

## VOLUNTEER TEACHING AND THE GROWTH OF TEACHING SKILLS AMONG ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS

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### Abstract

This study investigates how volunteer teaching contributes to the development of teaching skills among English Education students at Universitas Sriwijaya. Although experiential learning is widely recognized in teacher education, there is limited empirical evidence on how non-mandatory volunteer teaching fosters pedagogical growth in the Indonesian EFL context, particularly at the university level. Addressing this gap, the study examines on how volunteer teaching influences students' perception of the teaching profession, what specific teaching skills are developed, and what challenges arise during these experiences. Using a qualitative case study design, 23 purposively selected students participated in open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews guided by Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Model. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach. The findings indicate that volunteer teaching enhanced participants' lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional delivery, while also strengthening emotional resilience, adaptability, and professional identity. Challenges such as resource limitations, classroom discipline, and cultural adjustment prompted creative problem-solving, reinforcing instructional awareness. These results highlight the role of volunteer teaching as a practical bridge between academic preparation and real classroom demands, with implications for integrating structured volunteer opportunities into teacher education curricula in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *Experiential Learning, Pre-Service Teachers, Teaching Skills, Volunteer Teaching*

### Introduction

Teacher education plays a crucial role in preparing future educators with the necessary pedagogical, emotional, and social competencies to design meaningful learning experiences. A well-structured teacher preparation program must not only

provide theoretical foundations but also integrate practical experiences that allow pre-service teachers to apply pedagogical knowledge in authentic settings (Alshammari et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2019). However, in many contexts, including Indonesia, the transition from university coursework to real-world teaching continues to reveal a persistent gap between theory and practice (Soong, 2013; Yin, 2018).

To address this gap, many teacher education programs have adopted experiential learning models such as practicums, service-learning, and volunteer teaching. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) explains that meaningful learning occurs through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. These experiences foster deeper cognitive understanding, adaptability, and professional identity development (Zurita et al., 2025).

Among these approaches, volunteer teaching has gained prominence as a flexible and community-oriented form of experiential learning. Defined as unpaid instructional service, volunteer teaching enables pre-service teachers to engage with diverse student populations, refine teaching techniques, and develop affective attributes such as empathy, leadership, and resilience (Barkhuizen, 2016; O'Flaherty & Liddy, 2018). It is particularly relevant in English language teacher education, where the ability to adapt instruction to varied cultural and linguistic contexts is essential. Studies in Singapore and Malaysia show that volunteer teaching can improve instructional clarity, intercultural competence, and classroom confidence (Ellis et al., 2024; Gu et al., 2022; Yu & Wang, 2025).

However, despite its benefits, volunteer teaching is not without challenges. Without adequate mentoring, many pre-service teachers struggle with classroom control, assessment practices, and integrating theory into (Forster et al., 2015a; Lee et al., 2018). Eyler & Giles (1999) caution that, in the absence of structured reflection and institutional support, volunteer teaching may lead to superficial learning or even exploitation, particularly when students are placed in remote schools without proper preparation or supervision (Lee et al., 2018).

In Indonesia, volunteer teaching plays a strategic role in both educational reform and teacher preparation. Programs such as *Indonesia Mengajar*, *SM3T*, *Guru*

*Penggerak*, and *Kampus Mengajar* aim to place young educators in underserved regions to enhance access and equity in education. Likewise, university initiatives such as *KKN Tematik Pendidikan* and student-led organizations like *UKM Unsri Mengajar* empower pre-service teachers to support learning in disadvantaged schools and rural communities (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). While these programs offer rich experiential opportunities, participants also face real challenges related to classroom discipline, infrastructure, cultural adaptation, and limited academic support.

Universitas Sriwijaya provides a particularly relevant setting for investigating these dynamics. Its English Education Study Program actively encourages participation in volunteer teaching, with students involved in national and local initiatives across South Sumatra and beyond. These engagements expose them to linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, many of which lack adequate resources. Although Unsri's students frequently participate in these activities, few empirical studies have explored how such experiences influence their pedagogical skill development or professional identity. Moreover, volunteer teaching in English language contexts, where language exposure, instructional clarity, and cross-cultural understanding are central, remains underexplored in the Indonesian setting.

Despite growing global interest in experiential learning, most prior research on volunteer teaching lacks contextual specificity or long-term evaluation. Few studies critically assess how such programs function within Indonesian regional universities or analyze how discipline-specific demands, such as those in English language education, shape the outcomes of volunteer-based teaching (Lee et al., 2018; Zurita et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the present study examines how volunteer teaching experiences influence the development of teaching competencies among English Education students at Universitas Sriwijaya. Specifically, it explores which pedagogical skills are most affected, how students reflect on their growth, and what obstacles they encounter during their teaching engagement. By focusing on community-based volunteer teaching in a localized Indonesian context, this study aims to provide insights that inform curriculum design, institutional policy, and teacher education models in language teaching programs.

