

Reflective Practice in Developing Pre-Service ESL Teachers' Professional Identity and Teaching Competencies: Insights from TESL Trainees in the Malaysian Context

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Abstract

Reflective practice plays a crucial role in shaping the professional identity and teaching competence of Malaysian pre-service teachers of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) throughout their practicum. Although reflection is widely recognized as an essential component of teacher development, many pre-service teachers tend to focus on surface-level operational issues rather than critically examining their teaching experiences. This study explores how systematic reflective practice contributes to professional identity formation and teaching competency development among pre-service TESL teachers. Guided by the theoretical perspectives of Dewey, Kolb and Schön, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What key themes and experiences emerge from pre-service teachers' reflections? (2) How do these reflections contribute to professional identity formation? and (3) What reflective strategies support teaching competency development and identity construction? Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected from 10 TESL pre-service teachers at a Malaysian public university through reflection journals and semi-structured interviews. The findings highlight that effective reflection involves a continuous cycle of preparation, action, observation and evaluation that empowers pre-service teachers to refine classroom management, instructional strategies and responsiveness to students' needs. Through this process, participants developed stronger teaching competencies and a clearer professional identity as confident, adaptive and student-centered educators. However, challenges such as time constraints, limited guidance and negative perceptions of reflection reduced its effectiveness. The study recommends the systematic integration of structured reflective practices within Malaysian English teacher education programs to support a reflective teaching culture and support the development of ethically responsible, competent and lifelong learning educators.

Keywords: English teacher education, ESL practicum teachers, reflective practice, teacher professional development, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

1. Introduction

An increasing number of scholars recognize that reflective practice is essential to the professional development of pre-service teachers during their practicum, especially in the Malaysian education system. It helps teachers to connect theory with real classroom situations and improve their teaching through continuous learning. The concept of reflective practice in education was first introduced by John Dewey who emphasized the role of critical thinking in learning through experience (Dewey, 1933, as cited in Lefebvre et al., 2023). Later, scholars such as David Kolb and Donald Schön expanded this idea into a cyclical process of planning, action, observation and reflection, which is now widely recognized as a key approach for supporting continuous professional growth and improving teaching

quality in teacher education programs worldwide (Lefebvre et al., 2023).

Teacher education programs in Malaysia have formally adopted reflective practice to narrow the gap between theoretical knowledge and actual classroom practice. However, studies show that during practicum, pre-service teachers often engage in surface-level reflection and focus more on routine classroom activities than on deeper critical thinking (Choy et al., 2021). Moreover, limited mentor support further reduced opportunities for meaningful reflection and independent learning. Although the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) highlights reflection as a key strategy for improving teaching quality, challenges still remain. For example, Dinham et al. (2020) stated that time constraints and weak communication often produce only surface-level reflection. In addition, many pre-service teachers view reflection as a formal requirement rather than a means of professional growth (Mohamed et al., 2022). Therefore, stronger institutional support and clearer guidance are required to promote deeper reflective practices which highlight the need to examine how reflective practice can be effectively supported in this context.

Despite strong evidence that reflective practice is essential for developing teaching skills and professional identity, many pre-service teachers struggle to apply it effectively throughout their practicum. Studies show that teacher education programs often fail to provide clear training in reflective practices, causing students to be unsure how to evaluate their own teaching (Mwamakula, 2023). In addition, time limitation during practicum limits opportunities for meaningful reflection and in some educational cultures, a lack of active support for reflective activities further discourages their practical use. A study by Hahl and Mikulec (2018) highlights that reflection is a fundamental component of effective teacher preparation rather than an optional practice, yet it is still poorly integrated into daily teaching routines. Studies such as Prabandari (2020) raise concerns about the limited empirical evidence explaining how systematic reflection shapes professional identity across different contexts. Therefore, this gap suggests a need for better training, structured reflection models and further research to support practicum teachers' development.

Given these ongoing challenges and the identified gap in both practice and research, this study aims to explore the role of reflective practice in shaping pre-service teachers' teaching experiences, competencies and professional identity during practicum. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To identify the themes related to pre-service teachers' teaching experiences faced during their practicum through reflections written in their journals.
2. To explore to what extent do pre-service teachers' reflections influence the construction of their teacher identity during practicum.
3. To uncover the strategies of reflective practice used by pre-service teachers during practicum in developing their teaching competency and teacher identity.

Based on these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key themes and experiences highlighted in the reflections of pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum?
2. How do pre-service teachers' reflections on their practicum experiences contribute to the formation and development of their teacher identity?
3. What reflective practices and strategies do pre-service teachers employ during practicum to enhance their teaching competency and shape their teacher identity?

