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Methodological strategies and barriers in teaching EFL of Thai students by Indonesia preservice teachers during the international teaching practice program

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the methodological strategies, innovations, and challenges experienced by five Indonesian pre-service teachers teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to Thai secondary students during an international practicum. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and supporting documentation such as lesson plans, photos, and video recordings. Data were analyzed inductively following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, including data condensation, thematic coding, and triangulation to identify patterns in teaching strategies, challenges, and innovations. Findings show that storytelling, implemented through five modalities teacher-modeled narration with visual aids, collaborative group projects, culturally responsive stories, multimedia-assisted narration, and student-generated narratives served as the central strategy for engaging students in speaking activities. Complementary techniques, such as role-play, think-pair-share, and peer scaffolding, were also used to enhance participation and manage classroom anxiety. Teachers reported that these strategies supported vocabulary use, fluency, and learner confidence, based on qualitative observations. Challenges included linguistic constraints, culturally influenced reticence, mismatches with students' previous learning styles, and limited resources or class time. This study contributes by providing a detailed account of storytelling practices in cross-cultural EFL classrooms and emphasizes the importance of preparing pre-service teachers to combine communicative techniques with culturally adaptive strategies. Future research should integrate quantitative measures and multi-site studies to evaluate the effectiveness of different storytelling modalities.



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Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) presents unique challenges, especially in cross-cultural contexts where learners are not regularly exposed to English. Indonesian pre-service teachers, for instance, often encounter difficulties when teaching speaking skills to Thai students, including linguistic barriers, limited vocabulary, differences in learning culture, and restricted access to teaching materials (Nuranissa, 2024). Thai students, accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and memorization-based learning, may struggle to adapt to interactive and learner-centered activities, such as group discussions or project-based learning, which are

common in EFL pedagogy. Without effective adaptation, instructional strategies may fail to enhance speaking proficiency, a critical component of language competence.

To address these challenges, storytelling has emerged as an effective strategy for teaching speaking in EFL classrooms. Storytelling encourages active participation, promotes meaningful communication, and helps learners contextualize language use within familiar narratives (Isbell et al., 2004; Nasir, 2019). Research has shown that storytelling can increase motivation, improve fluency, and foster intercultural understanding, particularly when teaching learners from diverse cultural backgrounds (Raja et al., 2022; Turahman, 2024). Despite these benefits, few studies have explored the application of storytelling by Indonesian pre-service teachers in a Thai school context, leaving a gap in understanding how culturally responsive storytelling strategies can be implemented effectively.

The present study focuses on Thammasat Wittaya School in Thailand, selected due to its international teaching practice program for Indonesian pre-service teachers and its diverse student body, which provides a meaningful setting to examine cross-cultural teaching strategies. Investigating this context allows for an in-depth understanding of the pedagogical approaches, challenges, and innovations employed by pre-service teachers in enhancing speaking skills through storytelling.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategies used by Indonesian pre-service teachers in teaching speaking to Thai students, with a particular emphasis on storytelling as a pedagogical tool. By identifying effective approaches, analyzing encountered barriers, and examining innovative practices, this research seeks to provide practical insights for improving EFL teaching in similar multicultural and multilingual educational settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative field research design (Moleong, 2010) to investigate the methodological strategies, innovations, and barriers experienced by Indonesian pre-service teachers in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to Thai students during the International Teaching Practice Program. A descriptive qualitative approach was utilized to capture participants' experiences and perspectives in their natural teaching context. Qualitative research, as defined by Bogdan and Taylor (in Burhan, 2010), generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken narratives, allowing for an in-depth exploration of social contexts and personal experiences. This approach was deemed suitable to understand cross-cultural teaching dynamics, instructional methods, and classroom challenges encountered in EFL settings.

The participants consisted of five Indonesian pre-service teachers selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included active participation in the International Teaching Practice Program in Thailand, at least six months of experience teaching EFL to junior high school students (Grades 7–8), implementation of instructional strategies such as storytelling to develop students' speaking skills, and willingness to provide in-depth reflections on teaching strategies, innovations, and challenges. Specifying the exact number of participants and refining the experience requirement strengthened the credibility of the study and ensured richer data collection.

