

Research Article

Support Systems in International Teaching Practice Programs: Experiences of Students from a Private University

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Abstract.

In international teaching practice (ITP), support systems are vital in helping students navigate cultural differences and overcome various challenges while ensuring they meet their professional responsibilities. Although the number of Indonesian university students participating in ITP is on the rise, there is limited research on how support systems from sending institutions are provided. This paper aims to document and describe the strategies employed by a study program at a private university that has extensive experience sending students abroad for teaching practice. This paper examines the role of support systems and seeks to raise awareness about their importance for students in ITP. In 2023, 16 participants and in 2024, 9 participants were involved in the program, providing them with immersive teaching experiences in different cultural and educational environments. Data were gathered through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with all participants, focusing on their challenges, strategies, and skills gained. The findings highlight the crucial role of a strong support system in enhancing participants' adaptability and professional growth during international teaching experiences. This paper contributes valuable insights into the necessity of comprehensive support systems for students undertaking international teaching practice, emphasizing the importance of structured assistance from sending institutions.

Keywords: international teaching practice, support system, professional growth

1. INTRODUCTION

International Teaching Practices (ITP) allow pre-service teachers (PSTs) to develop not only pedagogical competence but also intercultural competencies. As diversity is an integral part of today's classrooms especially in Indonesia, PSTs are required to be able to accommodate diverse learners' needs and characteristics. As Tambyah [1] argued, a teaching practice in one's own cultural context may hinder him/her in learning how to deal with cultural diversity. In the Indonesian context, teaching practices in different regions may provide PSTs to different cultural contexts, but it is still not as challenging as ITP. The communication barrier is minimal because PSTs may still use Indonesian, a national language used by the majority of Indonesian people, for communicating

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with students and other teachers. Also, teaching students with a similar curriculum and education system tends to be less challenging for PSTs who have been exposed to these things in college. Therefore, practicing teaching across countries is often considered instrumental and has gained its prominence among many teacher education programs in Indonesia.

ITP has at least two main aspects of improvement, namely cultural understanding and professional experiences. In ITP, PSTs were exposed to diverse perspectives and beliefs from different cultures, allowing them to gain deeper understanding of another culture as well as better connection with people from that culture [2]. This aspect has been extensively studied, with the majority of results indicating development in cultural competence through ITP [1,3,4]. PSTs participating in ITP developed intercultural communication skills, adaptability, and empathy, which are crucial for effective teaching in diverse classrooms. ITP also helps PSTs overcome cultural biases and fosters openness to different educational perspectives. In terms of language, PSTs participating in ITP were required to deal with language barriers especially when they did not share similar languages with students and other teachers [5]. They usually adapt with such conditions by using translanguaging and slowly learning the students' language. In addition to cultural competence, ITP also enhanced professional growth by providing hands-on teaching experiences in completely new educational settings with different curriculums and education systems. Jin et al. [6] pointed out that ITP could cause a significant change in the way PSTs see themselves as teachers: It was reported that PSTs taking ITP gained self-confidence and ability to adjust their teaching style according to diverse students' characteristics.

Despite the above mentioned benefits of ITP, there has been evidence of various problems encountered by PSTs when participating in ITP. Significant differences in culture and education systems may adversely affect PSTs emotional conditions especially when they were not well equipped with some background knowledge [7]. Bernardes et al. [3] pointed out that poorly structured ITP programs might hinder PSTs from actually developing their critical interculturality. Jin et al. [6] found that a lack of shared beliefs on education systems and values could create tensions between PSTs and cooperating teachers. These issues can be mitigated through the provision of support systems in ITP [8]. There are four types of support systems in ITP according to Kaur et al. [8]: (a) emotional support, (b) informational support, (c) instrumental support, and (d) companionship support. Emotional support may take the form of attentive listening,

acknowledging others’ feelings, building trust, showing appreciation, expressing affection and concern, offering comfort and a sense of safety, as well as reinforcing one’s self-esteem. In comparison, informational support involves the provision of knowledge, advice, recommendations, and relevant information, and may also encompass concrete assistance such as financial aid, material resources, labor, or time. Meanwhile, companionship support refers to meaningful social interactions, informal feedback, and the sense of satisfaction derived from positive social relationships. The present study aims at describing the role of support systems in ITP conducted by an English language education at an Indonesian private university.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This is a qualitative case study investigating how support systems have been an important aspect for pre-service teachers who joined International Teaching Practice (ITP) programs. Case study is one of the designs in qualitative research which focuses on the in-depth analysis of a certain case, event, or even a program [9]. This research design was chosen because it meets the objective of the study where the researchers attempted to conduct an extensive analysis on the ITP program.