This study is significant because it contributes to both theory and practice in teacher education by providing clear evidence on how reflective practice can be strengthened among pre-service teachers. It highlights the need to move beyond basic reflection and supports more thoughtful, transformative professional growth. Furthermore, the findings offer practical guidance for pre-service teachers to strengthen their self-awareness and continuously develop their teaching effectiveness over the course of their practicum. As a result, it contributes to better classroom practices which can positively influence student engagement and learning outcomes. In addition, the findings can guide teacher educators, curriculum designers and policymakers in improving training approaches and acknowledging reflection as an essential professional ability. Ultimately, this study supports the development of more competent, confident and adaptable teachers who are better prepared for real classroom challenges.

2. Literature Review

Reflective Practice in Teacher Education

Reflective practice is a vital element in teacher education because it helps pre-service teachers to connect theoretical knowledge with real classroom experiences throughout the period of their practicum. Research by Choo et al. (2019)

shares that during the teaching practicum, student teachers are given the opportunity to apply the concepts, principles and skills they have learned in university settings into actual teaching situations. This exposure helps them to understand the realities of classroom environments such as student behavior, lesson effectiveness and teaching challenges. Research also highlights that practicum teachers develop greater awareness of teaching practices as they observe how students respond to their lessons which allows them to examine whether their approaches are effective or need improvement (Alsuhaibani, 2019). In this way, the practicum serves as a critical stage where theory is tested and refined through experience.

The role of reflective practice within the practicum further strengthens this learning process. When pre-service teachers are engaged in reflection, they are encouraged to critically analyze their teaching experiences, identify strengths and weaknesses as well as make necessary adjustments to improve their performance. This process supports the development of important teaching skills such as lesson planning, classroom management and instructional decision-making. However, the effectiveness of reflective practice depends on the level of support provided. Mwamakula (2023) highlights that while many practicum teachers benefit from reflection, some struggle to apply reflective skills effectively without proper guidance. Similarly, a study by Tay and Jain (2024) claimed that reflective activities help practicum teachers to question their beliefs and adapt to the complex realities of teaching that encourage deeper engagement with classroom practices.

Although reflective practice has many benefits, its implementation in teacher education still faces a lot of challenges. One key issue is the lack of shared understanding of reflection which can lead to a superficial engagement among pre-service teachers. In some cases, insufficient attention to reflective practices by educators reduces their overall impact on professional learning and growth (Mwamakula, 2023). Furthermore, research by Ann, Swanto and AlSaqqaf (2018) highlights that when reflective practice is not systematically included in teacher education programs, pre-service teachers may struggle to develop strong reflective habits. Therefore, reflective practice must be carefully structured and consistently supported to ensure that it effectively contributes to the professional growth of pre-service teachers.

Developing Teacher Identity Through Reflection

The construction of teacher identity does not take place all at once rather it gradually evolves through the interaction between personal values, cultural influences and professional experiences. This development becomes more noticeable during the practicum period when teachers encounter actual classroom-based situations that may not always match their prior knowledge (Aljuhaish et. al, 2020). In such moments, reflective practice becomes essential because it allows teachers to question, adjust and better understand their roles. Through careful reflection, they are able to connect theoretical knowledge with actual teaching practice and overcome identity conflicts that often occur in unfamiliar situations (Pandey and Mohanty, 2025). Additionally, research highlights that teacher identity is continuously shaped through reflective engagement with sociocultural and classroom experiences (Aljuhaish et al., 2020)

At the same time, reflective practice helps teachers to become more aware of their inner thoughts, emotional responses and hidden assumptions. This awareness is important because these factors can influence how they interact with students and manage the classroom. A study by Gorski and Dalton (2019) highlights that when teachers analyze their own behavior and decisions, they become aware of possible biases and improve their social and emotional competence. This type of reflection also motivates them to rethink their teaching beliefs and adjust them to match professional expectations that contribute to the development of a more stable and authentic identity (Pandey and Mohanty, 2025).

Furthermore, reflection supports both personal and professional growth by increasing teachers' confidence and independence. It encourages them to take an active role in improving their teaching and adapting to different students' needs. In addition, the study by Gorski and Dalton (2019) claims that reflective thinking brings attention to important issues such as fairness and inclusion that guide teachers to adopt more equitable practices in the classroom. For this reason, reflection serves as a powerful tool that supports continuous growth and helps teachers to build a strong and adaptable professional identity.

Building Teaching Competencies through Reflective Practice

Educators develop stronger teaching abilities by continuously reviewing and refining their classroom methods. Reflective practice encourages teachers to analyze their teaching methods and classroom management strategies in a critical and structured way. Instead of repeating the same approach, reflective teachers consider what is effective and what needs to be improved which helps them to teach more effectively and flexibly. Studies show that this

continuous process helps them to connect theory with real classroom experiences and respond to different learning situations more confidently (Mufidah, 2019; Pandey and Mohanty, 2025). As a result, teachers become more skilled in designing lessons that are both meaningful and suitable for their students.