The research was conducted at Thammasat Wittaya School in Thailand, chosen due to its international teaching program and diverse student population, providing an appropriate environment for examining cross-cultural teaching strategies. Data collection occurred throughout the program period, allowing continuous engagement with participants and systematic observation of classroom practices.

Three complementary instruments were used to collect data and ensure triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Indonesian teachers, Thai students, and program supervisors. Questions were carefully formulated to avoid leading responses while exploring teaching strategies, innovative practices, encountered barriers, and motivational techniques. Non-participant observations documented classroom activities, instructional methods, student engagement, and teacher-student interaction patterns using a standardized checklist to maintain consistency and objectivity. Supporting documentation, including photographs, video recordings, lesson plans, and official reports, was gathered and analyzed through content categorization to substantiate and contextualize information obtained from interviews and observations. Sample interview questions included inquiries about the teaching strategies used, challenges faced in delivering English instruction, innovative approaches implemented to engage students, and methods to motivate Thai students to actively participate in speaking activities.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three cyclical steps. First, data condensation involved reviewing, coding, and categorizing raw data into thematic clusters such as "Effective Teaching Strategies," "Speaking Skill Development," and "Barriers to Learning," while excluding irrelevant information. Second, data display consisted of organizing condensed data into tables,

matrices, and narrative summaries to identify patterns and relationships among strategies, innovations, and barriers. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification involved interpreting emerging themes and validating findings through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentation. Additional validation was conducted through member checking with participants and consultation with program supervisors to ensure accurate interpretation. Limitations, including the small sample size and time constraints, were acknowledged to provide transparency in the study's scope.

This methodological design ensured clarity, rigor, and credibility, addressing previous concerns regarding vague sample size, leading questions, insufficient documentation analysis, and enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings through explicit validation procedures.

Results and Discussions

Result

The empirical data were derived from semi-structured interviews with five Indonesian pre-service teachers (Teachers A–E) who taught EFL to Grades 7–8 at Thammasat Wittaya School during the 2024 International Teaching Practice Program. Data were triangulated with classroom observations and supporting documentation, including lesson plans, photographs, and short video clips, to validate the teachers' reports and provide a richer contextual understanding. Inductive coding of the interview transcripts produced four higher-order themes: predominant methodological strategies, teaching challenges and barriers, innovative implementations of storytelling and complementary techniques, and motivational or affective practices aimed at increasing student participation.

Regarding methodological strategies, all five teachers reported using storytelling as the central element of their instruction. Variants included teacher-modeled storytelling with picture sequences, collaborative group storytelling projects, culturally responsive storytelling, multimedia-assisted storytelling, and student-generated personal narratives. For example, Teacher A explained, "I primarily use storytelling as my main strategy because it aligns with the communicative approach while respecting Thai students' cultural preferences. I start with simple stories and encourage students to retell them." Teacher D added, "I start lessons with controlled speaking exercises like repetition and drilling, then gradually move to freer activities like storytelling. This scaffolding approach helps Thai students build confidence step by step." Complementary communicative techniques, such as role-play, think-pair-share, small-group discussions, peer teaching, games, and project-based tasks, were systematically combined with storytelling to lower speaking anxiety and scaffold participation, as highlighted by Teachers B and E. Observations corroborated these reports, showing students actively engaging in story retelling, group narratives, and project presentations, while documentation of lesson plans confirmed the integration of these strategies across the practicum.

Teachers consistently reported several interrelated barriers that influenced teaching effectiveness. Linguistic constraints, including limited vocabulary and L1–English phonological differences, slowed comprehension and required frequent repetition or gestural support, as noted by Teacher A. Cultural and learning-style differences, such as Thai students' passive classroom behavior and reluctance to ask questions out of respect for authority, hindered teachers' ability to probe comprehension, as reported by Teacher B. Resource and time limitations further constrained teaching, with Teacher E observing that "limited class time means I can't spend enough time on speaking practice." Additionally, the mismatch between students' previous memorization-based learning and communicative tasks caused hesitation during group discussions or projects, as observed by Teacher D. Observational notes and video recordings confirmed these barriers, showing instances of delayed responses, teacher scaffolding, and selective student participation.

