



“Inspired to be a teacher seriously”: An autoethnography of student engagement in a Vietnamese TESOL training programme

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Abstract

TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) training programmes in Vietnam often emphasise the significant alignment of academic knowledge with practical classroom methods. However, an intricate yet underexplored topic is understanding the dynamic engagement of student teachers in those programmes to investigate the complexities of such alignment. Therefore, this research examines factors influencing student teachers' in-class engagement following a 120-hour TESOL training programme at an institution in Vietnam. This autoethnographic study analysed a TESOL teacher trainer's reflections on student teachers' engagement in the programme, using artefacts in the form of anonymous and open-ended short-text feedback from 30 students across approximately eight months. The reflection and feedback responses were analysed thematically, anchored in a framework emphasising the three facets of in-class engagement, i.e., cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Through the analysis, three themes were constructed: (1) theoretical-practical synthesis: how TESOL-related concepts are blended with concrete teaching examples; (2) pedagogical climate: the teacher educator's critical role in creating a receptive and engaging learning environment; and (3) professional pathway clarity: the student teachers' understanding of their future roles and trajectories in the TESOL arena. The research's findings provide TESOL educators with crucial insights into student teachers' engagement with teaching methods that synthesise both theoretical and practical components. Moreover, the research enriches the academic discourse, underscoring the potential of using the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement triad as a diagnostic tool to understand students' learning experiences in TESOL training programmes.

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Publication

Received: 02 May 2024

Revision: 13 July 2024

Accepted: 15 July 2024

Published: 11 August 2024

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Keywords: *TESOL; TESOL education; engagement; teacher education; autoethnography.*

Introduction

In Vietnam, the rapid proliferation of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) training programmes has sparked a vibrant debate about their efficacy and alignment with the practical demands of teaching (see Andrew, 2020; Chowdhury & Phan, 2008; Nguyen & Ngo, 2017; Ping, 2015). This debate strikes at the heart of what it means to prepare student teachers in TESOL-related courses with essential skills and a foundation of subject matter knowledge, as well as equip them for the real-world challenges they will face. However, there remains a palpable gap in our understanding of how student teachers engage with these programmes and the extent to which this engagement influences their views on effective teaching practices for an English teacher.

TESOL programmes are designed to prepare student teachers with the crucial skills, foundational knowledge, and pivotal strategies to effectively teach English to non-native speakers (see Barnawi & Ahmed, 2020; Brown & Ruiz, 2017; Choi & Poudel, 2022). Student teachers in this study refer to individuals who have enrolled in TESOL training programmes and are at various stages of their professional development, from novice teachers seeking to enter the field of English language teaching (ELT) to more experienced teachers looking to refine their teaching practices and expand their expertise in TESOL methodologies. These training programmes, which vary widely in their structure, content, and delivery methods, serve as a crucial bridge between theoretical linguistics and practical teaching methodologies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen & Tran, 2022).

Literature in the field of language education consistently highlights several key elements crucial to the success of TESOL programmes (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Swan, 2018). Notably, the research underscores the importance of a robust curriculum that integrates linguistic theories with teaching practices, the development of a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and clear guidance on career pathways for aspiring TESOL professionals (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Richards, 2017). These foundational elements are critical for equipping future English language teachers with the tools to navigate the complexities of language instruction in diverse educational settings.

Driven by a blend of professional curiosity and personal investment, the first author of this paper (Hoang) embarked on this study to unpack the layers of student teacher engagement in Vietnamese TESOL programmes. This exploration was a journey to the core of what makes the TESOL training programme meaningful and effective, both for Hoang as a teacher in the training and the engaged student teachers in the course. Hoang approached one of his PhD supervisors (Lynette, the second author of this paper) to act as a critical friend in this study, providing insights and probing questions. It is important to note that, throughout the rest of this paper, when the first person pronouns *I*, *me*, or *my* are used, it reflects Hoang's insights and personal experiences. This was purposely chosen, as this paper is the story of Hoang's journey to uncover the elusive factors that influence student teacher engagement. When the pronouns

we, us, or our are used, this is done to reflect a more general description of the study design or theory, as this was a collaborative effort between Hoang and Lynette.

My journey into the heart of TESOL is deeply personal, driven by a quest to understand how we, as teachers, can bridge the divides of language and culture to fully unlock our students' potential. My attention was initially captured by the global surge in the demand for English proficiency, a testament to the critical role TESOL training programmes hold in our interconnected society. Over the past two years, my role as a TESOL teacher educator has been to equip student teachers with the essential skills and knowledge for effective teaching. Yet, my focus has equally been on fostering cultural sensitivity and adaptability, which are critical requirements in a TESOL training course (Brown & Ruiz, 2017; Gay, 2018; Tomlinson, 2016). These factors reflect the aspirations of many student teachers engaging in TESOL-related fields worldwide (Bordia et al., 2006; Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Yoko & Elke, 2022), underscoring the vital influence teacher educators have on their course success and their future views on ELT.

