

STUDENT TEACHER INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE IN SEA TEACHER PROJECT BATCH 8 CHIANG RAI, THAILAND

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Abstract: Teaching experience is necessary for student teachers' progress within their studies. Internship gives a valuable contribution to the students' improvements in terms of teaching skills and personal developments, as well as opportunity for the student teachers to initiate and implement what they have learnt throughout their study. Having an international internship experience could also add to the student teacher's awareness of global issues, the challenges of living abroad, and communications with people of different backgrounds. In this paper, the researcher wishes to investigate the contribution and effect of a one-month overseas internship experience which took place in the northernmost province of Thailand, Chiang Rai. This exploratory research aims to explore the experiences of six student teachers participating in a post-teaching survey. During the internship, the student teachers were responsible for teaching several subjects using English in various levels, ranging from pre-school up to upper secondary high school. Several participation in religious as well as cross-cultural exchange activities were found remarkably beneficial. The data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and documentation. The findings of this research suggest that the student teacher overseas internship experience gives positive contributions to the student teachers' personal as well as professional developments.

Keywords: *student teacher, internship experience, case study*

INTRODUCTION

Obtaining experience in teaching is without doubt important for every student teacher during their study. The experience of undergoing an internship strengthens and reinforces the knowledge gained throughout the coursework as well as practices within the courses in university, as they are provided with opportunities to practice as a candidate teacher (Salviana, Muslem, and Daud, 2018; Clark and Cutler, 1990). Encountering a real-life situation of managing students with their natural behaviors grants pre-service students the idea of a teacher's common case (O tara, 2014). An international internship, moreover, could contribute to many other benefits for the participants, such as raising cultural awareness, developing a sense of unity in diversity, and supporting intercultural developments (Willard-Holt, 2001; Sahin, M. 2008). In addition, having to live in a foreign country, communicating with people of different backgrounds, and working in an unfamiliar environment force the student teachers to adapt to their new surroundings, which gives positive contributions to raising their awareness of global issues as well as personal and professional developments (Alfaro, 2008); Pence & Macgilivray, 2008; Quinn & Morton, 2009; Cushner, 2007).

Wilson (1982) has stated that cross-cultural experiential learning should be a component of every teacher education program. She has also identified four positive impacts in which cross-cultural experiential learning can be justified:

1. Teaching itself is a cross-cultural encounter,
2. Cross-cultural experience aids self-development,
3. Cross-culturally effective persons have characteristics desirable for effective teachers, and
4. Cross cultural experience leads to global perspectives necessary for global education to happen in schools.

Findings of numerous similar studies have proved the effectiveness of having a teaching internship experience. Otara (2014) investigated the perceptions of 422 student internees in Rwanda, and found out that despite the benefits received during the program, the supervision of both mentors and supervisors needed to be improved. Not only that, the internees were unsatisfied as their work was supervised after the deadline and the supervisors had different viewpoints, causing a non-harmonious presentation. Studies also show that the program of teaching internship contributes to the development of a student teacher's professional and personal aspects. Yezim (2009) conducted a survey on five foreign student teachers and eight Turkish student teachers by giving pre- and post-teaching questionnaires as well as journals to assess the impacts on their 3-week teaching practicum, resulting in a satisfactory result as the students gain a lot of insights in the perspective of teaching while also developing themselves both professionally and personally. Miller and Gonzales (2016) examined the outcomes of twenty undergraduate students in USA after participating in a short-term international internship with the results of having positive contributions to their personal and professional developments. Short-term international internships provide student teachers with additive, unique, and potentially powerful contexts which also raise their awareness of global issues and a strong foundation to build multicultural competencies.

For decades, numerous studies have been conducted globally investigating on cross-cultural experiential learning, and recently to be focusing on the impact of student teacher's experience on their personal and professional developments (Sahin, 2008; Salviana, Muslem, and Daud, 2018; Otara, 2014; Willard-Holt, 2001; Yezim, 2009; Miller and Gonzales, 2016; Stachowski & Tyler, 2007). These studies were conducted all over the world, from developing countries such as Mexico and Rwanda, to Turkey and the United States of America. However, there are few studies investigating the experience of international teaching internship students in Southeast Asia, despite the many programs being held each year. The researcher believes that by exploring such experience, more improvements could be done for the future. In addition, such a program, like SEA Teacher Project, also gives insights to those wishing to achieve the opportunity to participate in an international student teacher experience.