## Method

This research adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how volunteering experiences contribute to the development of teaching competencies among pre-service teachers in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Sriwijaya. A case study was deemed the most appropriate methodological approach due to its capacity to capture the complexity, contextual richness, and dynamic nature of educational phenomena as they unfold in authentic environments (Yin, 2018a). As Creswell & Creswell (2018) emphasize, case study research is particularly well-suited for exploring developmental change within educational settings, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly distinguishable. This point also supported by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), who highlight the relevance of case studies in investigating experiential and behavioral learning.

The study focused specifically on students who had engaged in various volunteer-based teaching programs, with the intention of exploring how these real-world experiences facilitate the acquisition and internalization of pedagogical skills. This research direction aligns with recent findings that underscore the value of service-learning and volunteer teaching in fostering reflective thinking, instructional adaptability, and early-stage identity construction in pre-service teachers (Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025; Waiswa et al., 2025). Through examining individual reflections and narratives, the study aimed to gain a nuanced understanding of how community-based volunteer teaching serves as a platform for personal and professional growth in educational practice.

The participants of the study comprised 23 undergraduate studentskemdikbud enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Sriwijaya, specifically from the 2021 to 2023 academic cohorts. They were selected using purposive sampling, based on the criterion that they had participated in at least one form of volunteer teaching, regardless of its length or institutional affiliation. Volunteer initiatives included programs such as Kampus Mengajar, Unsri Mengajar, KKN Tematik Pendidikan, SEA Teacher, and other outreach-oriented activities. The duration and nature of their teaching engagements varied, ranging from single-day events to

extensive multi-year commitments, thereby offering rich comparative data across different levels of experiential exposure (Waiswa et al., 2025). Universitas Sriwijaya was chosen as the research site because of its strong emphasis on experiential learning through both formal and informal volunteer teaching initiatives. The university places students in a variety of educational settings, including under-resourced rural schools across South Sumatra, making it a highly relevant context for examining how diverse, real-world teaching experiences influence the pedagogical development of English Education students.

Two qualitative instruments were employed for data collection: open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' motivations, instructional challenges, skill acquisition, and emotional growth during their volunteer teaching. Informed by Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Evaluation Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016), both instruments aimed to assess learning outcomes across four dimensions—reaction, learning, behavior, and results. To further ensure that experiential and reflective dimensions were adequately captured, the instruments also drew on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which views learning as a continuous, cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Taisir et al., 2025).

The questionnaire was adapted from Dalimunthe (2022), originally a quantitative tool designed to assess internships, and transformed into an open-ended qualitative format to better suit the study's exploratory aims. Prior to implementation, the instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing with a subset of English Education students to ensure clarity, relevance, and content alignment. Initial data collection occurred through Google Forms, enabling asynchronous participation and in-depth written responses. Based on the richness and depth of these responses, six participants were then selected for follow-up semi structured interviews, conducted to further investigate emerging themes. six semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via Google Meet, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. All

sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized for ethical and analytical purposes.

Several procedures were put in place to uphold ethical integrity and ensure trustworthiness of the data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of voluntary participation and confidentiality. Institutional ethical approval was secured prior to data collection. In terms of qualitative rigor, member checking was conducted, whereby participants reviewed and verified their transcripts to ensure accuracy of representation. Triangulation of data from both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews strengthened the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, reflexivity was actively practiced throughout the research process via a reflective journal maintained by the researcher, documenting assumptions, positionality, and analytical decisions (Amare et al., 2025). To enhance analytic transparency, peer debriefing was carried out through regular consultations with an academic supervisor, who reviewed emerging interpretations and thematic categorizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For data interpretation, the study employed thematic analysis, a well-established method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process involved six iterative steps: (1) immersion in the data through repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes; (3) grouping codes into thematic categories based on conceptual relevance; (4) refining and validating themes in relation to Kirkpatrick's model; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) reporting findings supported by illustrative quotations. The final themes were not only grounded in participant narratives but also contextualized through existing scholarly literature on teacher development, service learning, and experiential education (Aguilar Cruz et al., 2025), allowing for deeper theoretical integration and broader applicability of the results.

## Results

This section presents the results of the study, which explored the impact of volunteer teaching experiences on the development of teaching skills among English Education students at Universitas Sriwijaya. The data were collected from semi-

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structured interviews (*I*) and open-ended questionnaires (*Q*) were analyzed thematically. The findings are organized into several core themes derived from participant responses.

### 1. Application of Theoretical Knowledge in Classroom Practice

Many participants reported that the volunteer teaching experience significantly helped them apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Questionnaire findings showed that most participants were able to integrate university-acquired theoretical concepts into classroom practices. Respondents reported applying theories such as Second Language Acquisition (SLA), behaviorism, instructional design, and curriculum analysis when designing or delivering lessons.

These responses were supported and elaborated on during in-depth semi-structured interviews, where students explained how such theories helped them develop practical teaching strategies in real classroom settings.

