

PRE-SERVICE ESL TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH USING ONLINE PLATFORMS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *The study explored pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs and challenges in teaching English through online teaching in secondary schools. The study employed a quantitative method involving a survey with closed-ended questions. Conducted on 45 pre-service ESL teachers from the Faculty of Education in a public university in Selangor through convenience sampling, the participants included 38 females and 7 males. The data were analysed through descriptive analysis based on the mean for each item. The findings show that the importance of students participating in activities using online platforms, online platforms providing a variety of resources, and the importance of students being enthusiastic about using online platforms are the three main beliefs held by the pre-service ESL teachers. The respondents demonstrated positive beliefs towards these aspects. Furthermore, the three main challenges were students' poor internet connection, which hindered their ability to join virtual meetings, lack of participation due to lack of motivation, and the inability to do collaborative work due to low engagement. In short, the challenges encountered are mostly from the students' perspective, not the teachers.*

Keywords: *Pre-service ESL teachers, online learning, blended learning*

Introduction

In achieving the principles of Education 5.0, technology integration has grown in significance, especially in Malaysian secondary schools. Due to the impact of COVID-19, Malaysia has experienced a drastic shift from conventional learning to a more modern approach, driven by technological advancement that continue to be relevant today. In Malaysia, the government has invested in a new strategy of integrating information and communication technology (ICT) to promote online learning in both public and private schools (Omar et al., 2021). To assist teachers and students in achieving success in online classroom learning, blended learning is regarded as one of the most common approaches to employ. According to Pardede (2019) and Menggo and Darong (2022), blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online instruction, is a key 21st-century teaching method, as it caters to different types of learning styles, increases engagement, and enhances students' digital literacy and self-regulated learning skills. In ESL education, blended learning has been found to boost students' motivation and English competence, though its impact on proficiency is still debated (Menggo & Darong, 2022). Digital tools within blended learning promote more flexible and innovative teaching approaches (Ramalingam et al., 2022).

Research Problems

Despite the integration of ICT and digital tools in education, ESL teachers continue to face significant challenges (Lukas & Yunus, 2021). Identifying and addressing these underlying issues is crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of online education in Malaysia. Pre-service ESL teachers often view online instruction positively and believe it can enhance the learning experience (Omar et al., 2021), but their current level of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge will influence their willingness to integrate technology into the classroom (Wah & Hashim, 2021). Many still struggle to implement online learning effectively due to inadequate training in digital literacy and essential 21st-century skills (Pazilah et al., 2024). While previous studies have examined teachers' perceptions of online learning in general and compared blended with face-to-face instruction (Pardede, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2022), there is limited research on the specific beliefs and practical challenges of pre-service ESL teachers when teaching English through online platforms in Malaysian secondary schools. Addressing this gap is vital, as understanding pre-service teachers' perspectives can inform teacher education programs and better prepare them for the realities of digital instruction. Therefore, this study aims to explore pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about online English teaching and the challenges they encounter, with a view to enhancing teacher preparedness and supporting the successful implementation of online learning in Malaysia.

Research Objectives

The changes in the educational environment in Malaysia, particularly the Ministry of Education's implementation and encouragement of online education since early 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak, have significantly impacted teaching and learning in schools. Pre-service teachers, who were traditionally exposed to face-to-face teaching, now face challenges with the unexpected shift to online platforms. Therefore, this study is conducted to explore pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs in the teaching of English in the ESL classroom through online tools and to examine the challenges of pre-service ESL teachers using online tools during their online teaching for practicum.

Literature Review

Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs in Online Learning

Pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about online learning are strongly influenced by the training and support they receive. Studies consistently highlight that without adequate preparation, pre-service teachers often lack confidence in adapting to digital environments, which limits their ability to design effective lessons (Cheung, 2021; Mendes & Finardi, 2020; Ramalingam et al., 2022). However, with support from institutional and professional development, teachers' digital literacy can be built and equip them with practical strategies that enables more meaningful implementation of online tools. Research also indicates that with sufficient training, it shapes teachers' perceptions and their use of technology.

To ensure consistent learning among teachers, constructivist methods that prioritize critical thinking, active engagement, and teamwork are more prevalent for those who hold positive views toward technology (Lee, 2018; Pardede, 2019; Lee & Pham, 2021). This is supported by findings that show while asynchronous platforms provide flexibility in teaching and learning, synchronous platforms offer real-time engagement, and an equal usage of both reduces cognitive load while improving learning outcomes (Subekti, 2021). Collectively, these findings suggest that pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs are influenced and shaped not only by their training and exposure to diverse digital teaching styles, but also by their overall views on technology. Therefore, to encourage positive perceptions toward online English instructions, pre-service teachers require both technical skills and reflective understanding.