Through reflection, teachers also engage in an ongoing cycle of planning, teaching, observing and evaluating their actions. This cycle allows them to identify challenges, such as low student participation or misunderstanding of content and take appropriate steps to improve. For example, a study by Mufidah (2019) highlighted that feedback from students or classroom interactions can guide teachers to adjust their explanations or try new instructional strategies. Over time, this reflective habit promotes flexibility and creativity in teaching which are necessary for professional growth. It also supports the development of stronger pedagogical skills that can be applied in different classroom contexts.

In addition, reflective practice supports the shift towards student-centered learning because it helps teachers to better understand their students' diverse needs and backgrounds (Almusharraf, 2020). Teachers can make informed changes to create a more inclusive environment by reviewing how their teaching affects student engagement and learning outcomes. This may include adapting materials, modifying activities or using different examples that relate to students' experiences. Such awareness encourages fairness and accessibility in the classroom to ensure that all students feel valued and supported (Henderson et al., 2011). Thus, reflection plays an important role in shaping educators who are competent, responsive and focused on students' needs.

Although the importance of reflective practice in teacher education is well recognized, previous studies have mainly focused on its general benefits rather than examining how it specifically shapes pre-service teachers' practicum experiences, competencies and identity at the same time. Many studies also highlight challenges such as limited guidance and superficial reflection, yet they do not explore in detail how pre-service teachers actually engage in reflection through their own written journals during their practicum (Mwamakula, 2023; Ann et al., 2018). In addition, there is a lack of research that clearly identifies the strategies used by pre-service teachers to develop both teaching competency and professional identity throughout their practicum. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by providing a deeper and more integrated understanding of reflective practice in real practicum contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the concept of reflective practice, a concept first introduced by John Dewey (1910) and later developed further by David Kolb (1984) and Donald Schön (1983). Dewey (1910) defined reflection as an active, persistent and careful process of thinking in which individuals critically examine their beliefs and actions based on evidence and consequences. According to this perspective, reflection represents a meaningful way of learning from experience rather than simply recalling events. A similar emphasis on learning through experience can be found in Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which views learning as a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Schön (1983) further deepened this understanding by introducing two key forms of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurs during the teaching process, where teachers think and respond immediately to classroom situations, while reflection-on-action takes place after the experience that allows for deeper evaluation and understanding. Together, these ideas present reflection as a continuous and dynamic process that supports thoughtful decision-making in professional practice.

In addition to these foundational ideas, reflective practice is often described as a cyclical process that involves planning, acting, observing and evaluating one's actions. This cycle encourages individuals to continuously review and improve their practices over time (Pandey and Mohanty, 2025). Knowles (1980) shared that such a process is connected closely with adult learning theory which highlights the importance of self-directed learning and learning through experience. From this perspective, reflection is viewed not as a one-time activity but an ongoing process that promotes deeper understanding and professional growth. These theoretical perspectives collectively highlight that reflective practice plays a key role in developing awareness, improving performance and connecting theory with real-life practice in educational contexts.

3. Method

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and reflections of pre-service teachers during their practicum. This approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' personal perspectives, particularly on how reflective practices influence the development of their teacher identity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, this approach is suitable for capturing both subjective and contextual insights which are essential for investigating complex phenomena such as identity construction and teaching

competency development. Instead of merely reporting participants' experiences, this design allows the study to examine how reflection shapes understanding that provides more meaningful insights into the way pre-service teachers develop and refine their professional identities over time.

Participants

The study was conducted in the Malaysian teacher education context and included pre-service teachers from the Bachelor of Education (TESL) program at a public university in Malaysia. In order to choose suitable participants, the study used purposive sampling to identify individuals with relevant practicum experience to ensure meaningful and detailed data (Campbell et al., 2020). The participants selected for the study consisted of 10 pre-service teachers aged between 22 and 24 years (two males, eight females). Among them, six had already completed their practicum and the remaining four were still undergoing their practicum. All participants were taught in secondary schools located in Selangor, which is located in the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia and is regarded as Malaysia's most developed and populous state, boasting the nation's largest economy. Overall, these participants provided diverse practicum experiences that contributed valuable insights into reflective practice during teacher education.

Instruments

The study used two main data instruments: reflective journal entries and semi-structured interviews. Pre-service teachers were instructed before starting their practicum to write regular reflection journals. A briefing session (Appendix A) explained that their reflections should focus on four key areas: teaching and learning, teacher-student relationships, teaching philosophy and personal values and teacher identity. These journals documented both emotional and intellectual experiences so that participants could reflect on challenges and professional growth. The purpose was to encourage critical thinking about past teaching practices in order to improve future actions.

