMP PAKK trainee teachers in June 2020/2024 intake to undertake English Communication Strand teaching with English as the instructional language, have been assessed. Themes discovered include the implementation of English Language teaching slots, limits during the implementation of English Language slots, and solutions to problems encountered during the implementation of English Language slots. All four study participants (PK) demonstrated insufficient readiness to execute English Communication Strand teaching with English as the instructional language. This is corroborated by statements or codes associated with passages from these interviews:

PK 1: "I don't use English in the classroom at all since the kids don't comprehend it and don't react when I do. I converse and give instructions in Mandarin or Bahasa Malaysia, but exclusively introduce terminology in English. I'm not comfortable speaking in English. Because I think my grammar and pronunciation are incorrect, I'm hesitant to use English in my instruction. For this reason, if I want to cut back on speaking activities, I'll pick ones like letting the kids play games or watch 'YouTube' that don't require me to speak much."

PK 2: "I acknowledge that I don't fully teach using English in the English slot, but I do use it for simple commands like "sit down," "very excellent," and "what's this." Sometimes the kids don't answer at all when I ask in English, so I have to translate into another language. I struggle to communicate in English since I don't speak it well. However, I don't have to speak it much when I use 'YouTube' videos, online games, and storytelling."

PK 3: "When it comes to teaching English, I find it difficult and highly stressful. Therefore, I use a lot of English-language videos on YouTube to help kids improve their speaking abilities. I do speak Malay, but I just introduce words in English. I must attend English classes that emphasise speaking... I use 'ChatGPT' to learn English as well."

PK 4: "It's incredibly hard to teach in English since I'm constantly conscious of my grammar, pronunciation, and sentence construction... In addition to being nervous to use English, I'm also ashamed if my supervising teacher finds out how I speak the language. I'm not confident when I speak English, therefore I like to look for 'YouTube' videos to help kids learn the language more effectively. I think I should study English more. I also use the internet and friends as resources for information."

To execute English teaching slots, all study participants prepared interesting induction sets using their own teaching aids, with the exception of PK4, which showed a 'YouTube' video of English children's songs. PK1, PK2, and PK3 provided suitable, measurable learning objectives based on children's capacities, but assessment implementation was not obvious during the activities. PK4 presented learning objectives that were somewhat above the ability of the

children in class, such as reading basic sentences, which the children did not appear to be able to read. The creation of teaching aids was also interesting and creative for PK1, PK2, and PK3, but the number of teaching aids was somewhat limited and unsuitable for the number of children. For example, in the activity conducted by PK1, the children appeared bored waiting for their turn, and the teaching aids provided by all study participants did not incorporate the concept of self-learning. PK4 was less imaginative in designing teaching aids because worksheets were still used for the exercises. All four participants made considerable use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as teaching materials, including 'YouTube' videos (children's songs and stories), online games, and reinforcement exercises.

Although the planning and implementation of teaching for the first stage - induction, teaching progression, and closure - are satisfactory, the main focus of the study, the use of English as the instructional language, is unsatisfactory because all four participants did not fully or partially use English as the instructional language, instead using the children's mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia / Mandarin. Only short instructions or specific terms were given in English, with the most of the teaching done in the children's native language. All four study participants used ICT as a bridge to overcome their limitations in using English as the teaching language. According to interview findings, all trainee teachers struggled with English due to a lack of confidence, fear, embarrassment, concerns about pronunciation, grammar errors, incorrect sentence structures, and children's lack of understanding when teachers interacted in English, prompting teachers to translate back into the children's mother tongue. Trainee teachers have changed their focus to ICT for the adoption of English as the instructional language, such as exhibiting YouTube movies, online games, and English online activities. Trainee teachers also indicated a commitment to develop their knowledge and skills in teaching English, particularly their English speaking abilities.