In terms of innovation, teachers reported five specific implementations that operationalized storytelling. Teacher-modeled storytelling with visual aids (Teacher A and D) scaffolded comprehension and pronunciation practice. Collaborative group storytelling projects (Teacher B) distributed speaking load and lowered anxiety. Culturally responsive storytelling (Teacher C) engaged students by translating local Thai stories into English. Multimedia-assisted storytelling (Teacher D) combined images with oral narration to support different learning styles, while student-generated personal narratives (Teacher E) promoted authenticity and ownership. Triangulated observations and artifacts, such as photos of group presentations and video recordings of storytelling sessions, supported teachers' perceptions that these innovations increased confidence, encouraged richer vocabulary use, and promoted longer utterances in English.

Motivational and affective strategies were integrated with methodological practices to enhance participation. Teachers applied positive reinforcement, normalized errors as part of learning, shared personal learning struggles, scaffolded progression from pairs to whole-class speaking, and encouraged peer support. Teacher A explained, "I always give positive reinforcement for any speaking attempt and start with low-pressure activities

like storytelling in pairs before moving to whole-class speaking.” Across all cases, teachers reported that storytelling and its variants contributed to fluency gains through repeated retelling, vocabulary acquisition in contextualized frames, pronunciation and intonation improvements when combined with modeling, and increased learner confidence. Observational data and classroom artifacts confirmed these outcomes, showing active participation, peer collaboration, and effective scaffolding throughout the practicum.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that storytelling, when combined with complementary communicative techniques and affective strategies, constitutes a central and effective approach for developing Thai students’ speaking skills in cross-cultural EFL classrooms. Triangulation with observation and documentation provided concrete support for teacher-reported outcomes, enhancing the credibility and depth of the results.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central role of storytelling as a culturally adaptive vehicle for speaking practice in cross-cultural EFL classrooms. The prominence of storytelling in teachers’ accounts aligns with previous theoretical and empirical claims that storytelling integrates cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of oral language development (Ellis & Brewster, 2002; Isbell et al., 2004). In particular, the progression from teacher-modeled narratives to student-generated stories supports Ellis and Brewster’s (2002) argument that storytelling provides meaningful context for vocabulary acquisition and narrative structuring, while repeated engagement with stories contributes to oral complexity and comprehension gains (Isbell et al., 2004). Importantly, the present study extends these claims to a cross-cultural pre-service teaching context, showing that Indonesian teachers adapted storytelling to Thai cultural norms, for instance, by gradually scaffolding activities and incorporating local content. This adaptation appears to mediate Thai students’ cultural reluctance to speak publicly, illustrating that pedagogical effectiveness depends not only on technique but also on cultural responsiveness. Teacher D’s description of the controlled-drills-to-free-storytelling sequence demonstrates a practical implementation of graduated release, confirming Brown’s (2001) recommendation to balance accuracy and fluency, particularly for learners unaccustomed to active participation.

Complementary strategies, such as role-play, think-pair-share, and collaborative storytelling, were consistently used alongside storytelling. These techniques reduced performance pressure, scaffolded participation, and distributed cognitive load, reflecting findings in the collaborative learning literature (Harahap & Zulfitri, 2019; Amran, 2015; Novianti & Kusumayanthi, 2022). In the Thai classroom context, where students often demonstrate cultural hesitation to speak publicly, the structured progression from pair work to small-group and whole-class activities provided a low-risk environment for rehearsal, gradually building learners’ confidence. This finding underscores that successful communicative tasks require thoughtful sequencing, particularly in contexts where prior educational experiences emphasize teacher-centered instruction.

Teachers reported several interrelated barriers, including limited vocabulary, L1English phonological interference, cultural reticence, and constraints on resources and class time. These barriers, corroborated by observations and classroom artifacts, limited the pace and scope of speaking activities and complicated formative assessment. For example, linguistic challenges lengthened lesson pacing, while cultural reticence reduced visible uptake of communicative tasks. These findings suggest that methodological solutions must be multi-pronged, combining linguistic scaffolding (graded input and visual aids), affective support (error normalization and teacher self-disclosure), and structural adjustments (longer speaking slots and frequent low-stakes practice). The interplay of language, culture, and resources observed here emphasizes the importance of contextual adaptation in cross-cultural EFL instruction, echoing prior studies on Indonesian teachers in Thailand (Nuranissa, 2024; Turbinita, 2024; Fajaryani et al., 2018).