In addition to the journal reflections, semi-structured interviews were conducted based on open-ended questions (Appendix B) adapted from Ulum (2020), with minor modifications to suit the Malaysian TESL practicum context and gain deeper insights. The flexible format allowed participants to elaborate on their thoughts while ensuring that essential topics were covered properly. Together, these instruments provided rich and detailed qualitative data for analysis. To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation was applied by comparing data from journals and interviews. Member checking was used by sharing interview summaries with participants for confirmation. Furthermore, discussions with supervisors through peer debriefing reduced bias and improved the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Procedures

Data were collected throughout the full 16-week practicum period, during which all 10 participants completed the practicum and submitted reflective journals through continuous documentation and scheduled interviews. The reflective entries (Appendix D) were collected on a weekly basis and then arranged and prepared for analysis. The researcher carefully reviewed all entries multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. For the interviews, participants were first contacted individually to arrange suitable sessions. Subsequently, each interview was conducted privately through Google Meet to ensure participant comfort and reduce bias and each session lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. Every session was audio-recorded and later converted into written transcripts for analysis.

The data analysis followed a systematic and inductive qualitative process using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings across both reflective journals and interview transcripts. The reflective journal entries were reviewed multiple times, coded and organized into categories to generate emerging themes. Similarly, interview transcripts (Appendix C) were analyzed using an inductive coding approach adapted from the qualitative analysis protocols established by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involved coding, categorizing responses and interpreting meanings. Finally, findings from both data sources were compared and integrated to identify common patterns and differences to ensure a more comprehensive and reliable interpretation of the participants' experiences.

4. Findings and Discussion

RQ1: What are the key themes and experiences highlighted in the reflections of pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum?

Table 1 presents the key themes identified from the reflection journals of ten pre-service teachers. Two main themes emerged: classroom management and interactive classroom activities. The code *Rules* was associated with classroom management by reflecting strategies used to establish order and expectations in the classroom. Meanwhile, the codes *Games* and *Classroom Activities* were grouped under interactive classroom activities. Games referred specifically to

structured, game-based learning activities such as Simon Says, Hangman and charades, whereas Classroom Activities covered broader interactive learning tasks, including group work, competitions, presentations and the use of teaching aids. While only a few teachers reflected on classroom rules, most participants highlighted the use of interactive activities during their teaching practicum.

Table 1. Key themes and experiences highlighted in the reflective journals of pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum

Participants	Codes	Elaborations
Pre-service Teacher 01 (PT01)	Rules Games	Implementing call-and-response techniques in the classroom, with every "Hello Class", the students need to respond with "Hi." Used a lot of games and activities during the lesson, like "Simon Says", charades, Hangman, and etc
Pre-service Teacher 02 (PT02)	Games	Used slides and interactive games, like online quizzes, "Movie Charades", Wordsearch, "Crack the Eggs", "Broken Telephone", "Mafia", and etc
Pre-service Teacher03 (PT03)	Rules Games	For students that did not bring their textbook, they needed to answer the questions in the class. Played some charades and "rock, paper, scissors" in class.
Pre-service Teacher 04 (PT04)	Games	Hangman, Unscramble the Word, and Watermelon games, Simon Says, some brain booster games like rebus puzzle game, charade.
Pre-service Teacher 05 (PT05)	Classroom Activities	Bringing teaching aids for the students to be able to visualise, grouping the students for a competition mode.
Pre-service Teacher 06 (PT06)	Classroom Activities	Playing Bingo games, increasing group activities.
Pre-service Teacher 07 (PT07)	Classroom Activities	Implemented "Shark Tank" activity in the lesson.
Pre-service Teacher08 (PT08)	Classroom Activities	Introduced the buzzer activity and make the students competed against each other.
Pre-service Teacher 09 (PT09)	Classroom Activities	Conducting a classroom activity using "Fight List" activity.
Pre-service Teacher 10 (PT10)	Classroom Activities	Utilized a set of buzzers during classroom activity.

The most dominant theme in the findings is the use of classroom activities, especially game-based and interactive learning. Almost all pre-service teachers mentioned different types of activities such as "Simon Says," charades, Hangman, Bingo, Wordsearch and "Rock, Paper, Scissors." Some teachers also used more creative approaches, including "Shark Tank" (PT07), buzzer competitions (PT08 and PT10) and "Fight List" (PT09). These activities show a clear effort to move beyond traditional teaching methods and create a more engaging classroom experience.

Many of these activities were carried out in groups which highlighted the importance of collaborative learning. For instance, PT07's "Shark Tank" activity allows students to work in teams to design a product, prepare a presentation and persuade their classmates. This not only improved language skills but also developed creativity and teamwork. In a further example, PT08 used buzzer-based games to teach grammar, where students competed in groups to answer questions quickly. This created excitement and encouraged active participation. Similarly, PT05 used teaching aids and group competitions to help students visualize content and stay motivated throughout the lesson.

While interactive activities were widely used to promote engagement, some pre-service teachers also emphasized the importance of establishing clear classroom rules to support a structured learning environment. The use of classroom rules was mainly reported by PT01 and PT03, especially during the early stage of their practicum. This suggests that new teachers see rules as a foundation for building an effective learning environment. For example, PT01 explained that setting clear expectations helped students to understand their behavior, participation and academic responsibilities. As the teacher stated, "...I also set clear expectations and rules for my class as I believed that it was an essential step in establishing a conducive learning environment..." This shows how the teacher viewed rules as a way to create structure and clarity. The teacher also introduced a simple call-and-response routine, where students replied "Hi" to "Hello Class," which helped to maintain attention and created a structured learning environment, particularly in a large classroom.

