

# Enhancing Teacher Preparation: A Case Study on the Impact of Integrating Real-World Teaching Experience in English Higher Education Programs

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## Abstract

This case study examines the impact of real-world teaching experience on future teachers' preparedness and understanding of the teaching profession. The study utilized a mixed methods approach, with future teachers teaching classes to children and adapting their lesson plans for online scenarios. The research focused on two courses that prepare individuals for a career in teaching. It involved three phases, and pre-and post-surveys assessed the participants' progress and expectations regarding motivation, preparedness, familiarity with teaching methods, and ability to manage classroom situations.

The findings revealed significant improvements in future teachers' motivation, familiarity with teaching methods, and preparedness to face students in a classroom. Integrating real-world teaching experience facilitated a deeper understanding of teaching approaches, critical thinking skills development, and the ability to adapt teaching strategies to different contexts. The study emphasizes the importance of providing prospective teachers with a well-rounded skill set, fostering the confidence to navigate the dynamic realm of teaching adeptly.

By engaging in practical teaching experiences during their higher education, future teachers gain valuable insights into the profession, enhance their teaching methods, and develop the necessary skills to become proficient educators. The study provides valuable insights for English Higher Education Programs seeking to enhance teacher preparation and improve the quality of education. It underscores the importance of constructivist approaches and the fusion of theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience.

English Higher Education programs must adapt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, nurturing capable educators who are committed to lifelong learning and the creation of meaningful learning environments.

**Keywords:** real-world teaching experience, higher education, English teaching, Milagro-Ecuador, future teachers, constructivist approaches, education programs, teaching methods, practical teaching experiences

## 1. Introduction

The ongoing debate regarding the significance of holding a teaching degree versus gaining practical experience has gained traction in the current educational discourse. While some argue that curricular internships play a significant role in integrating future teachers into the labor market (Franco et al., 2019), others suggest that active participation in authentic practice involves community engagement (Hunter et al., 2007).

Traditionally, future teachers are presented with the necessary information to review, but the emphasis on actively constructing knowledge and being involved in the experience is often overlooked. Many educators dedicate substantial time to delivering data-driven lectures. However, future teachers must engage in real teaching practices to develop a range of skills to effectively manage their classrooms and provide quality education to their students.

To achieve this, teacher education programs must incorporate diverse activities that allow future teachers to discover their teaching philosophies and develop motivation toward their careers. The experience of "seeing myself doing this" has been identified as a vital element in clarifying career paths for future teachers (Hunter et al., 2007, p. 60).

Along with a firm grasp of theoretical concepts, teachers must comprehend their students' messages, come up with practical solutions to challenging situations, and demonstrate creativity and initiative (Stavridis & Papadopoulou, 2022).

Given the demanding nature of teaching practice and the associated responsibilities, trainers and professors must provide guidance and support to future teachers to achieve the established goals (Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2018). This includes incorporating service learning into teacher education programs and encouraging critical reflection to originate meaning from experiences and academic content.

On the one hand, service learning (SL) has become integral to higher education (Jacoby, 2014). Providing service-learning experiences with opportunities to help future teachers apply course material in action can have numerous benefits. For example, future teachers can develop practical skills, such as student engagement and classroom management, which can be challenging to teach in a traditional classroom setting (White, 2021; Hooli et al., 2023). In addition, service learning can help students better understand their communities' needs and develop a more profound sense of empathy and connection to the world around them.

On the other hand, Critical reflection is a robust process that allows future teachers to challenge various perspectives and gain deeper insights, raising more thought-provoking questions. Reflection is essential for developing critical thinking skills, which is necessary for effective problem-solving in any teaching situation. By reflecting on their experiences, future teachers can identify their biases and assumptions and approach teaching with a more open and inclusive mindset (Kawai, 2021) and a welcoming learning environment for all students.

## 2. Literature Review

Practical experience is crucial for teacher training. While theoretical knowledge obtained through academic studies helps to develop a general understanding of teaching methods, real-world experience working as educators in various classrooms and contexts provides future teachers with a tangible perspective on imparting knowledge (Manasia et al., 2020). Therefore, gaining practical experience during training is essential for future teachers to become effective educators.