My focus has sharpened on Vietnam, my homeland, where the thirst for English education has surged, driven by the winds of globalisation and economic integration (Le, 2020). Here, the landscape of TESOL programmes has blossomed to meet this demand, each initiative a beacon of hope for bridging language divides (Le & Le, 2022). Yet, as these programmes multiplied over the past years, so did my concerns about the depth and quality of engagement they fostered among student teachers. This concern is not only academic but also personal. I have seen first-hand the difference a deeply engaged teacher can make, and I have witnessed the transformative power of passionate and participatory education. Working with student teachers across classes in those programmes, listening to their stories of why they want to become English teachers, and observing how they progressed throughout the instructed course, I have gained many insights. This experience echoes the findings of Chen and Gao (2020), who highlight the significance of such immersive learning experiences in the journey of language teacher education. Significantly, I am deeply invested in ensuring that these TESOL programmes not only meet the growing demand for English language teaching but also truly empower student teachers to foster learning environments where engagement is deep, meaningful, and transformative for every future student whose lives they touch.

In the Vietnamese context, as the demand for qualified English language teachers continues to grow, understanding the core components that contribute to effective TESOL training has become increasingly important (Ilieva & Ravindran, 2018; Morgan, 2019; Nguyen & Tran, 2022). Engagement, as I have come to understand it in the realm of TESOL, is a multifaceted concept encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of student teacher learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). In TESOL training, engagement reflects the intellectual rigour student teachers bring to their studies, the emotional connections they forge with their training and their active participation in shaping their learning journeys (Ellis et al., 2020; Hawkey, 2006). High levels of student teacher engagement in those programmes are the lifeblood of effective teaching, nurturing a profound understanding of teaching methodologies and honing classroom management skills that could positively contribute to student teachers' learning outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004; Nguyen & Ngo, 2017; Nguyen & Tran, 2022). Research

indicates that understanding how teachers can engage students effectively within the training context can shape student teachers' views on implementing these approaches in their future classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Nguyen, 2019). Therefore, understanding how student teachers engage within such programmes requires trainers to reflect on and adapt their instructional strategies and classroom dynamics.

My experiences as a TESOL educator have led me to pursue a PhD exploring the influence of student engagement on language teacher identity. In this way, I can agree with Pretorius (2019), who notes that "it is the research topic that chooses the researcher" (p. 3). Through my experiences in the PhD, I have reflected on my role as a teacher educator, and it is through this lens that I approach the present study. I hope to contribute to the scholarly discourse by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: Reflecting on my role as a teacher educator, what key factors within the TESOL training programme do I perceive as significantly influencing student teacher engagement?

RQ2: Based on my experiences and observations, how do I believe these factors influence the overall effectiveness of teacher preparation in the TESOL training programme in Vietnam?

Conceptual framework

My study is anchored in the multi-dimensional engagement framework delineated by Fredricks et al. (2004). My analysis particularly emphasises three critical dimensions of engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural) as they pertain to how I perceive student teachers' engagement throughout the TESOL training programmes. In this framework, behavioural engagement is characterised by various factors, including participation, effort, attention, persistence, adherence to positive conduct, and the avoidance of disruptive behaviours (Fredricks et al., 2016). Emotional engagement is understood through the lens of student teachers' positive and negative feelings towards their educators, peers, academic subjects, or the course itself, alongside their sense of belonging and identification within the learning environment (Fredricks et al., 2016). Finally, cognitive engagement involves the application of self-regulated learning strategies, deep learning approaches, and the exertion of effort required to grasp complex concepts (Fredricks et al., 2016).

Analysing any of the emotional, behavioural, or cognitive components in isolation fails to capture the complexity of human psychological processes (Dao et al., 2021; Huynh & Adams, 2022; Ngo, 2022). Consequently, I also adopted Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory of learning and development (1994, 1998) in this study. Vygotsky's (1994) theory supports Fredricks' (2004) engagement framework by seeing the dimensions of engagement as interdependent components of a holistic educational experience. Vygotsky's (1994) theory also emphasises the dynamic interplay between an individual and their environment, highlighting how this interaction is central to learning and personal development. Individuals contribute their unique experiences to this interplay, thereby influencing the nature of their interactions within various contexts (Ngo, 2022; Vygotsky, 1994). Concurrently, the environment, along with its participants, moulds the individual's development (Vygotsky, 1994). This perspective

underscores the symbiotic relationship between a person and their surroundings, suggesting that the essence of learning and development is found in the fluid exchange between internal processes and external influences (Vygotsky, 1994). Figure 1 demonstrates the conceptual framework for this study. This diagram highlights the interrelatedness of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement and their cumulative effect within the classroom setting.