2.2. Participants and Settings

A total of 25 pre-service teachers (PSTs) from the English Language Education Department (ELED) of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia participated in this study. Of these, 16 PSTs joined in the ITP program in 2023, while the remaining nine PSTs were enlisted in the program in 2024. These participants taught English in a number of ASEAN countries for a month and taught Bahasa Indonesia in Australia for two weeks. They mostly taught secondary school students and few of them taught primary school students. The following table shows the demographic profile of the participants.

TABLE 1: Demographic Profile of Participants.

Year	Number of PSTs	Target Country	Level	Subject
2023	2	Malaysia	Primary School	English
	5	Thailand	Secondary School	English

TABLE 1: Continued.

Year	Number of PSTs	Target Country	Level	Subject
	3	Vietnam	Secondary School	English
	5	Philippines	Secondary School	English
	1	Australia	Secondary School	Bahasa Indonesia
2024	2	Malaysia	Primary School	English
	4	Thailand	Secondary School	English
	2	Philippines	Secondary School	English
	1	Australia	Secondary School	Bahasa Indonesia

These 25 PSTs were the best candidates for the ITP program as they had passed a number of selection steps before their deployment. These PSTs went through four stages including (1) application, (2) resume screening, (3) commitment interview, and (4) psychological test. In the application phase, these PSTs completed and submitted the required documents online. Before applying for this program, the PSTs should at least meet the following criteria: a) are active students in their 2nd and 3rd year, b) have a minimum GPA of 3.00, c) have English proficiency certificate (such as TOEFL with a minimum score of 470), d) parental consent letter, e) motivation letter, f) medical record indicating allergies and/or past/current chronic illness, and g) other certificates and credentials. Once they submitted their application, the department did a screening for their resume to ensure that they met the aforementioned criteria. The third phase was an interview with the lecturers from the ELED to assess their commitment for completing the ITP program. After the PSTs affirmed their commitment, they went through the psychological test where they met a psychologist checking their personality, attitude, and mental readiness for the program. The psychological test is one of the most crucial tests because the candidates have to stay for one month far away from their family, friends and home country. They must be ready both physically and mentally.

2.3. Data Collection Technique

To collect the data, the researchers employed focus group discussions (FGDs) as the technique. FGD is one of the techniques used to collect data in qualitative research [10]. Finch also added that it usually involves four to ten participants to discuss as a group. There were two FGDs conducted in this study. The first FGD was conducted offline in 2023. 16 PSTs were divided into three groups and each group consisted of five to six participants. The participants involved in each group were coming from different

target countries and schools. Thus they had different stories and challenges. The researchers were involved in each group and led the discussion by asking questions. Each participant was allowed to respond to each other. The second FGD was conducted online with 9 participants as one group and was led by the researchers. Finch et al. [10] mentioned that FGD is more natural than interviews in terms of responses given by the participants which could be more spontaneous and reflect real situations. 21 questions categorized into three topics were discussed during the FGDs. The table below displays a sample of questions from each topic.

TABLE 2: Topic and Sample Question for FGD.

No.	Topic	Sample Questions
1.	Preparation (i.e., selection process, funding, pre-departure training)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you think about the funding scheme provided by the department for this program?• Was the training provided by the department prior to your departure sufficient to prepare you for the program? Which training is the most useful for you? Why?
2.	Implementation (i.e., supervision, challenge, benefit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did the supervisors from the department and your host school guide you throughout the program? How far did they supervise you?• What was your biggest challenge while joining this program? How did you cope with that?
3.	Post-program (i.e., output, outcome, sustainability)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have any difficulties in doing all the assignments related to this program?• How will this program influence your future career?

2.4. Data Analysis Technique

After collecting the data, the researchers then analyze them. Thematic analysis framework from Braun and Clarke [11] was employed in this study. Six stages of thematic analysis were conducted as follows.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Emotional Support: Building Confidence and Reducing Stress

Emotional support involved providing care, comfort, and emotional reassurance. This kind of support is vital in helping participants face the challenges of international teaching practices. Several participants in the ITP program mentioned feeling anxious and uncertain during the preparation and early stages of their teaching placements,

TABLE 3: Data Analysis Procedures.

No.	Stage	Description and Example
1.	Familiarizing with the data	Transcribing the data from FGD 1 and FGD 2, reading and re-reading the whole data.
2.	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features by highlighting words, phrases, or clauses, such as: “being independent”, “sharing session”, “buddies help me find halal food”
3.	Searching for themes	Gathering all the highlighted information and collating them into themes
4.	Reviewing themes	Checking whether all the codes connected to themes
5.	Defining and naming themes	Giving name of the themes from the same codes
6.	Producing the report	Writing and analysis the findings

highlighting the importance of emotional support in building confidence and reducing stress. Emotional support can come from parents, friends, or institutions. One participant who conducted an international teaching practicum in Thailand emphasized the importance of informal check-ins from both home and host university staff: *“They were constantly checking on me, asking if I was okay, if I had eaten, and ensuring I was comfortable. It made me feel safe.”* (Excerpt 1). Such emotional support encouraged a sense of security, reassuring participants that they were cared for, which was especially important in a foreign setting. Emotional support provided by the institution demonstrated the university’s readiness to send pre-service teachers to practice teaching in an international context.