Interacting with real students is vital to fostering instructional excellence as it enables individuals to share knowledge and practice, helping them identify areas for improvement before embarking on their careers (Robinson, 2016, Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2018). This is particularly true in the field of education, where firsthand experience in the classroom can help cultivate confidence and preparedness for future careers. As Aglazor (2017) notes, effective teaching practices significantly influence students' learning outcomes (p. 101). Additionally, teaching practice can help individuals determine if teaching is the right career path for them, as a passion for the art of teaching is crucial to becoming a proficient educator.

It is essential to recognize that most educational professionals will eventually work with children or teenagers, as schools and high schools are the primary employers. However, working with young learners can pose challenges, as teachers must discover effective methodologies to facilitate knowledge acquisition and transfer within their students' learning process. Recent graduates entering the field may face difficult challenges as they lack practical knowledge of teaching in real-life situations (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020). Therefore, engaging in teaching practice can improve teacher trainees' attitudes toward the profession, equip them with teaching skills, and enable the practical application of theoretical knowledge within instructional settings, thus enhancing professional proficiency (Abdullahi & Salisu, 2017, p.100; Mufidah, 2019). Moreover, this experiential learning can benefit future teachers by exposing them to real-life situations and prompting them to seek solutions to issues that arise in the classroom.

Educators must establish meaningful connections with their students and create dynamic classes that incorporate a blend of theories (Torres-Cladera et al., 2021). Aglazor (2017) highlights the importance of allowing student-teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses in classroom teaching, address them, and enhance their strengths (p.101). By creating a more engaging learning experience, educators can help students better understand the material and become more invested in their own learning. This requires a personalized approach that considers the unique needs and interests of each student. Moreover, educators must be willing to adapt their teaching methods to align with the individual learning styles of each student (Mufidah, 2019; Hamilton & Margot, 2019). By doing so, educators can bridge the gaps in students' understanding and help them reach their full potential.

Teaching practice is an essential component for future educators to gain insights into the art of teaching before entering the profession (Retnawati et al., 2018, p. 113). Moreover, this practice helps them shape their teaching identity, which is critical for their growth and development (Meyer et al., 2023). As educators, working in the field of

education provides invaluable experiences as they empower individuals to pursue their dreams and equip them with effective learning strategies, even when some students may lack interest. However, new teachers may find it challenging to navigate classrooms with disruptive behavior or students facing learning difficulties due to a lack of experience (Torres-Cladera et al., 2021).

In the EFL field, it is essential to note that some teachers perceive their role as solely evaluating students; however, they must recognize that their primary purpose is facilitating language acquisition (Ramírez, 2021). To accomplish this, teachers must employ appropriate methods and strategies tailored to the group while considering their students' culture, background, and prior knowledge. Robinson (2016) suggests that learning experiences that occur within the context of a typical school day are more likely to result in long-term learning and change (p.9).

Future teachers must reflect on their experiences and make necessary adjustments to improve their teaching performance (Meyer et al., 2023). In the field of education, being a professional requires more than just knowledge. Teachers serve as role models for children, who often emulate their behavior. Therefore, future teachers must prepare to face new educational challenges (Rowan et al., 2021) and integrate their academic content with practical experiences. By doing so, they can design or adapt meaningful activities that help them accept responsibility as competent professionals and lifelong learners, as Aglazor (2017, p. 105) suggests.

This case study aims to expose students to real-life contexts and allows them to engage in the teaching profession. It aims to expand their knowledge and readiness by highlighting that teaching is not just about sharing information but also a continuous journey of learning and personal growth. Therefore, the following research question guided the study:

- 1) How does integrating real-world teaching experience into higher education programs influence future teachers' understanding of the teaching profession and their preparedness to enter the field?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Setting*

This study specifically focused on students enrolled in two distinct courses at the same academic level, both aimed at preparing individuals for a career in teaching. One course focused on pedagogy, while the other centered on applying appropriate materials and techniques for teaching students based on their ages and skill levels. The integration of these two courses resulted in a project that required university students to gain practical experience by teaching classes to children.

This work allowed students to apply what they were learning and enhance their teaching methods in a real-world context. Through the development of teaching models and methods during this case study, university students were able to foster a positive attitude toward the teaching profession.

#### *3.2 Research Design*

The research design used in this study is a case study approach. It examines the impact of integrating real-world teaching experience into higher education programs on students' understanding of the teaching profession and their preparedness to enter the field. A mixed methods approach was used in this study through quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments.