This study has to do with SEA Teacher Project, a program established by SEAMEO, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization in 2014 as one solution to the seven issues being the priorities for SEAMEO Member Countries to work together in view of education quality in Southeast Asia. The program has been geared to help revitalize teacher education, as the project aims to provide opportunities for pre-service students from universities in Southeast Asia to experience teaching practicums in other Member Countries. SEA Teacher Project shortened from "Pre-Service Student Teacher Exchange in Southeast Asia commenced in 9th October 2015, where eleven universities from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam signed an agreement to have the exchange program of student teachers. The first batch of SEA Teacher Project started to run in January and lasted in February 2016. As of now, there have been 8 batches being sent and received all over Southeast Asia, and the number of universities and Member Countries keep growing, with the current number of 107 co-operating universities, 49 universities from Indonesia, 43 universities from the Philippines, 12 universities from Thailand, two universities from Vietnam, and one university from Malaysia.

SEA Teacher Project has the objectives of the following:

1. To enable pre-service student teachers to develop their teaching skills and pedagogy,
2. To encourage the pre-service student teachers to practice their English skills,
3. To allow the pre-service student teachers to gain a broader regional and world view, and

4. To expose future teachers to diverse teaching and learning situations and opportunities, and the value of flexibility.

Initially, the program was intended to be available for undergraduate students preferably of the third and fourth year, with the specific majors of Mathematics, Science, English, and Pre-School Education. However, as time passed by, the participation of students of other subjects has also been deemed important, and hence, more majors are added, such as Economics, Primary/Elementary Education, Social Sciences, and Physical Education. The exchange program goes for approximately a month's time and the universities share the cost systems, the receiving University would provide accommodation and transfers from the airport to the hotel, whereas the sending University would have some sort of agreement with the participants, such as additional support from the university in the form of allowance, subsistence, transport, insurance, etc. The program is held twice a year, around January and August. Every participant is required to use English in all teaching activities with no exceptions. The one-month practicum is divided as follows:

- 1st Week = Orientation & Class Observation
- 2nd Week = Lesson Plan Making & Assisted Teaching
- 3rd Week = Teaching Week
- 4th Week = Reflection and Closing Ceremony

However, not all host schools observe the procedure. Sometimes, the schools have events such as field trips or science fairs, which cause disruptions to the schedule. Indeed, the events do give more prominence to the country's tradition and values, though the opportunity of teaching hours of the student teachers might then be sacrificed. The host universities chose the host schools to which the participants are sent, while the mentors of the schools are appointed by the school to assist the student teacher during their program. The host universities were also advised to assign buddies to make the students' stay more comfortable. At the end of the program, all of whom involved in SEA Teacher Project are asked to evaluate the student teachers and the program itself to provide feedback and suggestions for the future batches. Along the years up to the most recent batch of SEA Teacher Project, which is the batch in which the researcher was participating, Batch 8, there have been more and more satisfactory feedback from the participants, host universities, mentor teachers, and the participants' buddies, though there were also critiques and suggestions for the program's improvements in the future. In this study, the researcher wishes to explore the experiences of the student teachers in August 2019 for around one month. The student teachers did not only participate in teaching activities in the host school, but also in religious and cultural activities which occurred incidentally during the program.

On May 28, 2019, the officials of each participating university signed a Letter of Agreement in Kedah, Malaysia, as the amendment to the universities' commitment to holding the Pre-Service Student Teacher Exchange in Southeast Asia, as witnessed by the SEAMEO Secretariat. The chosen delegates of the universities were then sent on the dates as informed by the host universities and welcome. The delegates of SEA Teacher Project Batch 8 arrived on 4th August 2019 in the northernmost province of Thailand, Chiang Rai. On the first two days, as arranged by the host university, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, the participants were welcome and given a brief yet thorough explanation of the upcoming weeks to encounter. Then, the representatives of the host schools pick each of the chosen delegates to bring with them, and later to observe and teach there as well for the remaining two and a half week. As for the last half of the week, the participants were taken back to the university and present the results of their stay, before finally leaving to return to their home countries.

The research question which becomes the main focus of this study is, “What are the contributions and effects of an overseas teaching experience on student teachers?”, with the specific aim to investigate some of the challenges they face while being abroad, the global awareness they develop which began to arise as they adapt with the new surroundings, and personal as well as professional developments of the student teachers.

METHOD

The researcher chose to use qualitative method as it could help contextualize the student teachers’ feelings at present and to help understand the meanings contextually (Erickson, 1986; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Pence & Macgilivray, 2008). The researcher chose to conduct the research using exploratory descriptive method, as it is appropriate to answer open-ended or comparatively broad research (Edgar, 2017). In his book, Edgar (2017) continued that exploratory study best fits the condition where the researcher wishes to understand better about a system, or answer research questions with no preconceived conceptual hypothesis or behavior. The researcher believes that by using exploratory study, greater understanding and insights into the specific phenomena being investigated can be achieved.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is also a participant of SEA Teacher Project Batch 8: Chiang Rai. Having travelled together for around one month, going through the hardest and happiest of times together, the researcher began to know details about one another which made it easier to understand the expressions and context within the questionnaires, as responded by the participants.