However, participants also faced emotional distress due to administrative challenges, such as the process of obtaining visas. One participant shared, *“I was really worried about getting my Australian visa on time. There were several miscommunications with the travel agent who helped me, and I wasn’t sure if everything was alright... I was almost panicking.”* (Excerpt 2). In this situation, supervisors played a significant role in providing emotional comfort and offering practical solutions. Since there was a group of supervisors, they could discuss the issue together to help participants identify the administrative problem and provide reassurance based on their professional knowledge and experience. This form of guidance and reassurance helped reduce stress and reassured participants that they were not alone in navigating bureaucratic issues.

Such emotional support was crucial for building resilience and confidence in international settings, as emotional distress could hinder the overall experience. Kaur et al. [8]

noted that having emotional support, particularly during stressful moments like visa processing, encouraged self-confidence and emotional resilience. It allowed participants to manage not only the practical challenges of their assignments but also the emotional difficulties of being in an unfamiliar environment. Similarly, Kabilan [2] emphasized the importance of emotional support in international placements, stating that it enabled pre-service teachers to adjust to cultural dissonance and emotional exhaustion, ultimately enhancing their ability to thrive in a foreign context. Tambyah [1] also highlighted how emotional support played a pivotal role in helping teachers process the challenges of intercultural adaptation and gain deeper intercultural understanding.

3.2. Informational Support: The Need for Clear Communication and Preparation

Informational support in the ITP context referred to providing knowledge, advice, and practical information necessary for participants to succeed in their teaching roles. Several participants in this study struggled with gaps in the information provided to them, particularly concerning administrative requirements and cultural norms. One participant noted, *“I didn’t find out until I was already in the host country that I needed to create a blog as part of the requirements. I wish I had been informed earlier”* (Excerpt 3). This highlighted a significant gap in the support system, where a lack of prior knowledge led to confusion and stress. Kaur et al. [8] argued that a lack of clear communication about program requirements and expectations could undermine participants’ preparedness and confidence. Studies had shown that inadequate pre-departure training and unclear communication about cultural norms were major sources of stress for teachers in international placements [6]. The participants in this study expressed that more extensive pre-departure training and clearer communication of program expectations would have reduced much of their anxiety. These findings echoed Kabilan et al. [12], who found that teachers in international contexts often felt overwhelmed when they lacked sufficient information on local customs, teaching practices, and administrative requirements. Moreover, informational support should extend to crucial practical details, such as visa requirements, safety concerns, and local cultural nuances. The absence of these essential details could contribute to logistical and cultural challenges. One participant mentioned, *“I needed extra time to prepare my passport documents, but the timeline was too tight, and I felt rushed”* (Excerpt 4). This underscored the importance of comprehensive informational support, particularly regarding legal documentation, to

ensure that participants feel adequately prepared and secure. These issues aligned with the concerns raised by Hasymi & Nurkamto [4], who highlighted the gap in pre-departure preparation and the anxiety it generated. Their study on Indonesian pre-service teachers also revealed how a lack of information about the host country's educational systems and cultural expectations contributed to stress.

However, the university successfully provided crucial information in other areas to support the participants. For example, many participants noted the value of cultural and pedagogical training provided before departure. One participant shared, *"The pre-departure session was quite helpful. We were given information about the local culture and teaching practices. Though in reality it still felt challenging, the training helped me anticipate teaching and cultural challenges. (Excerpt 5)"* Participants were more prepared to face challenges, especially in cultural interaction and religious practices. Even though some of them still experienced unexpected things such as difficulties in finding halal food or interaction with LGBTQ communities, participants could handle the situation well and perceived it as an enriching experience. Furthermore, pedagogical information, such as guidance on adapting lessons to diverse student needs and local educational standards, also played a significant role in supporting participants' professional growth. Thus, more specific pedagogical training that focuses on the curriculum of the target country needs to be developed more for future similar programs, as Kham [13] highlighted that cultural and pedagogical information enabled teachers to integrate smoothly into their new roles, reducing anxiety and boosting confidence in their teaching practices.