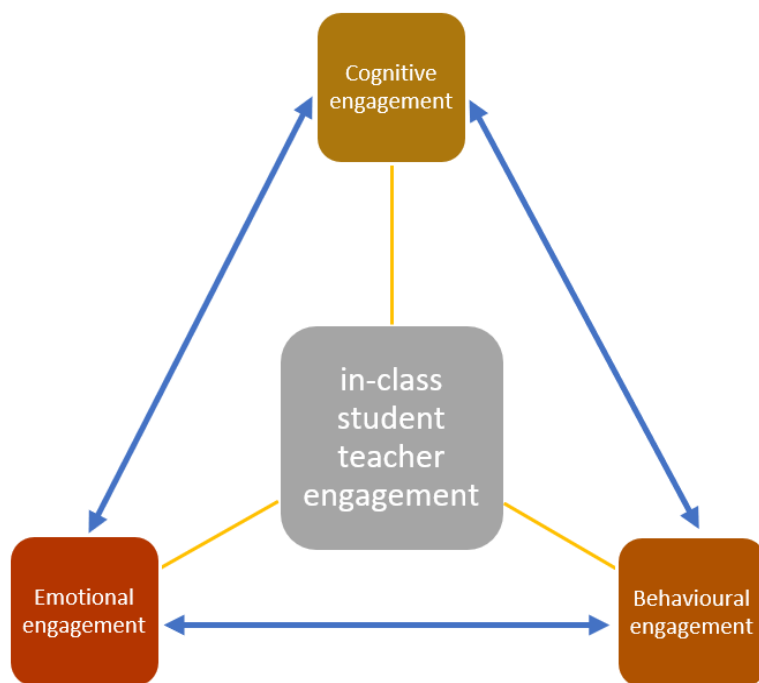


Figure 1. The interrelatedness of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement.

Recent research suggests that the dynamics of student engagement are significantly influenced by the classroom environment and individual learner characteristics (Dao et al., 2021; Huynh & Adams, 2022). Of particular significance in the context of student teachers undergoing TESOL training programmes is the intricate interconnection among cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement dimensions. In this paper, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural are defined based on their specific roles and impacts on student learning. Firstly, the fusion of cognitive engagement (interpreting tasks, planning lessons, and understanding language theories) with emotional engagement (building rapport with peers and establishing awareness of the target language's culture) is crucial. This combination empowers student teachers to foster an inclusive mindset and effective learning environments tailored to diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students.

In addition, the symbiosis of emotional engagement (such as feeling motivated to learn or being emotionally connected to the lectures) with behavioural engagement (including active participation and maintaining professionalism in class) reinforces interactions between teacher educators and student teachers and fosters a conducive atmosphere for TESOL training. Thirdly, the integration of behavioural engagement (classroom management and adaptability) with cognitive engagement (applying critical thinking in lesson delivery) equips student

teachers with the necessary skills to effectively translate theoretical knowledge into practical teaching strategies.

Methodology

Ethics

This project was approved by Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee (project number 40905). Both authors of this paper voluntarily took part in this study and agreed to share their experiences. The second author of this paper (Lynette) is one of my PhD supervisors, connoting an inherent power imbalance. It is important to note that I approached Lynette to act as a critical friend for this study, as she is an expert on the research methodology applied in this study. To avoid potential issues arising during the research process as a result of the inherent power imbalance, my other PhD supervisor did not take part in the study but instead acted as an independent observer.

Research paradigm

In this study, we adopted the constructivist paradigm, as we understand reality as subjective, constructed in the minds of individual people (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). In this study, my understanding of the world is, by necessity, different from that of Lynette's because of our different life experiences within social, cultural, and historical contexts. Arising from research demonstrating that PhD students' voices can be marginalised in academia (see Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021), we wanted to ensure that my understanding of reality was privileged throughout this study. Importantly, though, constructivism also emphasises the co-construction of knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). This was crucial in this study, as my knowledge construction involved a process of individual interpretation and collaborative construction between the two authors.

Autoethnography as research methodology

In this study, we used autoethnography as a methodology. Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology which privileges insider knowledge by allowing researchers to purposely explore personal experiences to illuminate cultural phenomena (Adams et al., 2022; Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius, 2022). The educational context of TESOL programmes in Vietnam can be considered as a cultural phenomenon, reflecting the perceived need of the Vietnamese people to engage with the wider world through a particular language. At the same time, the Vietnamese education system is complex, shaped by a variety of political and cultural influences, as well as a variety of linguistic and educational systems (see, e.g., Hoang, 2018). Consequently, we chose autoethnography as our methodology because it values my insider knowledge of the Vietnamese educational and cultural systems, helping us to better understand the complex dynamics of student teacher engagement within the TESOL programme.

To apply autoethnography in this study, we employed the following process. Firstly, I recorded my reflections on my journey as a TESOL educator. These reflections were recorded in the form of reflective diary entries and through self-interviews using Zoom. Written reflections were chosen because they could help me explicitly recognise knowledge that may have been implicit in my actions (see, e.g., Pretorius & Ford, 2016). I used the reflective prompt strategy as described by Pretorius and Cutri (2019). The prompts for reflection included:

“What happened?”