Participants

The researcher chose 6 out of 19 delegates to interview, to be precise as the other delegates were not in the condition to have an interview, due to the limited amount of time. The delegates are undergraduate students from all over Indonesia, from Bengkulu, Makassar, Yogyakarta, Malang, Nusa Tenggara and Purwokerto. Their ages are around 20-22. The student teachers vary in terms of subjects they teach, but all of them could teach in English.

Instrument

The data was collected using questionnaires which contained ten questions, grouped under several categories: the student teachers’ teaching skills improvements, personal developments, implementation on previous knowledge, awareness of global issues, challenges of living abroad, and communicating with people of different backgrounds. These items were adapted of several previous similar studies (Ozek, 2009; Hugh, 1995), but also changed in some ways to be unique and to find results of different aspects. All the items were designed in an open-ended format. Other than the use of interviews, the researcher also collected the data by using journals which were mandatory for each of the delegate to produce. The journals took an online form, which can be accessed publicly. It consisted of five criteria of which the journals were assessed: General Information and Academic Administration, Pedagogical Contents, Teaching Plan, Teaching Practice and Summary and Suggestions. The student teachers were required to finish the journals as a part of their progress completion in order to receive the certificate.

Procedure

The SEA Teacher Project Batch 8: Chiang Rai delegates were sent to different schools in the province of Chiang Rai. They were spread in institutions with various levels of education, ranging from pre-schools, elementary schools, lower secondary high schools and upper secondary high

schools. The student teachers spent the first one-and-a-half week observing and preparing their lesson plans. As they were adjusting and adapting with the new environment, the student teachers also began to learn the education system in Thailand. Then, on the last one and a half week, they were to implement their lesson plans in real class situations. They were assigned mentor teachers to cooperate with and help with their times at the host school. Meanwhile, during those weeks, the student teachers were told to keep track of things on their journals, based on the criteria of assessments above. At last, after the student teachers arrived back at their home country and completed their journals, the researcher distributed the questionnaires.

ANALYSIS

The data collected were analyzed using content analysis technique as it best fits a study involving textual data, such as individual interview questions, focus groups, or documents (Erlingsson (2017). The student teachers' responses to the interview questions were coded along with the journal items to create categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as to follow the previous studies' lists, though with different categories to make it unique (Willard-Holt, 2001; Pence & Macgilivray; Hugh, 1995; Sahin, 2008; Ozek, 2009). The following is the result of the findings.

Teaching Skills Improvement

Not all of the subjects show improvements in the teaching internship they participated in, as most of the classes implement traditional "lecturing" method of teaching. Education system in Thailand also still uses worksheets, just like in Indonesia, as one student teacher mentioned. One of the participants stated that he felt afraid if he was to change the way of teachings, as it might offend the mentor teacher. However, few student teachers found the teaching internship improved their teaching and pedagogical skills, as they discovered the mentor teachers put their best effort to raise the students' critical thinking skills. One of the subjects was surprised to see how well-facilitated the teachers in Thailand were. The English classroom she observed had all sorts of educational materials and tools which could enhance the teaching-learning activities easily. There were flashcards, CDs, audio recordings, TVs, image visualizer, complete stationery sets available for all students to utilize.

Personal and Professional Development

Nearly all the subjects agreed that the internship gave a positive contribution to their personal and professional development. Some of the student teachers felt self-conscious when notified that they were appointed delegates to be sent to Thailand as they did not feel confident about their English proficiency. They also doubted whether they could teach in English, or even deliver the information well. After going through the one month program, the students began to feel more confident and courageous. The subjects felt satisfied after doing the internship, as successfully teaching the students and making them understand about the subject. This was something they could be proud of. One of the student teacher claimed to have underestimated the challenge of teaching overseas. He was surprised that teaching English to students of foreign country was way harder, especially when he knew nothing of the mother tongue. Being professional was also found challenging for the student teachers. They learned that they could not rush into making decisions, and had to be able to take control of themselves in order to focus and give it their best shot when solving a problem. One pre-service student stated that it was important to respect others and give gifts to create a positive image on ourselves.