Similarly, PT03 used rules to ensure students came prepared for class. Students who did not bring their textbooks were required to answer questions that encouraged responsibility and accountability. This approach is reflected in the statement, "...students who did not bring their textbook would be asked to answer the questions in the class..." Over time, this method reduced the number of students forgetting their books. These examples show that classroom rules

were not only about discipline but also about supporting learning and creating a structured environment. For practicum teachers, such strategies are important as they help to build confidence and control in the classroom.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the pre-service teachers shared similar motivations for using both interactive activities and classroom rules during their practicum. Most of them aimed to increase student engagement, maintain attention and create a productive learning environment. These findings are supported by Fredricks et al. (2004), who explain that engagement includes behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects. Activities like games and group tasks encourage students to participate actively (behavioral), enjoy the learning process (emotional) and think more deeply about the content (cognitive). In addition, clear classroom expectations help to create the structure needed for such engagement to occur effectively. His research also shows that interactive and enjoyable learning experiences can improve student motivation and participation, which is clearly reflected in the practicum teachers' experiences.

Furthermore, the findings connect with the study of Cambay and Paglinawan (2024), who found that effective classroom management and a supportive environment are strongly linked to student engagement. Pre-service teachers maintain this balance by applying both rules and interactive activities. While rules provide structure and discipline, interactive activities create a positive and collaborative learning atmosphere. Group-based tasks also help students to build social connections, which are important for motivation and long-term learning. That being said, the pre-service teachers' reflections highlight a strong preference for active, engaging and student-centered teaching strategies that are supported by both practice and research evidence during practicum.

RQ2: How do pre-service teachers' reflections on their practicum experiences contribute to the formation and development of their teacher identity?

The analysis of both reflection journal entries and interview responses suggests that reflection played a crucial role in helping pre-service teachers develop a clearer sense of their professional identity during their practicum. Rather than merely documenting classroom events, participants used reflection to examine their decisions, evaluate their actions and consider the impact of their teaching. Through this process, they became more aware of their strengths, priorities and responsibilities as teachers. This finding is connected with Dewey's (1910) view that reflection involves careful examination of experiences to generate deeper understanding and informed judgment. It also aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which emphasises learning through the transformation of experience into knowledge. By critically reviewing their practicum experiences, the participants began to move beyond performing teaching tasks and started constructing personal understandings of what it means to be an impactful teacher.

A recurring pattern in the reflections was the development of professional values and beliefs. Several participants reflected on how their classroom decisions influenced students' learning and behavior, that leads them to reconsider their own teaching philosophies. For instance, PT01 recognized the importance of establishing clear expectations and noted that "I also set clear expectations and rules for my class as I believed that it was an essential step in establishing a conducive learning environment." This reflection demonstrates more than a classroom management strategy; it indicates an emerging belief that effective teaching requires structure, consistency and purposeful guidance. Similarly, PT03 reflected on encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning by ensuring they came prepared for class. Through evaluating the outcomes of these actions, the participants developed stronger convictions about accountability, discipline and their role in supporting student success.

Reflection also allowed the participants to refine their pedagogical beliefs and teaching approaches. As they reviewed their classroom experiences, many began to identify the types of learning environments they wanted to create. Several reflections indicated a growing preference for approaches that encouraged active student participation and collaboration. Rather than accepting their initial teaching methods uncritically, participants evaluated student responses and adapted their practices accordingly. This process reflects Schön's (1983) concept of reflection-on-action, where professionals learn by revisiting and interpreting past experiences. Through such reflection, the participants developed a stronger understanding of the educational values that guided their decisions, particularly the importance of engagement, interaction and meaningful learning experiences.

Another significant contribution of reflection was the development of a broader understanding of the teacher's role. The reflections suggest that participants gradually shifted from viewing themselves primarily as transmitters of knowledge to seeing themselves as facilitators of learning. By examining how students responded to different instructional approaches, they became increasingly aware of the need to support participation, motivation and understanding. This growing awareness encouraged them to consider not only what they taught but also how students experienced learning in the classroom. Such insights contributed to the formation of a more student-centered professional identity, characterized by responsiveness, empathy and a commitment to creating supportive learning

environments.

Finally, the findings highlight reflection as a continuous process of professional growth. Participants regularly evaluated their experiences, identified areas for improvement and considered alternative approaches for future lessons. This cyclical process mirrors the reflective model described by Pandey and Mohanty (2025), which involves planning, acting, observing and evaluating. It also reflects Knowles' (1980) view that professional learning develops through self-directed engagement with experience. Consistent with the role of mentorship in supporting reflection (Walkington, 2005) and the value of reflective journaling in connecting personal and professional experiences (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2017), reflection boosted participants' understanding of teaching practices and strengthened their confidence, self-awareness and professional commitment. Overall, reflective practice served as a key mechanism through which pre-service teachers developed their teacher identity, transforming everyday practicum experiences into opportunities for meaningful professional learning and self-development.