3.3. Instrumental Support: Addressing Financial and Logistical Challenges

Instrumental support, which involved practical assistance such as financial support and material resources, was another critical element of the ITP program. While emotional and informational support was generally appreciated, participants expressed other challenges related to funding, accommodation, document preparation and flight schedule that could only be overcome by sufficient instrumental support. Participants noted that the short time frame between acceptance into the program and departure created pressure, especially regarding obtaining necessary documents such as passports. One participant remarked, *"I almost didn't have enough time to renew my passport. Some people were even unable to get an appointment in time for their passport renewal"*

so they had to cancel the departure” (Excerpt 5). These logistical challenges pointed to the need for more structured support in terms of time management and document processing. Kaur et al. [8] found that when teachers received sufficient logistical support, including flexible timelines for document processing, their ability to focus on the teaching aspect of their assignments increased significantly. Furthermore, even though the university has been committed to supporting all participants financially, budgeting still became a major issue among them. Several participants mentioned that despite the monthly living allowance and flight ticket subsidy, they still struggled to manage living expenses in their host countries, as they did not receive adequate information on affordable options of the local living cost. Tran et al. [14] emphasized that supporting international students with financial literacy was crucial for participants, especially when teaching in countries with a higher cost of living compared to their home countries. More instrumental support in these areas would have allowed the participants to focus more on their teaching roles, rather than being preoccupied with financial concerns.

3.4. Companionship Support: Enhancing Social Well-Being and Collaborative Learning

Companionship support, which encompasses social interaction and informal feedback, was found to be one of the most significant types of support in the ITP program. Positive social interactions and relationship satisfaction could minimize the challenges of living and teaching in a foreign environment. The participants often spoke about the importance of companionship support from both their fellow participants and host university staff. One participant shared, *“We were always there for each other—whether it was to debrief after class or to explore the city together. It made everything less stressful”* (Excerpt 6). This aligned with the findings of Bernardes et al. [3], who suggested that the presence of supportive peers fostered a sense of belonging and well-being, particularly in cross-cultural settings.

The importance of companionship support also extended back to the preparatory phase, before participants even set foot in their host countries. Throughout the selection process and the preparatory program, the participants have tried to bond with each other, sharing experiences and supporting one another. One participant recalled, *“We used to share our worries during the selection process, but the more we shared, the more we felt like we were a team. When we finally got to our host countries, we were already close.”* This camaraderie continued as they navigated the challenges of

teaching abroad. The shared experience of being in a foreign environment helped them form emotional bonds, which provided comfort during moments of uncertainty. The act of sharing worries and supporting one another during both the selection process and preparatory program helped establish a strong support network. These participants were able to rely on each other, not just for practical advice but also for emotional comfort.

Furthermore, informal feedback from peers proved to be an essential component of companionship support. Several participants noted how they relied on their peers for suggestions and reflections on their teaching strategies. One participant mentioned, *“The feedback I received from my colleagues after class was really helpful. It wasn’t structured, but it made me reflect on how I could improve my lessons.”* Informal peer feedback provided both practical solutions and emotional relief, which could help participants enhance their pedagogical practices and adapt more effectively to the new cultural context.

In conclusion, companionship support, both during the preparatory phase and in the host countries, was crucial for participants’ social well-being and professional growth. The sense of community and the ability to learn collaboratively allowed them to better cope with the challenges of teaching abroad. These findings are consistent with Bernardes et al. [3], who emphasized that informal social interactions and peer feedback helped teachers develop intercultural competence, which is essential for adapting their pedagogical approaches and succeeding in international teaching practice.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study emphasized the importance of a well-rounded support system for the success of international teaching practicum programs. Emotional, informational, instrumental, and companionship support were critical components that contribute to the overall experience of participants, as evidenced by their reflections. Participants highlighted the gaps in the current support system, particularly in areas like pre-departure preparation, administrative assistance, and financial support, which impacted their teaching experience. Kaur et al. [8] indicated that a holistic support system was vital for not only the success of international teaching programs but also the long-term development of educators. Providing sufficient emotional support could help participants develop resilience, emotional security, and self-confidence, allowing them to adapt to the challenges of teaching abroad. Similarly, clear informational support

was essential to minimize stress and ensure that participants were fully prepared for their assignments. Instrumental support, such as financial literacy support and travel arrangements, could prevent administrative hindrance and optimize their cross cultural teaching experience. Lastly, companionship support fostered a sense of community and helps participants feel connected to both their peers and the local context.

The findings also underscored the need for a more structured and comprehensive support system in the future program. Addressing the gaps in informational and instrumental support, particularly in the areas of logistical preparation and cultural orientation, will allow participants to focus on their teaching practice rather than dealing with uncertainties related to their living arrangements or legal documentation. A stronger support system will ultimately empower participants to make meaningful contributions in their host countries while gaining valuable experience that will shape their professional careers.

By enhancing the support system, educational programs can create an environment where international teaching participants feel prepared, supported, and engaged, which is crucial for both personal and professional growth. This practical implication extends beyond the individual participants to improve the overall quality of international teaching initiatives, benefiting not only the teachers but also the students they teach and the institutions they collaborate with.

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