



# Exploring the Pedagogical and Cultural Challenges Faced by English Education Students during Teaching Practice in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the pedagogical and cultural challenges faced by English Language Education students from UIN Ar-Raniry during teaching practice in Malaysia. It highlights their adaptation to different classroom settings, language barriers, and cultural norms. This study uses a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of 10 English education students during their teaching practice in Malaysia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. This method helps uncover themes related to pedagogical and cultural challenges, offering insights into how students adapted to a new educational and cultural environment. Key challenges included adapting to teacher-centered approaches, low student participation, cultural diversity, and language barriers. These issues affected their teaching effectiveness and required flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and creative strategies to engage learners. The findings highlight the importance of preparation for cross-cultural and pedagogical adaptation. Future studies can look at how teaching in another country helps student teachers grow over time. It is also important to study how schools or universities can give better support to help them get ready for teaching in a different culture.

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## Introduction

Becoming a good teacher is a complex process that needs different skills and knowledge. Teaching practice is an important part of teacher training because it helps students apply theory in real classrooms (Kapri, 2017). English education students who do teaching practice in Malaysia face special challenges. They must adjust to a different education system, adapt their teaching styles, deal with language barriers, and understand different learning styles. They also face differences in curriculum and classroom management, which require flexibility and resilience (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023).

Cultural differences are also important. Adapting to a new culture is both hard and rewarding. It helps students grow personally and professionally. Including local culture in lessons can make teaching more engaging and help build connections with students and the community (Mingjie, 2023). However, this is not always easy. Many studies focus on practical aspects like classroom management but often forget the real-life feelings of students who face new cultures and teaching methods. These students often feel nervous and scared, but these challenges also help them grow and feel positive emotions like care and happiness as they connect with the local community (Rahmawati et al., 2023).

This study fills that gap by exploring the experiences of 10 English education students from UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh who did a 3-week teaching practice in Malaysia. It focuses on both teaching and cultural challenges and explores how students adapted to a new environment, changed their teaching methods, and interacted in Malaysian schools.

## Methods

This study uses a phenomenological approach to understand the real experiences of English education students during their teaching practice in Malaysia. In education research, phenomenology is helpful to explore what students and teachers go through. This study uses a type called descriptive phenomenology, introduced by Edmund Husserl. It focuses on describing experiences clearly and honestly, without adding personal opinions. The aim is to understand how student teachers face teaching and cultural challenges in a different country. By listening to their personal stories, the study tries to find the deeper meaning behind their experiences abroad.

The participants in this study are ten English education students from UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. They did their teaching practice at Maahad Tahfiz Kiblah Malaysia in Selangor from June 5 to June 29, 2024. They were chosen using purposive sampling because they had joined the Community Service (KKN) and teaching practice (PPL) programs in Malaysia. These students were willing to share their experiences and talk about the challenges they faced. Their stories help us understand how they adapted to the culture and education system in Malaysia.

The main method of data collection in this study is interviews. Since this is a qualitative study, interviews help explore the participants' experiences in more detail. Interviews allow the researcher to collect deep and useful information about the teaching and cultural challenges the students faced—something that cannot be easily gathered through surveys or just watching.

This study uses in-depth interviews. These interviews are like conversations but have a clear purpose. They are different from casual talks or therapy sessions. In-depth interviews help the researcher learn more about the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the student teachers. Unlike unstructured interviews that feel very informal or semi-structured interviews that follow a loose guide, in-depth interviews give more focus while still allowing the conversation to go deeper.

To understand the data, the researcher uses thematic analysis. This method helps find common patterns or themes in what the participants say. First, the researcher will read the interview transcripts several times to understand them better. Then, they will find repeated ideas or words and group them into simple codes. These codes are then put into larger themes such as teaching strategies, cultural differences, and communication problems. The researcher checks these themes again to make sure they match what the participants said. This step-by-step process, as explained by Miles and Huberman (2002), helps the researcher organize the data and find useful conclusions from it.

## Result

To answer the research questions in this study, I interviewed Indonesian English education students to explore their experiences and challenges during their teaching practice in Malaysia. The interviews focused on cultural and pedagogical challenges, as well as how these challenges affected their teaching effectiveness and ability to adapt. After analyzing the data, several important findings were identified.

One of the main pedagogical challenges was adapting to the teaching style in Malaysia. The participants observed that the classroom environment was often more teacher-centered compared to Indonesia. They had to adjust their methods to better connect with students and meet the expectations of the school.

IF said, "Additionally, I noticed that Malaysia still applies a teacher-centered approach, where teachers lead the lessons and provide most of the information. Students listen and take notes rather than actively discussing the material. In Indonesia, student-centered learning is more common, where students are encouraged to explore ideas and participate more in class discussions."

NI shared a similar experience: "Students are encouraged to use English in their daily conversations, not just for exams or written tasks, and I noticed that Malaysia still follows a teacher-centered approach in the classroom. Teachers play a dominant role in delivering lessons, explaining materials, and guiding students through exercises, while students mostly listen, take notes, and follow instructions."

ZH added, "In Indonesia, lessons usually start with grammar or vocabulary, followed by practice. In Malaysia, the focus is more on language skills like writing, speaking, listening, and reading through practical activities. Grammar is not heavily emphasized; students may even prepare for TOEFL without detailed grammar lessons. This was a big change for me. I also found that Malaysia still uses a teacher-centered approach, where the teacher leads most of the lesson. To help students, I adjusted my teaching style by combining grammar with speaking and writing exercises."

These insights show that the participants had to be flexible and adjust their teaching styles to suit the Malaysian classroom culture.

Another major challenge was the lack of student participation. This made it hard for the participants to build strong communication and fully understand the classroom environment.