“How did this experience make me feel?”

“What went well and what could I have done better?”

“What did I learn from this experience?”

“How have I used this experience to inform my TESOL teaching practices?”

I also utilised Pretorius’ (2024) method of interviewing oneself through Zoom to reflect on important experiences identified within my written reflections. This was done to encourage me to delve deeper into the more emotional aspects of my experiences, using the following prompts:

“Why did this experience make me feel this way?”

“How would this experience make me feel now?” and

“Why would I react differently now?”

I recorded the interview using Zoom, transcribed the recording using Otter AI, and corrected the transcript as needed before it was used for further data analysis.

Secondly, I consulted artefacts from my past teaching in the TESOL programme. This took the form of 30 anonymous feedback comments provided to me by student teachers over a period of approximately eight months across 12 different TESOL workshops. These feedback comments were used to prompt further reflection, helping me to focus on the elements of engagement reflected in the student teachers’ comments and how these comments influenced my teaching practices.

Thirdly, I engaged in a process of writing as reflection. This allowed me to further explore my thoughts and feelings during the experiences I was describing. This exploration was supplemented by prompting questions from Lynette, which reminded me of other experiences that further shaped my understanding of my experiences. Lynette’s prompting questions also encouraged me to discuss aspects of my experiences that may be hidden or assumed contextual knowledge. It is important to highlight that this process of writing and rewriting my story allowed me to engage deeply with my experiences, encouraging me to highlight the more

emotive or vulnerable parts of my story. In this way, the writing and rewriting process can be considered an important additional aspect of data collection.

Fourthly, I applied my analytic lens by re-examining my reflections by overlaying the aspects of the conceptual framework. Lynette asked me prompting questions to encourage me to add additional details highlighting the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of the experiences I was describing. This also helped me highlight what I thought others could learn from my own experiences.

Finally, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022) was applied iteratively throughout the writing as a reflection process as well as after applying the analytical lens. This is because we acknowledge that data collection is not linear, with additional insights gained throughout the data analysis process prompting the need for further data collection. This reflexive method of analysis also links with our constructivist paradigm, as we note that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through experience and social interaction.

Trustworthiness

In this study, trustworthiness was embedded throughout the data collection and analysis approach. Firstly, I employed data triangulation by collecting and analysing multiple data types (reflections, self-interview, and artefacts). Secondly, researcher reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process. As noted by Stahl and King (2020), researchers should be aware of how their values influence the interpretation of their findings. It is important to note that this is considered a strength in qualitative research, particularly autoethnographic research, because insider knowledge and subjectivity are valued (Adams et al., 2022; Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). By incorporating reflexivity throughout, I have been able to create vivid and detailed descriptions of my personal experiences. Thirdly, the artefacts contribute to the trustworthiness of the research as they represent my prolonged engagement in the context. As highlighted by Stahl and King (2020), regular, persistent, and natural data collection practices combined with the researcher's reflexive self-analysis are important in ensuring the credibility of qualitative research. Finally, Lynette acted as a critical friend for me, which further contributed to my research reflexivity during the data analyses.

Findings and discussion

Being a TESOL teacher trainer

When I first started working as a TESOL trainer in 2022, I reflected on a path that was more than just a series of academic degrees. This complex route started with a four-year bachelor's degree in ELT in Vietnam and continued with two years of master's studies in Australia. Indeed, my academic journey significantly influenced my decision to become a TESOL trainer and shaped my teaching philosophy in various ways. My undergraduate years gave me a solid grasp of ELT education and a profound respect for the intricacies of teaching English as a

foreign language. It was here that I first learned about the complex nature of language learning and instruction, which piqued my interest in practical application rather than academic theories. This experience provided the groundwork for my desire to be a TESOL trainer, as I became more conscious of the transforming potential of excellent language teaching.

My teaching perspective was further strengthened throughout my master's studies in Australia. Immersed in an international and research-intensive setting, I was exposed to a wide range of pedagogical techniques and teaching strategies, allowing me to understand language instruction as more than just information transfer, but as a dynamic, participatory process that could be tailored to the various learners' needs. My Australian education's focus on cultural sensitivity, learner-centred techniques, and critical thinking struck a deep chord with me, greatly transforming my approach to TESOL training.

Being a TESOL teacher trainer was a profound voyage of self-growth, introspection, and transforming discovery, which had a significant impact on my perspectives and practices in TESOL training. Specifically, it has provided me with empathy, understanding, and practical knowledge - all of which are required for teacher trainers to contemplate successful involvement in programmes (Brown & Ruiz, 2017; Choi & Poudel, 2022). Such an approach is consistent with approaches that highlight the need for comprehensive educational experiences that combine emotional and experiential learning with academic rigour (Fredericks et al., 2004; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013; Nguyen, 2019).