Technology Integration in ESL Teaching

The use of technology in educational settings has received more attention after the COVID-19 pandemic. The integration of digital tools and online platforms plays a prominent role in promoting literacy, improving engagement, and enhancing learners' autonomy (Manzoor et al., 2024; Rintaningrum, 2023; Siumarlata, 2024). When they are applied effectively, they provide numerous benefits such as improving retention and overall learning outcomes by boosting motivation, promoting self-directed learning, and offering flexible access to learning materials (Lee et al., 2020; Gangaraju, 2024). However, studies have also shown challenges when integrating digital tools in the classroom, such as limited appropriate resources, digital literacy gaps among users, and accessibility issues that hinder effective teaching and learning (Siumarlata, 2024; Andrei, 2017). This points out that all stakeholders in the educator sector need to identify and implement better and more effective solutions to curb these issues to ensure effective classroom learning.

To put it into perspective, these challenges are particularly challenging for pre-service teachers, who may lack the classroom experience needed to compensate and fill in the gaps in digital limitations. The low level of digital literacy may hinder them from keeping pace with others. The literature, therefore, underscores a paradox: although technology integration has the potential to greatly improve ESL instruction, its success largely depends on addressing systemic issues. This suggests the importance of examining how pre-service ESL teachers themselves navigate the tension between the opportunities and barriers posed by technology in the classroom.

Challenges Faced by Pre-Service ESL Teachers in Online Learning

Previous studies have shown some positive potential of technology, but pre-service ESL teachers continue to encounter multifaceted challenges from different aspects in online

learning. Issues related to infrastructure, such as poor internet connectivity, and lack of digital resources, remain common, particularly in rural areas where learners also struggle with accessibility challenges (Subekti, 2021; Syafryadin et al., 2021). Despite studies showing a positive attitude toward technology implementation, the literature consistently shows the real classroom practice is hindered by insufficient technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (Wah & Hashim, 2021; Maaatouk & Payant, 2022). In a situation where access is available, pre-service teachers often lack sufficient pedagogical knowledge to sustain engagement with students and among peer or to create appropriate digital assessments (Subekti, 2021). Their ability and confidence to deliver lessons is hindered by limited knowledge of technical issues, including ICT-related anxiety and unfamiliarity with online platforms (Atmacasoy & Aksu, 2018). This gap reflects what the TPACK framework (Mishra and Koehler, 2006) highlights, where effective technology implementation depends on the three domains that are teachers' knowledge of content, pedagogy, and technology. The absence of the intersection often results in superficial application of technology in classroom settings. This clarifies why enthusiasm alone is inadequate without the necessary knowledge domains to achieve meaningful technology-supported learning.

Beyond technical and pedagogical barriers, another significant issue would be the lack of social interaction. Limited teacher-students and peer-peer interaction can lead to more serious issues, such as isolation, decreased motivation, and weaker classroom dynamics. This situation shifts pre-service ESL teachers' perspectives to view the face-to-face classroom as more effective for providing immediate feedback and richer interaction (Pardede, 2019; Atmacasoy & Aksu, 2018). Collectively, all these challenges reveal that pre-service teachers are not inherently resistant to online teaching and learning, but are controlled by systemic, technical, and pedagogical issues. Addressing these challenges through targeted and appropriate training, along with stronger support from institution are therefore vital for preparing them to teach effectively in digital environments.