RQ3: What reflective practices and strategies do pre-service teachers employ during practicum to enhance their teaching competency and shape their teacher identity?

The findings indicate that pre-service teachers implemented a range of reflective practices during practicum to improve their teaching competency and support their professional development. Analysis of the reflective journals and interview data suggests that reflection functioned as an active process of examining classroom experiences and informing future instructional decisions. Participants regularly reviewed their teaching practices, interpreted students' responses and considered adjustments to improve subsequent lessons. Consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, participants engaged in reflection as a means of transforming teaching experiences into practical knowledge that could be applied in future classroom situations. The findings reveal four key reflective practices: seeking feedback, critically evaluating classroom experiences, reflective journaling and collaborative reflection.

One of the most prominent reflective strategies was seeking and utilizing feedback. Participants viewed feedback as a valuable source of information that empowered them to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and identify areas for improvement. For example, PT09 stated, "...I want to have like a personalized feedback... students have different level of proficiency...". This statement demonstrates an awareness that learners possess diverse needs and that teaching approaches should be adjusted accordingly. By reflecting on students' performance and responses, participants were able to make more informed instructional decisions. This finding supports Wang et al. (2023), who argued that constructive feedback encourages self-evaluation and promotes professional growth. Such reflection contributed to the development of a more responsive and learner-centred professional identity.

Another significant reflective practice involved learning from classroom experiences through critical evaluation of teaching outcomes. Rather than viewing lessons as isolated events, participants examined what worked effectively and what required modification. Several participants reported adapting their teaching approaches after recognising that students were more engaged during lessons that included interactive activities. These adjustments illustrate reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, as teachers evaluated their classroom experiences during and after instruction and used these insights to improve their future teaching practices (Li, 2025). Through this process, participants developed greater confidence in making pedagogical decisions and became more adaptable in responding to classroom challenges, both of which are important aspects of teaching competency.

Reflective journaling also emerged as an important strategy that supported deeper professional learning. The journals provided participants with opportunities to revisit teaching experiences, analyse challenges and evaluate their own development over time. Rather than simply documenting classroom activities, participants used writing as a means of critically examining their instructional practices and identifying recurring patterns in their teaching. This process encouraged self-awareness and facilitated them to recognise areas requiring further improvement. Aligned with González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal (2017), reflective writing facilitated connections between personal experiences and professional learning that allowed participants to become more conscious of their evolving roles and responsibilities as teachers.

Collaborative reflection further contributed to both competency development and identity formation. Discussions with peers, mentors and supervisors allowed participants to share experiences, receive alternative perspectives and refine their teaching practices. These interactions encouraged participants to critically reconsider their assumptions and explore new instructional approaches. According to Pandey and Mohanty (2025), collaborative reflection strengthens professional identity by strengthening dialogue and shared learning. Similar benefits were evident in the present study, where participants used professional conversations, lesson observations and analysis of student responses to guide improvement (Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021). Overall, the findings suggest that feedback-seeking, critical evaluation of classroom experiences, reflective journaling and collaborative reflection collectively improved

teaching competency while promoting the development of a confident and reflective teacher identity. Collectively, these reflective practices allowed participants to examine their teaching systematically, make informed instructional adjustments and continuously improve their classroom practice throughout the practicum experience.

5. Conclusion

The study highlights that reflective practice is a key factor in shaping pre-service English teachers' professional identity and improving their teaching competencies. Findings underscore that reflection is not only a method of reviewing classroom experiences but also a meaningful process that helps teachers to understand their roles more clearly. By engaging in structured and critical reflection, pre-service teachers are able to connect theoretical knowledge with real teaching situations. This connection allows them to respond more effectively to classroom challenges and to develop a clearer sense of professional purpose. In addition, reflection encourages teachers to question their assumptions and improve their teaching decisions based on experience. It also helps them to become more aware of students' needs and adapt their strategies accordingly. As a result, reflective practice supports the growth of self-awareness, decision-making skills and confidence, all of which are necessary for effective teaching practice.

Therefore, the findings carry important implications for teacher education programs and educational stakeholders, particularly in English language teacher preparation, where both classroom management (e.g., use of rules and routines) and interactive, student-centered strategies (e.g., game-based and collaborative activities) should be explicitly integrated into practicum training. It becomes clear that reflective practice should be an essential part of practicum training rather than an optional activity. Institutions need to provide clear reflective frameworks, guided support and structured opportunities for pre-service English teachers to design and evaluate engaging language learning activities that promote participation and communication. In addition, mentorship plays a significant role in shaping the quality of reflection because experienced teachers can guide practicum English teachers to think more critically about their classroom experiences. Mentors should also model how to balance language-focused instruction with engaging activities and effective classroom control, as reflected in the pre-service English teachers' practicum experiences. Policymakers and curriculum designers can also use these findings to improve English teacher training systems to make sure that reflection is seen as an essential professional skill that supports long-term effectiveness in teaching.