These in-class TESOL training experiences changed my knowledge of TESOL and helped me establish a more sophisticated approach to student teacher participation in this environment. By reflecting on my teaching and the feedback from my student teachers' on their learning as they finished their training TESOL sessions, I have constructed three key themes: 1) theoretical-practical synthesis, 2) pedagogical climate and student teachers' learning, and 3) professional pathway clarity for student teachers. This construction process was thorough and careful, involving systematic analysis and reflection to ensure the themes accurately represent the core aspects of the training experience.

Theme 1: Theoretical-practical synthesis.

The first important dynamic I found was the indispensable relationship between theory and practical applications during the training. This synthesis extends beyond theoretical comprehension of the course material to include the implementation of these ideas in different and practical teaching contexts. Through my students' experiences and reflections, I also learned that such integration of theoretical knowledge with practical application is critical to their engagement. One student noted, "*Everyone was engaged in the lessons, and had a chance to express ideas. A lot of activities were carried out to enable us to practise using some of the methodologies.*" Echoing the perspectives of scholars like Freeman and Johnson (1998), I resonated deeply with one student who commented, "*The way you organise the class sets examples of different ways that we can use to apply in our own class*". Here, I understood that it could be cognitively demanding for student teachers to really absorb a large amount of

theoretical knowledge regarding learning theories and motivations within a short amount of time. Therefore, I utilised practical demonstrations and interactive methodologies to help them internalise these concepts. This approach not only made the learning more tangible but also allowed the students to envision themselves applying these theories in real-life teaching scenarios.

I learned that by actively involving students in the learning process and demonstrating the real-world applicability of theories, I could cultivate a more engaging and effective learning environment. As one student noted, *“The content has some real-life situations, which makes the lesson more well-organised, approachable, and memorisable”*. This insight aligns with O’Neill’s (2015) emphasis on the practical application of theoretical knowledge, underscoring the vital role of experiential learning in teacher education. Indeed, the real-world application of these concepts enables TESOL teacher trainers to refine their approach, adapting to the evolving needs of student teachers (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2016; Johnson, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013). By bridging the gap between theory and practice, I strived to empower my student teachers with both the knowledge and the confidence to apply these concepts in their future classrooms, fostering a deeper understanding and a more profound engagement with the material.

The transformative impact resulting from the synthesis of theory and practice is evident in my students’ satisfaction and growth. This is manifested in their reflections, aligning with Ellis’ (2003) perspective on the importance of practical curriculum design. Statements like *“After module 1, I think I have established a kind of foundation for teaching in general”* signify the foundational influence of my teaching approach. My emphasis on clear, practical delivery, highlighted by a student’s comment on my technique of *“Pointing and emphasising keywords...with lots of examples”*, showcases my commitment to making complex theoretical content accessible and engaging. This integrated teaching strategy, blending real-world contexts with academic theories, personalised the learning experience, as echoed in the students’ feedback. Remarks such as *“I have learnt a lot...from the way you manage the class”* and expressions of gratitude underscore the depth and effectiveness of this approach.

Reflecting on the multi-dimensional effects of my teaching approach on student teacher learning, I deeply appreciate the profound impact of balancing theoretical and practical elements. Firstly, the cognitive dimension is addressed as student teachers actively process and internalise complex theoretical concepts, applying them in practical scenarios. Some student teachers did express their excitement when they could successfully apply these to their current classes. This intellectual involvement is crucial for deep understanding and long-term retention (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2016). Secondly, the emotional dimension is nurtured as student teachers develop a personal connection to the material. This emotional engagement arose when my student teachers observed the relevance and applicability of what they had been learning, enhancing their motivation and commitment to the course. Finally, the behavioural dimension is exemplified through active participation in classroom activities, discussions, and the whole course. This hands-on involvement is essential for developing practical skills and building confidence in their future roles as ELT teachers (Ellis, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004;

Fredricks et al., 2016). Together, these three elements of student teacher participation provide a comprehensive learning experience that not only motivates me as a trainer, but also prepares student teachers for the many opportunities and challenges of teaching English in their future courses.

However, I also experienced first-hand the challenges of combining theoretical knowledge with practical application in the curriculum. I must confess that one of the most significant challenges I faced in blending theory with practice stemmed from the constraints of limited time. I recall moments where the urgent needs of a hectic academic schedule hampered the richness and depth of the curriculum I wanted to disseminate. A clear illustration of this was an ambitious lesson plan I created to connect academic topics with hands-on activities. I imagined a class in which students might not only study teaching approaches but also practise using them in real-world situations. Due to the programme's strict time constraints, these detailed, participatory sessions had to be greatly reduced, if not completely eliminated. A student teacher's feedback emphasises this point:

I wish Module 2 were longer, with more details on teaching grammar, reading, listening, etc. Module 1 was too long, and its content isn't as applicable to our future teaching careers. Two days for Module 1 would be sufficient. The remaining three days of Module 1 should be allocated to Module 2 instead.