#### *3.3 Sampling*

The sampling method employed in this case study was purposive sampling. Fifty-two university students from the third semester of the English Language program at the public university in Milagro were intentionally selected based on specific criteria. The age range of the participants in this study varies from 18 to 25 years old. All participants were English teacher trainees with a B1 level of English proficiency as determined by the European Common Framework of Reference.

#### *3.4 Instruments*

The case study applied both quantitative and qualitative instruments for data collection. A pre-survey and a post-survey were administered to gauge the participants' expectations and assess their progress throughout the study. The surveys measured various criteria related to the participants' motivation, preparedness, familiarity with teaching methods, ability to manage classroom situations, and overall motivation to teach in real educational institutions. The surveys provided quantitative data for analysis. Additionally, qualitative data were collected by developing a website as an online portfolio. The website allowed participants to express their teaching philosophy, share their teaching

experiences, and reflect on their teaching practices. It included sections such as personal information, teaching philosophy, learning theory application, experiences at the educational institution, class videos, and reflections.

### 3.5 Procedure

For this research, fifty-two students from the third semester of the English Language program at a public university in Milagro participated in real-world teaching practices. The study was divided into three phases.

#### 3.5.1 Phase 1

Future teachers were divided into seven groups and assigned a school grade and a specific topic to work on. The purpose of group work was to foster collaborative skills among the students, as educators need to know how to work effectively with others and be open to different ideas and perspectives. Practical experience in teacher preparation is widely accepted as crucial for developing classroom skills (Bacharach et al., 2010, as cited in Whannell et al., 2019).

Future teachers were tasked with preparing a lesson plan detailing their teaching approach. Besides, they created various didactic materials using different strategies and methodologies and additional resources to achieve their goals with the children. One of the professors guided the process, ensuring the materials used were appropriate for the children's level, culture, and age. Most university students in this research employed the Task-Based Learning (TBL) model, considering the limited time (45 minutes) and focusing on a specific task. Moreover, they exchanged information among the groups while planning their lessons, allowing for collaborative improvement of their teaching strategies.

Additionally, future teachers were required to create a website as an online portfolio, where they expressed their teaching philosophy by integrating learning theories and their teaching experiences. According to Johnson (2018), online portfolios consist of users' artifacts demonstrating their learning journey, including research projects, photographs, videos, observations, and evaluations (as cited in Sasai, 2017). The students also shared memories from preparing the materials and included pictures of the classes they taught. Furthermore, they recorded a video discussing their experience as English teachers and identifying areas for improvement in their future teaching endeavors based on their interaction with children aged four to nine.

Besides, future teachers were expected to enhance their lesson plans, considering the characteristics of the specific group they taught while maintaining the same objectives. Collaborative work was vital in designing a professional and educational webpage, emphasizing the importance of professionalism when working with underage individuals and preparing students for future research projects.

#### 3.5.2 Phase 2

During the second phase, future teachers faced an online scenario, allowing them to experiment with blended learning. Blended learning combines online and face-to-face classroom interactions to achieve learning objectives (Allman, 2021). The professors assigned a teaching method to each group, and the students had to adapt their lesson plans for the same group of children. Future teachers had the opportunity to modify and tailor the topics since they were already familiar with the students. Moreover, the change in setting to an online environment necessitated adjustments to the materials. For instance, if the CLIL method was assigned and the previous topic covered Halloween, the students could choose Christmas or Valentine's Day as the new topic while adhering to the assigned method.

Future teachers prepared online resources specific to the assigned method during this stage. They practiced among themselves, considering the online setting and the limited time available for the class (45 minutes). One of the professors acted as a facilitator, supervising their preparation process, and providing feedback to ensure the selection of appropriate activities for the specific group of children. Facilitative learning requires interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers from different subjects (Eपुरi, 2020).

After the completion of the first and second phases of the teaching experience, future teachers made significant changes and improvements to their web pages, dividing them into six sections. In the first section, they shared personal information about each group member and selected a quotation that reflected their preferences for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This section aimed to provide insights into the educators they aspired to become. The second section focused on their teaching philosophy, incorporating their ideas and thoughts based on their experiences and the content they learned in their classes. The third section required future teachers to upload a video in which the learning theory they identified with was discussed and how they would apply it in their future teaching practices, considering the real educational context they would encounter. All group members needed to participate in the video.