Discussion and Research Implication

Based on the findings, this study exposes the actual situation faced by trainee teachers when planning and implementing English Communication Strand teaching with English as the instructional language. The following is a discussion of the research findings based on the study objectives examined:

Trainee teachers demonstrated readiness in planning the implementation of English Communication Strand teaching by preparing lesson plans (RPS), clear learning objectives, systematic teaching steps from induction sets, teaching progression, and closure, selecting engaging and appropriate teaching aids (BBM), and developing assessment tools to effectively measure learning objectives. This is consistent with the subjects covered by trainee teachers, such as "English Language Proficiency," "English Language for Young Learners," and "Communicative English for the Teaching of Young Learners." These courses focus on the planning process for introducing English teaching slots. Furthermore, trainee instructors' constant assessment tasks include preparing RPS, developing creative teaching aids, creating assessment instruments to measure learning objectives, and so on. For study participants (PK4), practicum supervising lecturers must provide assistance on how to prepare RPS that follow the format and requirements of the KSPK.

The implementation section in PR2 Phase 2 Core Area PAKK Form (Preschool) demonstrates a good teaching process in numerous aspects, specifically teaching stages from the beginning - induction, teaching progression, and closure, the given teaching aids are also

creative and entertaining; the use of ICT in teaching slots, as well as the activities given, can help students attain learning objectives that can be measured using the established assessment tools. However, there are several flaws that must be addressed, such as several trainee teachers failing to prepare assessment tools to measure learning objectives, insufficiently provided teaching aids causing problems in class, and some trainee teachers continuing to make copies of worksheets for the activities. Engaging and inventive teaching aids are essential in the preschool teaching and learning process, particularly those that include ICT aspects. When used appropriately, interactive technology and media can promote successful development and learning (Abdullah et al., 2021). Furthermore, Syed Chear and Md Yunus (2019) argued that ICT substantially facilitates and adds excitement to teaching and learning activities.

The most serious issue is that all trainee teachers entirely disregard the usage of English as the instructional language as specified in the KSPK 2017 revision. Trainee teachers exclusively use ICT as a substitute for English as the instructional language when instructing. This originates from trainee teachers' lack of confidence when speaking English. This is demonstrated by Roysmanto's (2018) study on the association between self-confidence and speaking skills amongst students, which discovered a favourable relationship between self-confidence and English speaking abilities. The findings are also consistent with a study conducted by Nisa Arifa Nurul Aulia and Tri Wintolo Apoko (2022) on the self-confidence of students learning English as a foreign language in terms of speaking skills. The findings showed that students' self-confidence and English speaking skills are positively related. As a result, efforts must be made to boost the self-confidence of PAKK trainee teachers in their English speaking abilities (Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017).

Based on this study findings, it is recommended that the following be considered to ensure that trainee teachers can enhance their readiness for planning and implementing English Communication Strand teaching by using English as the instructional language: emphasis on writing English RPS that adhere to the prescribed format and requirements of the KSPK, as well as the development of assessment tools. Linguistic and non-linguistic elements also influence speaking success (Utama et al., 2013). Linguistic characteristics include grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, sentence comprehension, vocabulary, and language fluency. Non-linguistic components include personality traits like self-esteem, personality type, motivation, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and anxiety. Several suggestions to help trainee teachers improve their English speaking skills include lowering anxiety (non-linguistic element) in the classroom. Lecturer should accept trainee teacher blunders when speaking English by providing a setting that promotes the idea of atmosphere without pressure. It is possible to undertake speaking practice in pairs or small groups, as well as oral tests. This phase is especially important for children from rural areas with low socio-economic position and low parental education backgrounds, as the environment might impair individual understanding of English.

Conclusion

Practicum training is one aspect aimed at improving IPGM trainee teachers' professional practice by allowing them to apply current pedagogical knowledge, interpersonal skills, and teaching and learning theories, as well as generate new educational theories, innovations, and pedagogical theories. A structured and progressive practicum programme allows trainee

teachers to grow, master, and expand their professional teaching expertise in order to become competent and educator-minded beginning instructors. Based on the findings of this study, efforts should be increased to address the primary issue of trainee teachers' lack of confidence in speaking English, particularly in the classroom (Aziz & Mamat, 2018). This is critical because PAKK trainee teachers who finish Phase II practical training in preschools will be assigned to various schools across Malaysia to monitor compliance with early childhood education curriculum implementation. Psychological variables are one important component that determines mastery of English speaking abilities. (Aziz, 2022)

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