On the basis of these results, a number of recommendations can be made for future research and practice. Further studies should examine how reflective practice continues to influence English teachers after the practicum period, particularly in their early teaching careers. Longitudinal research could provide a deeper understanding of how reflective habits develop over time and affect professional growth. In addition, future research may explore different reflective strategies such as the use of digital tools, to improve engagement and effectiveness. Expanding studies in these fields can help teachers and institutions to improve support for reflective practitioners who are adaptable, thoughtful and prepared to meet the evolving demands of education.

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Author contributions

Dr. Nadhirah designed the study, managed data collection, and share equal authorship on this project. The initial manuscript draft was written by the main author, while Prof. Dr. Fauzi provided critical revisions. All authors have read and given final approval for the published version. Additionally, the authors thank Humyra Anjum Maliha for her invaluable assistance with data collection and administrative support during this project.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix A

Instruction for Participants

You are required to maintain a weekly reflective journal throughout your 16-week teaching practicum. These reflections are a critical component of your professional development and should document both your emotional responses and intellectual engagement with your teaching experiences.

Each weekly entry should be guided by the following four key areas:

1) Teaching and Learning

Reflect on your classroom practices, lesson delivery, instructional strategies, and student learning outcomes. Consider what worked well, what did not, and why. You are encouraged to connect your experiences to relevant pedagogical theories or methods where appropriate.

2) Teacher–Student Relationships

Examine your interactions with students, including classroom communication, rapport-building, classroom management, and responsiveness to student needs. Reflect on how these relationships influenced the teaching and learning process.

3) Teaching Philosophy

Discuss how your beliefs about teaching and learning are being shaped or challenged during your practicum. Consider how your actual classroom practices align (or do not align) with your stated teaching philosophy.

4) Personal Values and Teacher Identity

Reflect on your emerging identity as a teacher. Consider how your personal values, beliefs, and experiences influence your decisions, behavior, and professional growth. Identify moments that contributed to your development as an educator.

Guidelines for Writing:

- Write one entry per week (Weeks 1–16), with each entry ranging between 300–500 words.
- Use a reflective and critical tone, not merely descriptive narration.
- Support your reflections with specific examples from your teaching experiences.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What was one lesson or activity that truly stands out in your mind and why?
2. How has your practicum experience impacted your understanding of student learning or classroom management?
3. What are your next steps in developing your teaching practice?
4. How do you see your personal and professional identities intersecting and influencing your teaching practices?

Appendix C

A Sample of the Transcribed Interview Responses


Practicum Teacher 07

“Alright, so the first question is, what was one lesson so far in your practicum right now or activity that truly stands out in your mind and why?”

“Alright, okay. So I'm going to start off with, currently I'm holding two classes. One is for form one and another is form two. So the form one we call them one umar and second one is two ubaidah. So the one lesson that stands out the most for me is for Tukubaita. What I did is that I wanted to talk about the topic. The lesson is about environment. And in English, we have to teach them four skills, right? So the skills I have to teach them at that time was speaking. And I was wondering because compared to other school, in the basic of it, my students, are quite proficient compared to other students. They're considered as A2, A2 to B1. However, compared to the pupils around the school, they're quite low proficiency. So they can understand. In classes in the school, I speak fully English. They can understand, but they have difficulties in speaking. So I wanted to think of a lesson that can help