The impact of the time limitation was twofold. On the one hand, it caused me to feel a genuine feeling of irritation, as I felt that the full potential of my teaching - and hence my student teachers' learning experiences - was not being realised. On the other hand, it restricted student teachers' ability to fully interact with the content in a more immersive, experiential manner. This hampered their capacity to internalise theoretical notions while also limiting their opportunities to build practical abilities via exploration and experience.

This ongoing struggle against the clock has served as a sobering reminder of the intricacies and constraints inherent in educational institutions. It emphasises the need for a more adaptable, time-efficient curriculum design that can fit both the breadth and depth of learning necessary in TESOL instruction. Reflecting on my own teaching experiences, I recognise the constraints highlighted by Nguyen and Ngo (2017) that these inflexible structures can stifle the essential dynamic interplay between theory and practice. From my experiences with student teachers' feedback, there is a need for a more balanced approach in the training curriculum. Language components and skills teaching should be given greater emphasis, while the allocation for learning theories is optimised for relevance and applicability in real-world teaching scenarios.

Student feedback emphasises the crucial necessity of an adaptable and reactive teaching method, particularly for individuals with varied educational backgrounds. One student teacher expressed, "*The content is quite abstract. For the first class, the teacher didn't speak Vietnamese, so it's hard for the others to understand. But day by day, when we suggested, the instructor spoke bilingual, everything seemed better [sic].*" This reflects the importance of adaptability in teaching methods and the use of both languages to bridge language barriers,

enhancing comprehension and engagement. I have utilised bilingual instruction as a deliberate approach to improve understanding and include emotional and cultural aspects of learning, resulting in heightened involvement and improved memory retention. I noticed that the use of Vietnamese acknowledged the mental effort required to digest novel theories and concepts, particularly when it is delivered in a language that is not the native tongue. This student-centric approach facilitates the utilisation of practical demonstrations that connect with the students' cultural backgrounds, in line with wider educational goals to cater to different learning preferences and language abilities. The purpose of this programme is to provide student teachers with the required abilities to effectively traverse the intricacies of real-world teaching contexts. My training focusing on adaptation is crucial for presenting knowledge and creating educational experiences that are accessible and meaningful to students from various backgrounds. In general, the input from student teachers emphasises the significance of modifying teaching techniques to effectively connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications, thereby facilitating a smoother transition into more intricate areas (DelliCarpini, 2008; Ellis et al., 2020; Hawkey, 2006).

Theme 2: Pedagogical climate and student teachers' learning.

The second important dynamic I have come to understand deeply is how the pedagogical climate within training programmes critically shaped the learning experiences and outcomes of student teachers. Here, pedagogical climate is viewed as the overall atmosphere and dynamics of the teaching and learning interactions. In my journey, it is critical to consider the value of building a learning environment that is not only supportive and collaborative, but also aligns with each student teacher's personal and professional development. Jensen (2019) emphasises this need for an engaging environment, which I observed as pivotal in enhancing student motivation and fostering a sense of community.

In my actual practices, I focused on cultivating an atmosphere that encouraged enquiry, nurtured curiosity, and acknowledged each student's unique journey to energise the classroom. The implementation of active learning strategies, where student teachers engage in discussions, group activities, and practical exercises, has been central to this approach. For instance, when a student teacher noted, "*The group discussions were really helpful for understanding different viewpoints*", it underscored the importance of collaborative learning in enhancing critical thinking and peer learning. I also had students create mind maps to explore and illustrate their understanding of theories, significantly contributing to the dynamic pedagogical climate of my TESOL classes. This exercise allowed student teachers to visually and conceptually organise their thoughts, fostering a deeper and more personalised comprehension of complex theories. Following this, I motivated them to display these mind maps on the classroom walls as part of an exhibition that transformed the learning space into an interactive gallery of ideas. All students moved around the classroom, observing and taking notes on the mind maps created by their peers. After this exploration, they gathered in groups to discuss their observations and insights, sharing what they had learned from each other's interpretations and perspectives. This interactive exercise fostered a deeper understanding and collaborative learning environment. One student captured the essence of this experience by saying, "*Seeing our mind maps on the*

wall made the theories we learned feel alive and relevant.” Additionally, the exhibition format facilitated a sense of ownership and pride among students over their learning process, further engaging them emotionally and cognitively (Fredricks et al., 2016).

Such strategies highlight the multifaceted nature of engagement illustrated in the Figure 1 framework, where cognitive understanding is complemented by creative expression and collaborative exploration, creating a rich and stimulating learning environment that is both informative and inspirational (Fredricks, 2004; Fredricks et al., 2016). The positive feedback from my students, such as *“The instructor is interactive with the class and didn’t make me disappointed in selecting to study TESOL! Very much inspiring!”* and *“Mr. Hoang is an enthusiastic teacher,”* reflects the essence of my teaching philosophy, which aligns with research highlighting the teacher’s crucial role in energising the classroom (Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Richards, 2017). Students have expressed their appreciation for the learning environment I cultivated, noting, *“I feel I have learned a lot about teaching from you, including how to inspire and interact with students”* and emphasising the importance of a relaxed atmosphere when tackling challenging material. This aligns with Swan’s (2018) emphasis on the significance of a supportive, collaborative, and empathetic environment that fosters a sense of belonging and community, which is essential for academic success.