Theoretical Framework

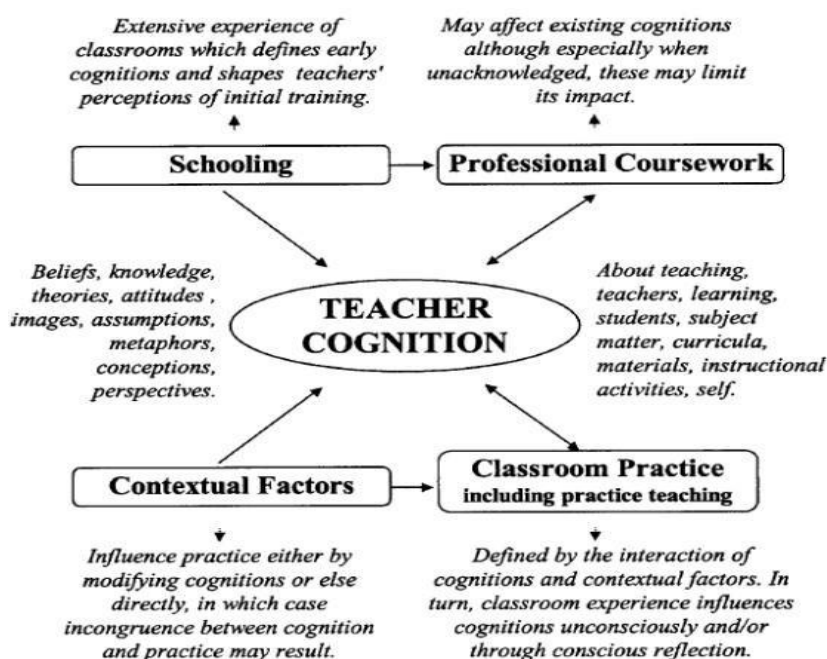


Figure 1: Teacher cognition, schooling, professional education, and classroom practice (Borg, 1997)

According to Borg's (1997) teacher cognition framework, teachers' beliefs are shaped by their past experiences as students (schooling), their training in TESL programs (professional education), and their actual teaching experiences (classroom practice). Pre-service ESL teachers may question the effectiveness of online instruction since they have primarily received their education in face-to-face settings and believe it is essential for language acquisition. Even if TESL programs expose participants to concepts of online instruction, their lack of practical experience may make them feel unprepared and insecure. They encounter significant obstacles when they start teaching online, including low student engagement, technological problems, and difficulties in assessment. These experiences may either strengthen their doubts or help them adapt their beliefs. To curb this issue, more hands-on online teaching experiences should be incorporated into TESL programs to contribute to pre-service teachers' readiness.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about teaching English via online platforms and the challenges encountered. Questionnaires are commonly used in such research as they generate uniform data, making it possible to consistently pinpoint participants' beliefs and challenges in teaching through online platforms (Taherdoost, 2017). The participants consisted of 45 pre-service ESL teachers (38 females, 7 males) from a public university in Selangor. Convenience sampling was employed, as the researchers had access to pre-service ESL teachers at the university, particularly final-year TESL students with relevant online teaching experience. While this allowed the researchers to gather pertinent data efficiently, it also limits generalizability, as the results may not represent pre-service ESL teachers from other universities or regions in Malaysia.

The research instrument used was a questionnaire adapted from Chung (2014) and modified to suit the Malaysian context of pre-service ESL teachers. Minor modifications were made to ensure cultural and contextual appropriateness, particularly in adjusting terminology to reflect local online teaching practices and aligning items with their teaching experiences in Malaysia. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions on pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs and challenges in online teaching. The questionnaire comprised three sections, where Section A: demographic background, Section B: pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs (24 items, measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), and Section C: challenges in online teaching (20 items, rated on the same scale). The questionnaire's reliability was supported by adapting existing items from Chung (2014), with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.7.

Data were collected through Google Forms, distributed via WhatsApp application. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no names required. The survey was closed once the required data had been collected. Data were analysed using SPSS using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to summarize participants' responses. SPSS was utilized as it is a widely acknowledged tool in educational research, valued for its capacity to manage large datasets and perform robust statistical analyses (William et al., 2010).

Findings

The results showed that the teachers were generally supportive of using online platforms to teach English. Descriptive analysis of Section B showed that the highest rating was for "*It is important for students to actively participate in activities using digital technology*" (mean = 4.69, SD = .468). Similarly, the second highest rating was for the belief that digital technology can help collect information from various resources (mean = 4.64, SD = .570), followed by the

belief that students should be enthusiastic about using digital technology (mean = 4.51, SD = .661). On the other hand, the results showed that the lowest ratings were for “*When I use digital technology, I need help from other staff*” (mean = 2.53, SD = 1.217), “*Digital technology interrupts normal classroom activities*” (mean = 2.62, SD = 1.319), and “*Digital technology limits my abilities as a teacher*” (mean = 2.69, SD = 1.328). The results showed that pre-service ESL teachers believe in the importance of active student engagement in online learning but do not feel that digital technology interrupts classroom activities or limits their teaching abilities. This finding is in line with studies done by Andrei (2017) and Liza and Andriyanti (2020) who also found using online platforms as useful teaching tools.

