

Negotiating English Teaching Internships in a Resource-limited Islamic School: Challenges, Strategies, and Transformative Learning of Pre-Service EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Teaching internships play a crucial role in preparing student teachers for the transition from theoretical learning to practical teaching in real classrooms. For many English as a foreign language (EFL) student teachers placed in Islamic high schools with limited resources, internships can become complex learning environments influenced by structural constraints, inadequate mentor support, and insufficient institutional support. Understanding how student teachers navigate these conditions is essential for strengthening teacher education programs in Indonesia. This study examines the challenges faced by EFL student teachers during teaching internships in a resource-limited Islamic high school, the strategies

they use to overcome these challenges, and how these experiences facilitate transformative learning. Using a qualitative case study design, five third-year student teachers from the Department of English Education participated in this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective internship documents. The findings reveal three main challenges: inadequate school facilities, difficulties in classroom management, and limited mentoring support. In response, student teachers implemented various adaptive strategies, including student-centered teaching, engaging and joyful learning activities, collaborative group work, and contextual teaching practices suitable for the Islamic school setting. Beyond overcoming classroom difficulties, these strategies serve as reflective tools that enable student teachers to critically evaluate their assumptions about teaching and learning. Through continuous reflection, experimentation, and adaptation, participants experience a perspective shift in characteristic of transformative learning, which contributes to the reconstruction of their professional identities as EFL teachers. This study extends the application of transformative learning theory to a resource-limited Islamic high school setting and emphasizes the importance of institutional support, structured mentoring, and reflective pedagogy in ensuring equitable and meaningful teaching internship experiences.

Keywords: *reflective practice, teacher identity, teaching internship, transformative learning, resource-limited islamic school*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching internships play a pivotal role in teacher education programs by providing student teachers with practical opportunities to apply pedagogical theories, engage in authentic classroom interactions, and develop professional awareness through direct teaching experiences (Ghufron, 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2025). Previous studies have highlighted the significant impacts of internship programs on the development of pedagogical competence, including classroom management, instructional design, and collaboration within the school environment (Mounce et al., 2004; Otara, 2014). These experiences enable student teachers to gain a deeper understanding of how effective learning can benefit students (Derakhshan & Shirmohammadli, 2015; Tuasikal et al., 2021).

However, the quality of internship experiences is strongly shaped by the school context. In the realm of English teaching internships, technology-enhanced instruction is often emphasized to support interactive learning (Pheng et al., 2021). Nonetheless, many schools in Indonesia face challenges such as limited facilities and inadequate instructional resources, which directly impact the implementation of English teaching during internships (Kusniyati & Rachman, 2022). This scarcity becomes particularly problematic in resource-limited school settings, where issues like insufficient infrastructure, low student discipline, and inconsistent mentoring practices—often may differ from the ideal teaching conditions emphasized in university coursework (Abdullah, 2018). These structural and cultural constraints can complicate the teaching process and require student teachers to adapt their instructional approaches to align with the unique norms and values of Islamic school environments.

Beyond pedagogical competence, teaching internships are also a crucial phase in the development of teachers' professional identities. Teachers' professional identities generally refer to teachers' understanding of who they are, including their values, beliefs, motivations, self-confidence, and perceptions of their role in the educational context (Beijaard et al., 2004). These identities are understood as dynamic, evolving constructs that are continually shaped through social interactions, teaching experiences, and reflective practices, rather than being static or stable traits (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019).

Previous studies indicate that professional identity is not formed instantaneously but develops through continuous engagement with teaching practices, challenges, and critical reflection (Chaaban et al., 2021; Zhang & Wang, 2022). During teaching internships, student teachers begin to internalize their role as educators while negotiating their beliefs, expectations, and professional responsibilities (Lestari et al., 2024; Mintz et al., 2020). This identity development process is strongly shaped by social and institutional contexts, including school culture, peer collaboration, mentoring support, and environmental conditions, all of which can

either facilitate or hinder the formation of a positive professional identity (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025). In resource-limited Islamic school settings, where educational practices are intertwined with moral values and disciplinary norms, student teachers are required to navigate both pedagogical demands and contextual realities. Limited facilities and unsupportive environments may exacerbate challenges during internship and prompt student teachers to reconsider their assumptions about teaching and their professional roles, while supportive contexts can strengthen confidence and motivation (Huu Nghia & Tai, 2019; Lestari, 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on transformative learning theory to understand how challenging internship experiences contribute to professional growth and identity formation. According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning occurs when individuals encounter disorienting dilemmas that prompt critical reflection and a shift in perspective. In teaching internships, challenges such as limited resources, classroom management difficulties, and inadequate mentoring can create dilemmas that compel student teachers to reassess their assumptions about teaching and learning. Through reflective dialogue, experimentation, and adaptation, these student teachers can reconstruct their perspectives and develop a deeper pedagogical awareness (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2012).