My teaching style is also profoundly anchored in building healthy, respectful teacher-student relationships, as expressed by a student who commended my *“conscientious guidance.”* As I systematically reviewed the feedback, several recurring phrases drew my attention – words like *“enthusiastic,” “inspiring,”* and *“supportive,”* and *“understanding”* frequently recurred, pointing to the effectiveness of my approach. These descriptors not only reaffirmed my methods but also mirrored the importance of fostering a learning environment that is both engaging and empathetic. The relationship between me and my student teachers, as Swan (2018) articulates, provides a safe space for students to express vulnerabilities, explore new ideas, and take risks. The impact of such a nurturing environment is evident when a student remarks on how they were inspired to have a new view on teaching, emphasising the significance of mutual respect and understanding in our interactions during the training.

The feedback from my students, highlighting their desire for deeper connections, underscores a critical dimension of the pedagogical climate – the student-teacher relationship. The act of remembering a student’s name, while seemingly simple, is an engaging gesture that can significantly alter the classroom dynamics. It transcends the traditional student teacher-trainer hierarchy, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect. By recalling and using their names, I communicated a message of recognition and an understanding of the importance of their individuality, effectively turning our classroom from an impersonal space into a thriving, engaged community. This is consistent with student teachers’ expectations shaping the nature of learning exchanges (Kim & Nguyen, 2018).

Theme 3: Professional pathway clarity for student teachers.

The third important dynamic in my exploration was the clarity of professional pathways for student teachers in TESOL education, which involves a deep dive into the interconnection between students' career aspirations and their educational experiences. The pathway clarity referred to here pertains not only to comprehending the available positions that exist in contemporary TESOL scenarios but also to fully knowing the specific skills and competencies that are necessary for each role. It clarifies the teaching profession, converting it from an unclear aspiration into a concrete objective with clear steps and milestones. Upon contemplation of my past educational experiences as a student teacher involved in TESOL programmes, the lucidity of career trajectories served as a guiding light, helping me navigate through the complexities of the area. This component, therefore, was crucial in influencing my methodology for training, as it enabled me to customise my learning towards precise objectives, resulting in a meaningful and focused educational encounter.

As a trainer, this understanding of the significance of professional clarity has profoundly shaped my teaching philosophy. My goal is to not only teach my student teachers' academic knowledge and practical skills, but also to guide them towards the various career opportunities that are open to them. This method seeks to provide them with not just the capacity to teach proficiently but also the insight to navigate their careers in TESOL with assurance and intention. Understanding career trajectories and professional identities is pivotal in motivating student teachers and aligning their personal goals with professional development needs (Barkhuizen, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2016). Professional clarity is not only important for personal motivation, but it also serves as a fundamental element in fostering the growth of skilled, thoughtful, and flexible TESOL professionals. It is crucial to not only equip student teachers with the necessary skills for the classroom but also to make them aware of and motivated by the various opportunities that exist beyond. This understanding becomes particularly salient when considering the diverse and rapidly changing landscape of the TESOL field.

The feedback from my students complements these academic insights. One student's revelation, "*I realised that teaching is something that's beyond my mind,*" encapsulates the transformative journey of recognising the depth and breadth of the teaching profession. This student teacher further confirmed "*I have been teaching for 3 months based on my instinct to teach my students. But now, after a 4-day TESOL training, I notice that I lacked many things about teaching. I am so appreciative of Mr. Hoang for giving many lessons that I can acknowledge not only in the teaching method but also in life [sic].*" Based on the learned content, the students also made a commitment to their future practices "*.... the teacher also told us that the key to success in teaching language is understanding the principles and processes of behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, communicative language teaching... I'm willing and trying to work hard to make a change*". I understand that encouraging student teachers to have a deep appreciation for the nuanced complexities of the teaching profession is critical. Their realisation that effective teaching extends beyond instinct to encompass a broad array of pedagogical theories and life skills underscores the transformative impact of comprehensive TESOL training. "*After Module 1, I was inspired to be a teacher seriously and to learn post-education like you. Thanks to you, I can see clearly the role and responsibilities of a*

teacher.” This aligned with many student teachers valuing that their future practices benefited a lot more from their participation in the course.

This mirrors my own experiences where I actively sought advice and orientation from colleagues and the academic manager, indicating the value of professional mentorship. This student’s expression of need and my personal quest for guidance both illustrate a larger context where student teachers are seeking direction and mentorship to understand and navigate the complexities and opportunities of the TESOL field. Faez and Valeo (2012) highlight this necessity, noting the critical role TESOL programmes play in providing comprehensive career guidance and mentorship. I strongly believe such support is pivotal in shaping future teachers, equipping them with not only theoretical knowledge but also practical wisdom and insights into the ever-changing scenario of language teaching and learning.