Implementing Previous Knowledge

As the student teachers were undergraduate students in their 3rd or 4th year, they had gained sufficient understanding about teaching methods, strategies, and pedagogical skills. Most of the students admitted they applied their prior knowledge during their teaching internship. Some of the subjects implemented teaching methods by adjusting to the topics being taught, such as Discovery Learning when they were teaching about natural resources, even though one of the delegates did not have the opportunity to modify his class as he observed strictly the mentor teacher's way of teaching. The use of games was favored by the learners, and, therefore, was utilized most by the student teachers. The way the mentor teachers taught was also seen a bit out-of-date in a way, and the student teacher tried to implement his knowledge and used technology in his teaching-learning activities, which turned to be a huge success and the learners loved his class.

Global Awareness

The student teachers were aware of global issues around the world, though it was not very apparent until they experienced first-hand the condition and situation of living abroad. They were aware of the many cultures, religions, customs, regulations, and traditions existing among countries. They tended to think that learning about the global issues is exciting, as they were learning more and more about things they have never known about before. The Thai language and culture slowly influenced each of them and began to change them in one way or another. The student teachers found the Thai language and culture to be unique and interesting. They believed that respect was a valuable principle they must definitely uphold while staying in a foreign environment. One of the student teachers used a strategy to survive in a country where he was not familiar with, which was not to voice opinions directly in order to respect others' feelings. He understood that there were things which might be against his personal belief, but that did not mean that he should blatantly refuse and reject it. He learned that someone's belief is not something one can force. We cannot force them into thinking that their doings are right or wrong. We can only observe and make critical reflections but not intervene.

The student teachers were also interested in how much the Thai people respect their culture, Royal families, the local wisdom, and values, but at the same time, they are also open to values from Western civilization. Thai people preserve their honor to the temples, to Buddhism, to the monks, the values being taught since elementary grades, but at the same time, they have an intense clubbing culture. They are open to the idea of diverse genders and sexual orientations, and this is interesting for the student teachers to observe. They wish to understand further and comprehend how the two opposite themes are linked, and why this certain phenomenon is happening. One of the student teachers also added that she was amazed by how much the students respect the teachers. She was accustomed to many cases revolving the experience of teaching practicums in her home country dealing with students who would not respect nor obey their teachers. Once, she told the students to be quiet, and they fell silent instantly. The students always paid attention to her words.

They also met people of different cultures and religions. As Thai people were religious and very respectful to their temples, the student teachers have experienced visiting the sacred sites of Buddhist people. They also observed many different religious activities which were held in the schools. This helped grow the student teachers' tolerance with other people of different religions. The student teachers came to a conclusion that the internship had raised their global awareness to a significant level that now they understood that respecting one another, accepting the diversity, spreading and sharing harmonious words would help create a better world. The student

teachers experienced such warm feelings and unforgettable memories given by the Thai culture and the people around them.

Challenges of Teaching in Thailand

Most of the student teachers agreed that the experience of teaching in Thailand was remarkable despite the many challenges they had to face and cope with. The main aspect which became the biggest problem to solve was the language barrier. In most schools, Thai students were not very proficient in English. They could not understand written form of English, and very little of spoken English. Some schools implemented English program, which was helpful for the student teachers who were luckily placed there, as the learning and teaching activities did not have much obstacles. For others, they had to come up with any sorts of ideas in order to deliver the information to the students, and still maintain a fun and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom. The Thai students also had a thick accent which made it difficult for the student teachers to understand what they were trying to express. Their pronunciation was very different and it could lead them to mispronouncing a word, which can be critical in its meaning. This made the students began to think that learning English is difficult. Therefore, their perception of English is affected by this factor.

In addition, each school treated the student teachers differently. Some of the delegates were supported fully by the school, which also provided them with generous living supplies and needs. The unlucky ones, however, had to struggle and survive despite the very limited amount of time of teaching given and facilities provided by the school. Some of the schools also gave different amount of responsibilities. The student teachers could be given twelve classes to handle at the same time, and still had to submit all the lesson plans and prepare materials as well as worksheets for the class later. Not all mentor teachers were fully supportive. Some of them, despite being an English teacher or proficient in speaking one, often had miscommunication due to the difficulty in coping with their accent. Some of the schools were also lacking in media and facilities, which the student teachers had to overcome. They modified the lessons by adding media, such as online crossword games and digital quizzes which are accessible via computer. It was also not easy to maintain the students' focus and compete with their excitement level as they seemed to have endless amount of energy, which was solved by having media such as flashcards and puppets.