While respondents had positive beliefs about online instruction, they also faced several challenges. Descriptive analysis of Section C showed that the main challenges were students' inability to join online meetings due to poor internet connection (mean = 4.36, SD = .957), lack of participation due to low motivation (mean = 4.33, SD = .905), limited internet access (mean = 4.20, SD = 1.100), and reduced collaboration due to lack of student engagement (mean = 4.20, SD = 1.120). Similarly, the lowest ratings were for the teachers' lack of knowledge on computer literacy and CALL applications (mean = 2.11, SD = 1.210), their inability to teach due to poor internet connection (mean = 2.29, SD = 1.218), and difficulty finding suitable online materials (mean = 2.38, SD = 1.302). The results showed that the challenges pre-service ESL teachers face are mainly related to students' internet access and participation, rather than the teachers' own skills or resources. This is similar to a study conducted by Syafryadin et al. (2021) who found that that one of the main issues faced by the pre-service ESL teachers was access to the internet for the students who lived in rural areas.

Discussion

The findings revealed that pre-service teachers generally hold positive beliefs on the implementation of digital technology in ESL classrooms. Their core perspective emphasizes on the importance of students' participation in classroom activities using digital tools. This suggests that teachers see technology as a medium to foster learner interaction. This aligns with research conducted by Hussaini et al. (2020), which found that digital tools help students remain attentive and actively engaged by providing feedback. Similarly, online learning models promote independent learning by extending learning outside of the classroom through digital resources (Drozdikova-Zaripova & Sabirova, 2020). Conversely, pre-service teachers believe that they do not require external assistance when dealing with technology and digital tools, nor do they perceive them as disruptive or limiting. This finding indicates a sense of confidence among teachers when implementing digital elements into their teachings. This is in contrast with a concern that technology might disrupt instructional flow that leads to ICT-anxiety issues (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Overall, the findings indicate the need for teacher education and professional development programs to further enhance student engagement in digital classrooms. Even though teachers seem to be confident, dealing with technology often involves unexpected issues, hence, necessary institutional support is still important to further strengthen the effective integration of online platforms in language teaching.

The study also found that the main challenges faced by pre-service ESL teachers were poor internet connections preventing students from joining online meetings, low student participation due to lack of motivation, and financial constraints affecting connectivity. These findings are consistent with previous research. For instance, Syafryadin et al. (2021) highlight that students with limited access to reliable internet still encounter substantial hurdles, including poor internet connections and financial barriers, while Suciati et al. (2022) and Akpen et al.

(2024) highlighted how low engagement levels and student participation were caused by technological problems such as erratic internet access and inadequate online learning infrastructure. Nonetheless, challenges related to teachers' digital literacy, internet access, and finding suitable online materials were rated lower, suggesting that these factors had less influence on the respondents. To address these issues, enhancing internet accessibility and giving students financial support are crucial. Additionally, both teachers and students may benefit from the implementation of more interesting activities, technology-based training, and flexible learning strategies to boost participation and sustain motivation.

Therefore, the initiative to improve technology integration in the classroom is clear, where teacher education programs must go beyond technological knowledge to explicit training in online pedagogy. Holistic preparation programs for pre-service teachers are needed to bridge the gap between the positive beliefs about technology and the realities of classroom practice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, this study found that pre-service ESL teachers emphasized the significance of students' active involvement and enthusiasm in an online learning environment. They also believed that online platforms serve a variety of appropriate teaching aids and digital resources that can be adopted and adapted for their lesson planning, which allows them to be more creative and innovative. However, significant challenges were reported, mainly related to internet connectivity issue caused by students' socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locations. This issue often led to lack of participation and lack of motivation among learners. Due to personal reasons, the school authorities may find it challenging to assist; instead, this evokes the need for the inclusion of government initiatives. Additionally, pre-service ESL teachers encountered challenges to develop materials, students' language proficiency and content delivery. This signals the need for continuous professional development as this falls within the educators' responsibilities. Addressing these gaps through targeted training programs could enhance their confidence, teaching effectiveness, and adaptability to digital learning environments.

Since this study only focused on pre-service ESL teachers from a public university in Selangor, future research should include larger and more diverse samples from different regions to ensure broader reliability and generalizability. Moreover, future research should also explore ESL learners' challenges in using digital tools for online learning, and propose effective solutions to reported challenges. By addressing this gap, future research could provide more in-depth insight to ensure effective learning.

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