The fourth section showcased the students' experiences at the educational institution where they taught. They uploaded pictures, videos, and detailed lesson plans and were required to write a phrase that encapsulated their teaching experience. The fifth section featured the class video from the virtual scenario and the corresponding detailed lesson plan, demonstrating that the planned activities were effectively executed during the class. Finally, in the last section, the students wrote a reflection based on their teaching practices throughout the semester. They expressed their feelings about the opportunity to teach in real educational institutions.

### 3.5.3 Phase 3

Professors assigned peer revisions and feedback to the students. This method increases students' engagement with the feedback process and improves learning without placing an additional burden on the teacher regarding providing comments (Gaynor, 2020). At this stage, university students focused on showcasing their professional and educational backgrounds and demonstrating their ability to provide constructive feedback based on the knowledge acquired in their classes.

All future teachers received feedback from their peers, and then they collaborated in groups to discuss how to enhance their webpage and reflect on their decisions. The professors considered not only the final work but also the recommendations, comments, and observations provided by peers. Throughout this phase, future teachers exhibited their creativity in webpage design and demonstrated their growth in the learning process and their collaborative skills.

## 4. Results

This research implemented quantitative instruments to gather relevant information, and data collection involved using the SPSS program to analyze all components and generate reliable results. This program facilitated data derivation and assessed effect size. Descriptive statistics were also utilized to analyze pre- and post-surveys, enabling the measurement of statistical differences. The resulting statistical values are presented in Table 1, highlighting the positive effects of gaining teaching experience while pursuing a teaching degree among future teachers. The participants' motivation and gains exhibited significant improvement across each criterion.

**Table 1.** Analysis of Pre- and Post-Surveys

Criteria	Pre-survey Mean	Post-survey Mean
Familiar with how to work on a lesson plan for a specific group of students	2.01	3.59
Familiar with using different methods to teach English	1.25	3.05
Familiar with choosing the correct method to teach English according to the students	1.07	2.89
Feels ready to face students in a classroom	2.25	4.54
Feels secure to impart classes in a classroom	1.97	4.41
Feels secure to explain a topic to real students	1.46	4.13
Knows how to research or create material for use in class	2.08	4.46
Ready to manage a situation in which the prepared class needs to be changed due to lack of something (energy, materials, classes canceled)	1.07	4.71
Knows how to manage time in a real classroom	1.13	3.43
Knows how to manage students in a real context	1.02	3.87
Knows how to manage stress when preparing a class	1.05	3.98
Feels motivated to teach in real educational institutions	2.00	4.86
Feels motivated to continue with the preparation required to be a teacher	2.56	4.91

The table presents the results of the pre-and post-surveys, where participants expressed their opinions and perspectives on each criterion. Learners had the opportunity to reflect on their improvement during the research. Participants reported feeling more secure in explaining topics to real students, with a mean of 4.13. They also felt ready to handle situations where the prepared class needed to be modified for various reasons, such as lack of energy, materials, or canceled classes, with a mean of 4.71. Participants demonstrated an understanding of time management in a real classroom (mean = 3.43) and managing stress when preparing for a class (mean = 3.98). Furthermore, participants showed increased motivation to teach in real educational institutions, with a mean of 4.86, and to continue with the necessary preparation to become teachers, with a mean of 4.91.

#### 4. Discussion and Final Considerations

The present study provides compelling evidence of the critical role of practical experience in teacher training. The findings of this study align with the observations of Manasia et al. (2020) and Robinson (2016) that practical experience is essential for future teachers to gain motivation and experience the complexities and nuances of teaching in real-world settings. Additionally, Peterson-Ahmad et al. (2018) assert that engaging with real students enhances instructional excellence, further corroborating the importance of practical experience.

The study demonstrates that combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience helps future teachers overcome their initial nervousness and gain valuable insights into teaching strategies. This finding aligns with the observation of Kihwele and Mtandi (2020) that recent graduates often face challenges in real teaching scenarios due to a lack of practical knowledge. However, the transformative power of practical experience is evident in the significant improvement in participants' English skills, supporting the findings of Ramírez (2021) in the EFL field.