Research on transformative learning highlights that perspective transformation often emerges from learners' encounters with uncertainty, constraints, and imperfect conditions, which require continuous reflection and adaptation (Baumgartner, 2007; Taylor, 2007). Recent studies further emphasize that teacher professional identity is shaped not only through successful teaching experiences but also through struggle, tension, and negotiation in challenging and marginalized school contexts (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Lestari et al., 2024).

Internship challenges are often influenced by structural constraints and institutional values, making transformative learning a relevant framework for understanding how student teachers adapt and engage in self-reflection in specific contexts.

However, this study acknowledges that transformative learning theory primarily focus on individual cognitive and reflective processes and may not fully capture broader socio-religious norms, as well as the values and expectations that shape teaching practices in Islamic school settings. Therefore, it is important to interpret transformative learning as a flexible analytical lens.

Previous studies in teacher education have shown that challenging experiences in teaching practice can stimulate reflection, adaptation, and professional development among student teachers (Crawford-Garrett et al., 2015; Sari et al., 2023). Additionally, recent international research shows that emotional, relational, and socio-cultural factors, including the school environment and interpersonal relationships, influence the transformative learning process during teaching practice (Dirkx, 2006; Taylor, 2007, 2017). In response to contextual constraints such as inadequate facilities, challenges in classroom management, and insufficient guidance, prospective teachers often adopt adaptive strategies, including flexible lesson planning, collaborative learning activities, and continuous reflective practices to foster professional growth (Huu Nghia & Tai, 2019; Lestari et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

Design

This study uses a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges and strategies encountered by prospective teachers during their teaching practicum at Islamic secondary schools with limited resources in Indonesia. A qualitative approach is used to capture the participants' experiences and interpretations within an authentic classroom context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The case study design enables an in-depth examination of a bounded educational environment, focusing on prospective English teachers placed in Islamic schools with limited resources (Hollweck, 2015). The internship, conducted during the 2024/2025 academic year, involved classroom observation, lesson planning, material development, at least four teaching sessions, and participation in routine school tasks. This structured context facilitates the analysis

of how participants responded to challenges and developed their pedagogical awareness and professional identity.

Participant

The participants in this study consisted of five third-year teacher candidates who had completed teaching internships at Islamic secondary schools with limited resources. They were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that the insights gained would be relevant to the focus of the study. Each participant engaged in a minimum of four teaching sessions, participated in routine school activities, and expressed willingness to share experiences through interviews and reflective journals. Although the sample size was limited, the participants' diverse classroom experiences provided valuable contextual insights relevant to similar educational environments with limited resources in Indonesia.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participants' reflective journals. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their internship experiences in depth while enabling researchers to guide the discussion toward key issues, including challenges encountered during teaching practice, strategies used to overcome these challenges, and reflective moments that shaped their understanding of their teaching role. Interviews were conducted offline and online: two participants were interviewed in person, while three participants participated via Google Meet. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent. Additionally, reflective journals were also collected to complement the interview data, providing insights into participants' classroom experiences, reflections, and self-evaluations during the internship.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis began with a data familiarization stage, during which interview recordings were transcribed and reflective journals were reviewed repeatedly to understand the participants' experiences. The

researchers then performed manual coding to identify meaningful features in the data, which were subsequently grouped into initial themes based on recurring patterns related to the research questions. These themes were rigorously reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and an accurate representation of the dataset. Finally, the themes were interpreted using transformative learning theory, specifically the concepts of confusing dilemmas, critical reflection, and perspective transformation. To enhance credibility, member verification was conducted by sharing a summary of the themes with participants for their confirmation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges

The findings reveal several interconnected challenges that shaped student teachers' teaching internships in a resource-limited Islamic high school. These challenges included limitations in infrastructure, difficulties in classroom management, and limited mentoring support. Such conditions often contrasted with expectations formed during university coursework, leading to disorienting dilemmas that triggered reflection and professional adjustment.