MA said, "One of the biggest challenges was that many female students were too shy to ask questions or join discussions. They were often quiet, even when they didn't understand the lesson. To help them feel more comfortable, I used group activities and small discussions before asking them to share their answers with the whole class. This way, they felt more confident to speak. Another challenge was that the school didn't have much technology. There were no projectors or digital tools, so I couldn't use slides or videos to explain the lesson. Because of this, I had to find other ways to make the lesson interesting. Even though it was difficult at first, it helped me become more creative in teaching."

CS also observed, "The main cultural difference I noticed was that Malaysian students were more passive in the classroom, often listening quietly to the teacher rather than actively participating. In contrast, Indonesian students were more accustomed to engaging in discussions and asking questions. To encourage student participation, I gradually introduced small discussions and simple question-and-answer sessions. I also encouraged students to share their ideas, even if they were unsure, to help build their confidence in speaking up during lessons."

Similarly, AS said, "One noticeable difference was in how students interacted in class. In Indonesia, students tend to be more open and expressive, actively engaging in discussions. On the other hand, Malaysian students were generally quieter and more careful with their words. To encourage their participation, I used simple questions and interactive group activities, which helped them feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts." These stories show that while the lack of participation was a challenge, it also encouraged the participants to find creative ways to engage students and improve classroom interaction.

The participants also faced cultural challenges, especially in classroom engagement. Malaysian students were often more passive and relied heavily on the teacher, which made it difficult to create interactive lessons. This cultural difference influenced how students behaved in class and made it harder for the participants to motivate them and keep the class lively.

One specific challenge was dealing with cultural diversity in the classroom. Students came from different regions and backgrounds, and this affected their learning habits and confidence levels.

AU said, "I noticed that students from different backgrounds had varying learning attitudes. For example, students from Jenderam Hulu, which is near the school, seemed more confident and actively asked questions during lessons. In contrast, students from Kuala Lumpur were more passive; they preferred to sit and listen without much interaction. Meanwhile, Thai students were very quiet. Although they understood the lessons, they lacked confidence in speaking up. To help them engage more, I encouraged the quieter students by directly asking them questions.

When prompted, they were usually able to answer, which helped build their confidence over time.”

LH also shared, “During my teaching practice, I realized that students’ classroom behavior differed depending on where they came from. For example, students who lived closer to the school, like those from Selangor, Sepang or the school zone that is Jenderam Hulu, often showed more confidence and were not afraid to ask questions or express their thoughts during the lesson. In contrast, Thai students were very quiet. Even though they understood what was being taught, they didn’t usually speak unless encouraged. Meanwhile, many students from Kuala Lumpur were also less interactive—they listened carefully but rarely participated in discussions.”

These experiences highlight the need for flexibility and cultural awareness in diverse classrooms.

Another cultural challenge was the language barrier. Many students did not understand English well, which made communication difficult.

NA explained, “I expected the students to be good at English because my lecturer told me that English is the second language in Malaysia. I also thought that since they were boarding school students, they would have a basic understanding of English, just like in my own experience as a boarding school student. However, when I arrived, I was surprised to find that most of them didn’t understand English at all. Only one or two students could follow what I was saying. To deal with this, I used body language to help explain my points and made my gestures as clear as possible. I also asked for help from their teacher, who was fluent in English, Malay, and Indonesian. She was really smart and helped me a lot in translating when the students struggled to understand.”

EN had a similar experience, saying, “One of the biggest challenges I faced was the language barrier. Even though I used English throughout my lessons, many students still had difficulty understanding what I was saying. At first, this made communication a bit challenging, as I wanted to encourage them to use English more. However, I found a way to help them by first explaining the material in Malay and then translating it into English. This method made it easier for them to grasp the lesson without feeling frustrated or left behind. Over time, they became more comfortable listening to and using English in class, which helped improve their learning experience.”

These stories show that the language barrier was a major challenge, but it also helped the participants learn how to adjust and find effective ways to teach in a new environment.

## Discussion

This study found that English education students faced several pedagogical and cultural challenges during their teaching practice in Malaysia. One major challenge was adapting to a more teacher-centered teaching style, which differs from the student-centered

approach common in Indonesian universities (Overby, 2011). Participants had to adjust their strategies by mixing grammar explanations with skill-based activities like speaking and writing. They also noticed that Malaysian students, being ESL learners, were generally more confident in using English compared to Indonesian EFL students (Widiati et al., 2023). These findings align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which highlights the need for teachers to adjust their methods based on students' cultural backgrounds.

Another pedagogical issue was the lack of student participation. Many students were passive, especially younger or female ones, making it hard for participants to engage the class. To address this, they used interactive activities like group work and games, following constructivist principles that promote active learning (Anastasha & Movitaria, 2019).

Cultural challenges also appeared in the form of diverse classroom behaviors. Students came from different ethnic and national backgrounds, including Thailand, which influenced how they interacted in class. Participants had to be flexible, respectful, and culturally sensitive in order to make all students feel included (Uyun, 2022).

Lastly, language barriers affected communication. Although English is widely used in Malaysia, many students still had trouble understanding lessons. Participants responded by simplifying their language, using visuals, and sometimes including Malay words. This helped improve comprehension and boosted students' confidence in using English (Halim & Halim, 2013; Christie & Listyani, 2018).

## Conclusion

This study highlights the key challenges faced by English education students during teaching practice in Malaysia, especially those related to cultural differences that affect teaching methods, communication, and classroom management. A major issue was the limited cultural knowledge of the teacher education students, which made it harder for them to handle diverse classrooms. This emphasizes the need for teacher training programs to focus on cultural understanding and reflective teaching. Understanding students' cultural backgrounds helps create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, making students feel valued. The study also found that, despite the challenges, participants became more flexible, creative, and culturally aware, showing that these experiences contributed to their professional growth.

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