Moreover, the study highlights the benefits of collaboration and feedback from qualified educators, a component emphasized in teacher preparation programs. Future teachers have become more adept at planning and strategizing, a skill critical for navigating classrooms with diverse learning challenges and behavioral issues, as noted by Torres-Cladera et al. (2021). They have also gained insights into adapting teaching methods to individual learning styles, a recommendation emphasized by Hamilton and Margot (2019).

Despite initial struggles, the study offers valuable insights into practical classroom strategies for future teachers, confirming the importance of practice in forming a well-rounded teaching identity. This supports the notion that teaching practice not only enhances technical skills but also contributes to shaping a teaching identity, which is critical for professional growth (Retnawati et al., 2018, p. 113).

Overall, the study underlines the indispensable nature of practical experiences in forming competent educators ready to face new educational challenges (Rowan et al., 2021). These experiences equip future teachers with both the practical and interpersonal skills required in their journey to become not just educators but also role models for future generations.

By bridging theoretical concepts with the lived experiences of future teachers, this study adds a crucial layer of understanding to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of hands-on experience in teacher preparation. The findings of this study have important implications for teacher training programs, emphasizing the necessity of practical experience for future teachers to become competent educators.

#### 5. Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the time constraint, as undergraduate students only sometimes had classes aligned with the school's terms. This posed challenges in planning for the teaching experience. It is important to note that undergraduate students only study for four months during the semester, while schools have classes throughout the year. Additionally, some students did not reside in the city where the practice occurred, requiring them to travel for participation. However, the professors consistently supported university students and provided guidance when they faced concerns about planning practical activities within a limited timeframe since professors also acted as facilitators (Jagtap, 2016).

Another limitation that future researchers must consider is the need for permission from educational authorities at the schools and the Local Educational Department to conduct certain practices in real institutions. Some schools may be unwilling to grant access to external individuals. Therefore, it is recommended to carefully plan the necessary procedures, ensuring that suitable locations for student participation are secured prior to the start of classes. Technological proficiency posed a challenge for some students, as not all possessed the necessary skills, and half of the action research focused on utilizing technology.

#### 6. Conclusions

This study emphasizes the critical role of integrating real-world teaching experiences into higher education programs, corroborating the literature's assertions. The results highlight the transformative power of practical training in preparing future educators to meet the multifaceted demands of the teaching profession. By engaging in constructivist approaches and blending theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience, this research underscores the importance of imparting a comprehensive skill set to prospective teachers.

Moreover, these findings underline that practical training not only enhances students' motivation but also mitigates

their initial apprehensions, instilling confidence to navigate the dynamic landscape of teaching effectively. This aligns with the literature review's emphasis on developing teachers who can adapt to diverse classroom scenarios and exhibit critical thinking skills. Teacher education programs must evolve to bridge the gap between theory and practice, thereby nurturing proficient educators who are lifelong learners and capable of creating meaningful learning environments for their students.

The outcomes of this research affirm that exposing future educators to real-life teaching contexts helps them refine their instructional strategies, understand diverse student needs, and build their teaching identities. The collaborative and reflective aspects of this approach align with the educational theories that emphasize the importance of practical experience and critical reflection in teacher preparation. In this light, this study underscores the need for a pedagogical shift in higher education programs to better equip prospective teachers for their roles as transformative educators who continually enhance their teaching practices to meet the ever-evolving needs of the educational landscape.

## 7. Recommendations

After completing this research, it is advisable for future professors intending to undertake similar projects to educate their university students about the ethical considerations associated with working with underage pupils. It is inappropriate to share images that reveal these children's faces publicly. Moreover, future teachers should know that their involvement in an educational institution necessitates behaving as aspiring educators, demonstrating professionalism and appropriate conduct. Furthermore, while pursuing their university studies, when engaging in practical experiences at schools, students must adhere to the regulations set forth by these institutions.

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of students practicing in schools is crucial. This knowledge allows for the appropriate placement of students at the appropriate educational level when assigned to educational institutions. Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that not all students may be inclined to teach younger children and require substantial support and guidance from headteachers. Consequently, engaging in discussions with students is recommended to ascertain the grade level they feel comfortable working with, enabling them to practice their teaching methods in groups that inspire their motivation.

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