Technology and multimedia acted as amplifiers for storytelling but were constrained by access. Teacher D reported that slides and pictures enhanced comprehension and interactivity, consistent with Nuranissa’s (2024) suggestions, whereas Teacher E highlighted the limitations of insufficient materials. These findings indicate that low-tech solutions, such as picture sequences or printed story cards, can still provide meaningful scaffolding when high-end technology is unavailable, highlighting the need for adaptive resource use in resource-limited contexts.

Affective strategies were equally critical. Positive reinforcement, scaffolding from pair to group work, and teacher self-disclosure supported learners in overcoming anxiety associated with public speaking. These practices are particularly relevant in the Thai context, where cultural norms may discourage overt risk-taking or public error, and align with Amran’s (2015) findings on affective engagement reducing learner anxiety.

This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it documents in detail how pre-service teachers operationalize storytelling across five distinct modalities teacher-modeled with visual aids, collaborative group storytelling, culturally responsive story content, multimedia narration, and student-generated narratives

moving beyond prior work that often treats storytelling as a single, uniform technique (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). Second, it demonstrates empirically that storytelling, embedded in scaffolded sequences and combined with affective strategies, functions as a culturally adaptive approach to eliciting oral production from initially passive learners, linking Communicative Language Teaching principles with culturally responsive pedagogy.

Nonetheless, several limitations temper the generalizability of these findings. The small purposive sample of five teachers in a single school limits external validity, and findings rely primarily on teacher self-reports, albeit triangulated with observations and documentation. Systematic pre- and post-assessment of student speaking skills was not conducted, and the short practicum period precluded longitudinal tracking of learning gains. Moreover, while teachers perceived certain strategies as effective, the study cannot definitively explain why some approaches were more successful than others in the Thai cultural context. Future research should integrate qualitative insights with quantitative measures, such as rubric-based oral performance scores or pre/post speaking tests, and expand to multi-site studies to assess the causal impact of specific storytelling modalities. Intervention studies that randomize classes to different storytelling variants teacher-modeled, student-generated, or multimedia-assisted could clarify which configurations most effectively enhance fluency, accuracy, and confidence in Thai EFL learners.

Conclusion

This study investigated the methodological strategies, innovations, and challenges encountered by Indonesian pre-service teachers in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to Thai secondary school students during an international teaching practicum. The findings indicate that storytelling, implemented across five distinct modalities teacher-modeled narration with visual aids, collaborative group projects, culturally responsive stories, multimedia-assisted narration, and student-generated narratives served as the central pedagogical strategy for enhancing speaking skills. When scaffolded from controlled to free-speaking activities, these approaches supported vocabulary acquisition, fluency development, and increased learner confidence, particularly among students initially hesitant to participate.

Despite these positive outcomes, several persistent challenges were observed. Teachers faced linguistic constraints such as limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties, culturally influenced reticence to speak, mismatches between traditional memorization-based learning and communicative activities, and resource or time limitations. The study suggests that these barriers can be mitigated through integrated strategies combining linguistic scaffolding, affective support (e.g., normalizing errors, peer assistance), and culturally responsive adaptations of communicative tasks.

Theoretically, this study extends the literature by providing a nuanced, modality-specific account of storytelling in a cross-cultural EFL context, demonstrating how scaffolded, culturally sensitive storytelling can facilitate oral language development. Practically, the findings highlight the need for teacher education programs to equip pre-service teachers not only with a repertoire of communicative techniques but also with the adaptive skills to tailor instructional strategies to learners' sociocultural realities. For instance, teacher training should include guidance on sequencing storytelling from teacher-modeled to student-generated narratives, incorporating affective support, and managing resource limitations.

Several limitations warrant consideration. The small purposive sample of five teachers in a single school limits the generalizability of findings, and reliance on teacher self-reports, though triangulated with observations and documentation, restricts the objectivity of reported outcomes. The absence of systematic pre- and post-assessments of student speaking proficiency and the short duration of the practicum also constrain conclusions regarding long-term learning gains. Future research should integrate quantitative measures, such as rubric-based oral performance scores, across multiple sites to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of different storytelling modalities. Intervention studies that manipulate the type of storytelling implemented could clarify which approaches most effectively enhance fluency, accuracy, and learner confidence in cross-cultural EFL classrooms.

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