Considerations and implications

It is important to acknowledge that my findings represent my journey as a single teacher trainer. Readers may, therefore, consider that my work is less statistically generalisable to other contexts. It is important to note, however, that qualitative research does not aim to provide this type of generalisability (see Smith, 2018). Instead, my work aims to highlight findings that are naturalistically generalisable and transferable. Naturalistic generalisability refers to research that resonates with the reader’s experiences through evocative storytelling (Smith, 2018). I have also used stories and detailed quotes from my students’ feedback as a way to provide an engaging story, which I believe is transferable to other contexts. In this way, I believe my story can be of relevance to new educators entering the field, providing a guide to the importance of the teacher student relationship and the role teachers have in motivating and inspiring their students.

Furthermore, while this study did consider student feedback over an eight-month period, additional longitudinal studies may highlight additional themes that could not be found in our study. That being said, our study does highlight the importance of reflexivity as an educator, which we believe could be a valuable model for future TESOL educators, particularly those new to the field, to help them gain confidence in their own practice.

The dynamic nature of TESOL necessitates an adaptable and forward-looking approach to curriculum design and career guidance (Clarke-Jones, 2021). As a TESOL trainer, I was often tasked with preparing student teachers for the shifting terrains of global demand, technological advancements, and updates on current teaching scenarios. This required an ongoing commitment to update my teaching methodologies and course content to reflect contemporary trends and technologies, thereby ensuring my students are equipped to meet the demands of diverse teaching contexts (Andrew, 2020; Nguyen & Ngo, 2017; Ping, 2015). This is of particular significance in the current environment where generative artificial intelligence is acting as a catalyst and disrupting force within education. That being said, the three themes I

have constructed align with recent research exploring the elements of AI literacy, particularly in addressing the socio-emotional awareness dimension (see Pretorius & Cahusac de Caux, 2024). I believe that my approach to teaching will stand me in good stead as I help nurture my student teachers' understanding and implementation of new technologies such as generative AI into their future work. Moreover, the examination of professional pathways must consider the varied contexts in which TESOL teacher trainers operate. As Morrison (2017) points out, the roles and opportunities for TESOL educators differ significantly across different educational settings and cultures. While English is considered a global lingua franca, the diversities in Global Englishes necessitate an adaptable and contextually knowledgeable workforce (see, e.g., Rose & Galloway, 2019). This diversity calls for a nuanced and comprehensive approach to career planning within TESOL programmes. By fostering an understanding of the global TESOL landscape, we can prepare our students not only for the challenges but also for the myriad opportunities that lie ahead.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore my role as a teacher educator within a TESOL programme to *identify* the factors that I believe significantly influence student teacher engagement and explore *how* they impact the classroom experience. My autoethnographic exploration identified three key factors—theoretical-practical synthesis, pedagogical climate, and professional pathway clarity. The exploration of how these factors affected the classroom experience highlighted three elements. First, the harmonious integration of theory and practice enriches the learning experience, making the theoretical knowledge not only more digestible but also immediately applicable, thus bridging the gap between abstract concepts and classroom realities. Second, the nurturing pedagogical climate for which I advocate fosters a community of learners who are motivated, engaged, and collectively involved in their educational journey, enhancing both their academic and emotional growth. Finally, the clarity of professional pathways illuminates the route for aspiring TESOL educators, equipping them with not just the skills, but also the vision to navigate their future careers with confidence and purpose. As we draw this paper to a close, it is paramount to reflect on the profound journey embarked upon through this research, exploring the complex yet rewarding world of TESOL training programmes in Vietnam. Our findings not only illuminate the intricate dynamics of student teacher engagement but also offer vital insights for enhancing TESOL education, profoundly impacting both the individuals involved and the broader educational landscape. Here, we acknowledge that the complexities of how student teachers engage in TESOL programmes could add significant cultural layers to their learning experiences. This insight informs TESOL practitioners to embrace culturally responsive pedagogies that are cognizant of the societal norms and values shaping future English teachers' perceptions towards ELT education in Vietnam. In conclusion, as we reflect on the engagement and transformation witnessed through this research, it becomes clear that the path to becoming a TESOL educator is both a personal and professional quest, enriched by deep engagement, rigorous training, and a clear understanding of the career landscape. As educators, our role transcends the boundaries of mere instruction to become mentors and guides in the ever-evolving landscape of language

education. The insights gained from this study not only contribute to the academic discourse but also resonate deeply with those committed to the art of teaching, inspiring current and future educators to approach TESOL with passion, dedication, and a deep commitment to fostering educational excellence.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the members of our writing groups for helpful discussions during the preparation of this manuscript. We also acknowledge that we used a customised version of ChatGPT 4 (OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com/>) during the preparation of this manuscript to help us refine our phrasing to reduce our word count. The output from ChatGPT 4 was then significantly adapted by both authors to reflect our own style and voice, as well as during the peer review process. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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