Within Islamic school contexts, where moral education and character development are emphasized, such constraints created additional tensions. Student teachers were expected to model discipline and responsibility while navigating inconsistent institutional support, which heightened their awareness of the complexities involved in real teaching practice. A summary of the challenges, adaptive strategies, and learning outcomes related to transformative learning is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Challenges, Adaptive Strategies, and Transformative Learning Outcomes during Teaching Internship

Key Findings	Description of Challenges	Adaptive Responses and Learning Outcomes
Infrastructure limitations	Noisy classrooms, inadequate lighting and ventilation, and limited access to instructional technology	Student teachers adapted by simplifying lesson plans, reducing reliance on technology, and developing flexible, context-responsive teaching practices
Classroom management issues	Low student attendance, weak discipline, and passive student participation	Student teachers relied on joyful learning activities, student-centered interaction, and socio-affective approaches to improve engagement and classroom climate
Limited mentoring support	Irregular mentor presence and minimal instructional guidance	Student teachers relied on self-reflection and peer discussion, leading to increased professional autonomy and confidence
Collaborative learning practices	Small class sizes and lack of teaching media	Group discussion and peer support enhanced participation and understanding without requiring extensive resources
Reflective practice	Recurrent instructional challenges during teaching	Continuous reflection enabled student teachers to evaluate assumptions, refine teaching strategies, and reconstruct their professional identity

Infrastructure-Related Challenges

Inadequate infrastructure presented a significant challenge during the internship, manifesting in various structural issues, including noisy classrooms, poor lighting and ventilation, and limited access to learning technology. One participant explained, "I was surprised because the school was situated right next to the

main road, which caused noise disruptions that affected students' concentration" (S-T 1). Technology-related difficulties were also frequently reported, as projectors were often unavailable or malfunctioning, hindering the implementation of technology-based lesson plans. Another intern teacher noted, "Using the projector took too long and sometimes didn't work, so we ended up not using it" (S-T 3). These conditions illustrate the structural limitations commonly found in resource-limited Islamic schools, where limited facilities shape everyday classroom practices.

From a transformative perspective, such experiences can serve as disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991; 2012). After receiving training in a college context that emphasized technology-based teaching, prospective teachers initially experienced confusion and frustration when these expectations conflicted with the actual conditions of the school environment. This discrepancy triggers critical reflection regarding their dependence on technological resources and prompts a re-evaluation of what constitutes effective teaching in a context with limited resources. Through reflection and experimentation, prospective teachers gradually adapt by simplifying lesson plans, improvising learning materials, and prioritizing teaching strategies that are flexible and responsive to context. This adaptive process supports the arguments of Baumgartner (2007) and Taylor (2007), which assert that transformative learning often emerges when individuals are required to re-evaluate their beliefs in response to unfamiliar and imperfect conditions. These experiences illustrate that teaching competence in resource-limited environments require not only technical skills but also contextual sensitivity and pedagogical flexibility.

These experiences also contributed to the development of teacher professional identity. As Groenewald and Arnold (2025) and Lestari et al. (2024) suggest, professional identity is developed not only through successes but also through the struggle faced in realistic teaching contexts. Encountering infrastructural constraints helped student teachers to perceive themselves as adaptive problem solvers tasked with responding creatively and ethically to

the realities of their teaching environment, especially in the context of marginalized education.

Challenges in Classroom Management and Student Motivation

Beyond infrastructure, student teachers encountered significant difficulties related to classroom management and student motivation. Commonly reported issues included low attendance, passive participation, and weak discipline. One participant noted, “Only five students attended, and only two were actively engaged; the rest were absent” (S-T 4). Disruptive behaviors, such as students leaving the classroom or talking excessively during lessons, further complicated the instructional process. Student teachers also expressed uncertainty about their authority, particularly because regular teachers often refrained from intervening. As S-T 1 explained, “We are confused because even the teachers do not discipline students who are late, so we don’t know what actions to take.”