them to be more interested. So we have to go, the process is that I have to search for activity about environment. Environment is generally, I would say, very overused and boring topic. And I think they've learned to listen about pollution and yada yada yada, everything too much already. So I wanted to do something different, something that makes them want to speak. they are very, very especially very shy and they're not confident at all. But they can understand, they can create, they can write, they can read very well. It's just that they don't want to speak. So I was wondering what kind of activity I can do for speaking. So what I did is that I Google around, look at TikTok, know, those kind of stuff. Usually that's where you get an idea. It's at the places where you might think it's inconvenient for learning, but it's actually the part where you can get a lot of ideas. So what I saw is I saw a reality TV show, Shark Tank. Shark Tank is about where you ask them, you sell your product and you ask the person they call like a panels, a panels of people, we call them sharks to invest on your money. And what I did is that I asked them to be in groups. they have groups of five, three girls, two boys. I asked them to create a product that can help the environment. So they have criteria. They have five criteria. The name of the product, what was it used, what kind of problem it can give a solution to, and slogans and special features of the product. I give them a list of things they have to do. So they have to create it, and then by the next class, they have to present it to their to their friends and I want them, the one that are presenting will be the seller, the company. I call them a company. And the ones that are watching and looking, they will be sharks. So what does the shark do when they are watching their friends presenting? Another thing you have to think of when you're teaching and learning, you have to make sure that all of the pupils engaged within each other. So I tried my best to make them focus. while their friends are presenting, they have to focus because, well, if you don't focus on what's the point of learning, right, you have to understand what your friends are saying and whatnot. So one of the friends will be presenting, they will be the company and the other will be sharks. And again, you have to remember the main point of the sharks is to have money to invest. So I told them, okay, if you want to invest, for example, this product is so good, one person from one group, we will raise a a shoe, a shoe to raise to show that they want to invest. So one shoe equals to \$10,000. So the highest, the company with the highest investment wins the presentation. So, I mean, I didn't really give them anything, but they like it. And I did that and they really truly enjoy it. And by after the presentation, Before the invest, I asked them to do this PQS, please question and suggestion. So I will randomly select any group to please and question and give a suggestion for their friends presentation so that they will focus, so that they won't be confused. there are parts where I mean the issues with speaking. So it took them a while to do the who asked part of the presentation but overall, they really like it because they can give like, oh, like, oh, I want to invest on my friends, my friends company, 10K, 10Ks and the one that presenting, they are fired up because they want their friends to invest. So I think I like it that way because I can see like they, before I did the activity, I did ask them, do you know what Shot10 is? majority of them did not but quite a few I mean in the class there's like 30 people 30 peoples there's like 10 to 50 peoples that are almost half knows what a shark tank is so we have the basic there they already know what what what shark tank is and how to play.”

Appendix D A Sample of the Participant’s Reflective Entries

 <p>Selangor Darul Ehsan</p> <p>SELF-REFLECTION</p> <p>Name: Alyssa Matric Number: 2XXXX Name of Supervisor: H/P Number: 01X-XXXXXX Programme: Bachelor of Education (Teaching English as Second Language) Semester & Year: Semester 2, 2024/2025 Name of School: SMK Seri Bunga School Tel. Number: 0X-XXX XXXX</p>	<p>Week: 1</p> <p>Date: 25th March 2025 – 29th March 2025</p> <p>1. Teaching and Learning</p> <p>On Wednesday, I was assigned to teach two classes: 1 Cemerlang and 2 Bestari by the evening senior assistant. The first lesson primarily focused on building rapport with the students. They introduced themselves and shared about their interests, while I also introduced myself to them. Establishing this connection is crucial as it helps create a supportive and engaging learning environment where students feel valued and understood. I also set clear expectations and rules for my class as I believed that it was an essential step in establishing a conducive learning environment. It allowed me to communicate effectively with my students about what I expected from them in terms of behavior, participation, and academic performance. By setting these guidelines early on, I aimed to create consistency and structure in the classroom, which helps students feel secure and understand their boundaries.</p> <p>As for my Form 1 pupils, I started the lesson with a fun game of charades focused on household chores. This game helped break the ice between me and the students, making the atmosphere more relaxed and interactive. Afterward, we completed exercises from the textbook to reinforce their learning. To wrap up the lesson, I asked each student to write down two things they would like to buy with their own money on a small piece of paper, and then they placed these papers in a savings box I provided. This activity not only helped me understand their interests better but also gave me insights into what motivates them. It will guide me in planning future lessons that cater to their specific interests and needs.</p>	<p>2. Teacher-student relationships</p> <p>During the group activity, I noticed that some students were very active and talked a lot, but a few students stayed quiet and let others do the work. I walked around the room and tried to talk to the quieter students, asking them simple questions and encouraging them to share one idea with their group. When they did, I made sure to praise them. I realized that I need to pay more attention to these students so they feel more confident and included in class.</p> <p>3. Teaching philosophy</p> <p>I believe that students learn better when they are active and can talk to each other, not just listen to the teacher. This lesson allowed them to work together and share ideas, which I was happy to see. However, I also learnt that just giving a group activity is not enough. I must think carefully about how to set it up, how to explain it clearly, and how to guide students while they work. This experience made me reflect on how I can better match what I believe about teaching with what actually happens in my classroom.</p> <p>4. Personal values and teacher identity</p> <p>I want to be a patient and fair teacher. During this lesson, I tried to stay calm when students did not understand the instructions and when the class became noisy. I noticed that I tend to speak faster when I feel nervous, which may confuse students. This week showed me that I still have a lot to learn, but it also gave me some confidence because I saw small improvements in how I talk to students and how they respond to me. I am starting to see myself as a teacher who is learning step by step, and I hope to keep improving in the coming weeks.</p> <hr/> <p>Weeks: 2</p> <p>Date: 1st April 2025 – 5th April 2025</p> <p>1. Teaching and Learning</p> <p>In my Form 1 class, I implemented a variety of interactive teaching strategies aimed at fostering active learning and critical thinking. One such method was the use of rearrange words activities during set inductions, which served as dynamic warm-ups to engage students from the onset of each lesson.</p>
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