Due to the language barriers between the students and the student teachers, they were sometimes helped by the mentor teachers if they were available at the time. Some of the students had advanced English proficiency, and therefore could help translating what the student teacher was trying to say to the students. The student teachers also tried to change the habits the students were accustomed to, which was given worksheets, into playing games, such as Chinese Whispers. This game successfully raised the students' interest and improved their speaking, listening, reading, as well as writing skills at the same time. The student teacher was intrigued to refuse the use of worksheets at that time because she felt that not all the students enjoyed the idea of having worksheets. At the start of the class, the student teachers also liked to do warming ups for the students, which made them enthusiastic. The student teachers in some other schools added that getting the students' attention could be really difficult. They tried knocking on the whiteboard, but the students would still not pay attention. At first, they would look at the board seriously and focused on the lesson, but gradually, they would stop listening and became busy with themselves. The student teacher believed it might also be caused by how they use English a foreign language to the students.

Challenges of Living Abroad

Most of the student teachers sent to Chiang Rai were Moslems, which means that they had to overcome the struggle of finding halal foods there. They agreed that it was a difficult obstacle for them, as Islam is a minor religion in Thailand. They added that living in Chiang Rai could be quite costly which is highly affected by the availability of support of the host schools. Some host schools did not provide any support for daily needs, unlike other schools which were very generous by giving free supplies in the form water, eggs, rice, and so on. They also found the language to be a problem, as everything was also written in Thai. Thai alphabets are very much different to the alphabets they knew. It became a challenge when the students needed to go to a place or buy some foods, as they were not able to read the signs.

Communicating With People of Different Backgrounds

The student teachers agreed that it was not easy to talk with Thai people. They could not communicate with the locals as English is not their main language. The student teachers were forced to memorize several common expressions which are used daily, such as greetings and expressions of appreciation. It was a relief that most of the mentor teachers were Filipinos and foreign teachers from an English-speaking country, though some student teachers had to deal with Thai teachers with their dialects which could be difficult to understand. Sometimes, the student teachers would use simplified version of English to make the students understand, by reducing the grammatical coherence for the sake of the meaning. However, if the students were still having difficulties, the student teachers would ask one of the students whose English was good to be the translator. Last but not least, they had faith in Google Translate by which they spoke in English then Google would translate it into Thai, and the students could easily understand what the student teachers were trying to convey. The student teachers also used a lot of body language in order to create visualization in the students' minds on the student teachers' words.

Suggestions

Though all the student teachers agreed that the program was wonderful and beneficial, they agreed that it should be held longer, as it is a student teacher internship. They believed that the longer the duration, the better the outcomes would be. The student teachers stated that the four weeks were not for purely teaching, but only two weeks of observation and two weeks of teaching. Even so, the schools also often have events which would disrupt the schedule. The student teachers wished to have more opportunity to teach and gain experience as much as they could as candidate teachers. They wanted to experience the program as a whole, to fully analyze the students' skills, so that they could understand which skills the students needed to improve. They also wanted to learn more about the curriculum and education system in Thailand. They believed that the teaching internship would become more effective with visible results. Secondly, they agreed that the organizer should strictly filter the participating schools. The organizer must ensure the schools are ready to welcome the student teachers because some schools are not quite ready yet. The treatments of each school should also be the same to motivate all the student teachers during their programs.

The student teachers also wish that there are more exchange programs to be established all around the world, and not just Indonesia or limited in Southeast Asia. The experience is unforgettable, and has left a great mark in the student teachers' heart. Not only that, the student teachers can also improve their pedagogical skills and intercultural competence by experiencing an overseas internship. Sharing knowledge with the mentor teachers also helps in creating networks across the globe, giving positive contributions to the participants as well as the

organizers. Regarding the program, the student teachers were disappointed as they expected to use a lot of English, which was not used at all. They wished that perhaps the host schools should at least have English program or have students who are fluent in English.

CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, SEA Teacher Project is one of the many exchange programs which offer very valuable opportunities for student teachers to experience an international teaching internship. It is without doubt that the universities' support would greatly affect the student teachers' motivation in applying for the program. Precisely, as revealed by the present study, the international internship experience improves not only the pre-service teachers' teaching and pedagogical skills, but also personal and professional developments. The program has also helped promote global awareness by establishing a sense of unity in diversity, as experienced by the participants. As an ongoing program, there are suggestions given that can help improve the program later on as well as giving insights to those who are interested in participating. Since this study is limited to only having collected data on several participants, the researcher wishes to continue and improve the study by conducting a case study for her thesis which looks at more aspects and subjects that can be investigated. To add, further studies are suggested to be conducted by observing the development of the participants throughout the program, as the researcher could only hold the study after the program was done. Long term effects of the program could also be studied as to see the student teachers' developments after participating in the program. The researcher wishes that this study can help provide evidence which supports the idea of overseas teaching experiences contributing positively to a student teacher's personal, professional developments, as well as their global issue awareness to a great extent.

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