The gap between theoretical classroom management models learned at university and the realities of the school environment encouraged student teachers to reflect on their pedagogical beliefs and emotional responses. As a result, they began to reconsider rigid disciplinary approaches and instead adopt more socio-affective strategies aimed at improving student engagement (Agustin & Silalahi, 2021). These experiences also contributed to the development of teacher professional identity, particularly in relation to emotional regulation, authority negotiation, and relational competence (Kakar & Sarwari, 2022). As Wirantaka and Wahyudianawati (2021) suggest, identity formation involves learning to respond ethically and emotionally to complex classroom dynamics. Within the Islamic school context, where moral values and interpersonal relationships are prioritized, student teachers increasingly positioned themselves not only as instructors but also as mentors and moral role models. Consistent with previous studies on challenges in teaching practice (Purwanti & Vania, 2021), these findings highlight how classroom management difficulties may become more pronounced in resource-limited Islamic school environments with offer limited institutional support.

Limited Mentoring Support

Another major challenge identified during the internship was limited mentoring support. Several student teachers reported minimal guidance, irregular mentor presence, and limited feedback. One participant explained, “Mentor teachers are rarely present at school, so I often teach alone” (S-T 3). This absence created uncertainty regarding instructional quality and professional expectations, particularly for those who were still developing their pedagogical confidence.

Despite these limitations, the lack of mentoring also encouraged student teachers to develop greater independence and rely on peer collaboration. Research by Yunus et al. (2024) suggests that such conditions can strengthen reflective thinking and independent decision-making. In this study, student teachers frequently evaluated their teaching practices, adjusted instructional strategies, and sought informal support from peers. These reflective processes increased their pedagogical awareness and confidence, contributing to transformative learning and the development of their professional identity. These findings highlight a paradox in resource-limited Islamic settings: while weak institutional guidance and support can hinder student teachers, the responsibilities they face may accelerate their professional maturity. Through continuous reflection and dialogue with peers, student teachers internalize responsibility for their teaching decisions, a crucial aspect of developing a professional identity (Irawati et al., 2025; Ni'mah et al., 2025).

These findings also reveal broader structural issues in a resource-limited Islamic schools. Mentors often face heavy workloads and insufficient institutional support, resulting in inconsistent mentoring practices that may reinforce inequities in internship experiences. While some student teachers managed to turn these limitations into opportunities for professional growth, not all may be equally prepared to do so. Therefore, mentoring should be understood not only as an individual responsibility but also as a systemic component of teacher education that requires stronger institutional support. Despite these constraints, student

teachers actively developed adaptive strategies to maintain classroom engagement and instructional effectiveness.

Strategies

Despite facing challenges, student teachers employed several strategies to manage classroom conditions and support student learning.

Joyful Learning and Engagement Techniques

To overcome low motivation and limited resources, student teachers implemented joyful learning strategies such as icebreakers, games, humor, and contextual examples to maintain students' attention. One participant shared, "Without learning media, we use games to help students focus" (S-T 1). Creating an engaging and supportive classroom atmosphere contributed to students' emotional readiness and participation, particularly in resource-limited classrooms (Firdausiyah, 2024). These approaches represent adaptive pedagogical responses shaped by contextual constraints rather than merely entertainment-based activities.

In the context of Islamic schools, enjoyable and student-centered learning is implemented alongside institutional expectations that emphasize moral and religious values. Student teachers are encouraged to integrate practices such as leading prayers before lessons and promoting respectful behavior. As a result, engaging learning is not positioned in opposition to institutional norms but is negotiated within the framework of religious discipline (*adab*). From a transformative learning perspective, this adaptation reflects how prospective teachers reconsider their assumptions about effective teaching and balance engagement strategies with moral responsibilities and institutional values (Mezirow, 2012). Through this process, they gradually develop a professional identity that integrates pedagogical flexibility with the cultural and religious context of Islamic education.

Collaborative Learning to Support Understanding

Student teachers often use collaborative learning strategies such as brainstorming, group discussions, and short presentations

to increase student engagement, especially in classes with only five to eleven students. One participant explained, “Because there are so few students, it is easier to hold direct discussions and combine active and passive students so that they can learn from each other” (S-T 5). Small class sizes and limited facilities make collaborative learning a practical strategy, as it requires minimal teaching resources while encouraging deeper interactions among students.

By using collaborative activities, student teachers reorganize groups, combining active students with passive ones, enabling peer support and shared understanding. This approach helps increase participation and reduce discipline problems, as students become more engaged and responsible for group tasks. These findings are in line with Qureshi et al. (2023) Qureshi et al. (2023), who argue that collaborative learning increases motivation, facilitates the exchange of ideas, and improves conceptual understanding.

From a transformative learning perspective, the implementation of collaborative strategies reflects a shift in how student teachers understand classroom challenges. When limited resources disrupt their original lesson plans, they reconsider how meaningful learning can occur without relying on technology. This reflective process encourages them to prioritize interaction and participation as key elements in the learning process. Such adaptations also contribute to the development of student teachers' professional identities, as they learn to facilitate group dynamics and create supportive learning environments despite contextual limitations (Zitha et al., 2023). This observation indicates that collaborative interaction can serve as a viable pedagogical alternative in situations where technological resources are scarce.

Reflective Practice as an Improvement Strategy

Reflection emerged as one of the most important strategies used by student teachers to address challenges during their internship. Frequent disruptions such as inadequate facilities, disengaged students, and limited mentoring support, prompted them to reassess their teaching decisions. As one participant explained, “We reflect on each teaching session by noting and sharing challenges with internship friends” (S-T 5). This process

transformed reflection from a mere routine into a thoughtful response to unexpected classroom conditions.

Through ongoing reflection, student teachers were able to analyze effective methods, identify areas for improvement, and adjust their strategies for subsequent lessons. This practice aligns with the findings by Ciptaningrum (2017) and Mutiara (2023), who emphasize that reflective experiences help teachers connect classroom practice with professional judgment and improve pedagogical decision-making. From the perspective of transformative learning, reflection empowers student teachers to critically examine their assumptions, reinterpret challenging experiences, and reconsider their roles as educators (Mezirow, 1991). Engaging in peer discussions and receiving occasional feedback from mentors further facilitate this reflective process, allowing participants to evaluate strategies used to address infrastructural limitations, difficulties in classroom management, and constraints related to mentorship (see Table 1). Such collaborative reflection contributed to the reconstruction of teacher professional identity, strengthening self-awareness, confidence, and ethical responsiveness in challenging educational contexts (Ghufron, 2024). These findings highlight that transformative learning in resource-limited Islamic schools does not occur in isolation but within complex socio-cultural environments. Student teachers must navigate not only material limitations, but also institutional expectations related to discipline, morality, and religious values. As a result, the development of professional identity becomes closely intertwined with ethical responsibility and contextual awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study examines two research objectives: (1) the challenges faced by student teachers during their teaching practicum at a resource-limited Islamic school, and (2) the strategies they used to overcome these challenges. Using transformative learning theory as a framework, the findings show that while teaching practicums allow student teachers to apply

theoretical knowledge in real classrooms, they encounter significant limitations, including inadequate resources, limited mentoring support, and issues related to student motivation and discipline. These challenges represent complex dilemmas that stimulate critical reflection, adaptive decision-making, and shifts in pedagogical awareness, thereby contributing to the development of their professional identities.

However, the adaptability of student teachers should not divert attention from broader systemic responsibilities. While the resilience demonstrated by participants reflects individual agency, it does not indicate sufficient institutional support. Overemphasizing adaptive strategies risks normalizing the issues in resource-limited internship contexts and shifting accountability away from schools, teacher education institutions, and policy frameworks. Therefore, transformative learning in this study should be interpreted as a response to structural constraints rather than a justification for persistent inequalities in teacher preparation.

This study also contributes both theoretically and practically. It extends the application of transformative learning theory to resource-limited educational settings, highlighting importance of reflective practice and peer collaboration in shaping teachers' professional identities. Practically, the findings emphasize the need to strengthen mentoring support, prepare student teachers for resource-limited teaching environments, and integrate structured reflective practice into internship programs. Future research could further explore the perspectives of mentor teachers, compare internship experiences across different school contexts, and analyze how transformative learning during internships affects the early professional development of teachers. The findings highlight the importance of preparing student teachers not only with pedagogical knowledge but also with the adaptability required to navigate diverse educational realities.

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