Table 1. Interview result of Theory-to-Practice Application

Participant	Theoretical Concepts Applied	Teaching Skill Developed
PN	Instructional Design	Engaging students effectively
FA	SLA Theory	Reinforcement of teaching theory
MR	SLA, Student Diversity	Adaptive strategies
RF	SLA & Curriculum Analysis	Lesson planning, student analysis
HM	Speaking and curriculum classes	Structured lesson plan (RPP)
AE	Behaviorism and motivation	Using rewards to boost motivation

### 2. Classroom Management and Adaptability

Most participants reported substantial growth in classroom management skills. Volunteer teaching required them to control diverse groups, manage time effectively, and adjust lesson pacing to different student needs.

From the questionnaires, FA shared:

*"At first, handling a class of 40 was intimidating, but over time I became more confident and could keep their attention."*(Q-FA)

PN reflected on readiness:

*"My confidence increased each time I managed to finish a lesson without losing control of the class."*(Q-PN)

Interviews provided richer context. HM explained:

*"Discipline was a challenge, but I learned to engage students early so they didn't lose focus. Greeting them warmly and starting with an energizing activity helped."*(I-HM)

AE highlighted emotional adaptability:

*"Some days the students were quiet, some days too energetic — I had to read the mood and adapt my plan."*(I-AE)

MR recognized the importance of understanding learner diversity:

*"Every class had different dynamics. Some students were shy, others outspoken. I learned to balance participation so everyone was included."*(I-MR)

These findings suggest that classroom management growth was not merely a by-product of repeated exposure, but was actively shaped by the necessity to adapt lesson content and pacing to large, diverse groups. The development of confidence and adaptability aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, where repeated classroom experiences foster reflective observation and active experimentation. This reinforces prior research by Forster et al. (2015) showing that authentic teaching environments accelerate behavioral readiness when paired with responsive strategies.

### **3. Attitudes Toward Classroom Challenges**

Participants described a shift in their attitude when facing teaching difficulties. Many felt braver, more patient, and more adaptive after encountering real classroom challenges.

From the questionnaires, MR wrote:

*"The classroom was noisy and there were no proper facilities, so I had to improvise a lot."*(Q-MR)

FA described strategic adaptation:

*"I prepared backup lesson plans because sometimes the school lacked materials or electricity."* (Q-FA)

Table 2. Results from Interview of Attitudinal Changes Toward Challenges

Participant	Attitude Change	Key Insight
PN	Brave, inclusive approach	Valuing every student's participation
FA	Strategically adaptive	Developed backup lesson plans
MR	Empathy & patience	Adjusting based on student behavior
AE	Emotionally adaptable	Improved classroom control & planning

The challenges reported—such as inadequate facilities, resource scarcity, and unpredictable class behavior—mirror conditions in many rural Indonesian schools. Encountering and overcoming these obstacles appears to have strengthened participants' emotional resilience and problem-solving skills. This supports Eyler & Giles Jr.'s (1999) claim that service-learning's transformative potential emerges most strongly when learners are pushed beyond their comfort zones, provided they receive opportunities for reflection and support.

#### 4. Teamwork and Responsibility

Participants highlighted the value of teamwork, collaboration, and responsibility during volunteer programs. They emphasized communication and task-sharing as crucial components.

Table 2. Teamwork and Responsibility

Participant	Insight	Theme
PN	Importance of communication	Collaboration
FA, AE	Shared responsibility in material development	Sense of Responsibility

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MR	Respecting boundaries & leading when needed	Communication & Initiative
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From the questionnaires, AE noted:

*"Working with another teacher taught me to share responsibilities in developing materials and planning activities."* (Q-AE)

PN emphasized communication:

*"Clear communication within the team made it easier to manage classes and divide tasks."* (Q-PN)

These results show that volunteer teaching significantly enhanced participants' teaching competence, classroom adaptability, emotional intelligence, and professional collaboration. The experiences acted as real-world platforms to apply their pedagogical training while developing interpersonal and instructional strategies.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that volunteering as a pre-service teacher significantly enhances the development of teaching skills among English Education students at Universitas Sriwijaya. Data from both questionnaires and interviews indicated that Participants consistently reported that their ability in core teaching competencies, such as lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional delivery during and after their involvement in volunteer teaching programs. Many reported that repeated exposure to real classroom situations allowed them to translate theoretical concepts from university courses into practical actions. For example, in lesson planning, they learned to structure materials according to students' proficiency levels and available resources, while in classroom management, they developed strategies to maintain student engagement and address behavioral challenges. Instructional delivery also improved as they adapted their speaking pace, use of examples, and interactive techniques to suit the dynamics of different learning environments. These developments were largely attributed to the authentic and sometimes unpredictable nature of volunteer teaching, which demanded quick decision-making, flexibility, and continuous reflection.

These real-world interactions allowed pre-service teachers to adapt to student needs, implement instructional strategies, and manage learning dynamics more effectively than they could in theory-based classroom settings. This finding aligns with the argument by Soong (2013), who emphasized that experiential learning gained through teaching placements enables future teachers to sharpen their pedagogical abilities and instructional responsiveness. Similarly, Pazilah et al (2021) found that service-learning activities allow teacher candidates to face the realities of the classroom and to apply what they have learned in teacher training programs more meaningfully.

The data also indicate that the volunteer teaching experience contributed to the emotional and professional growth of the participants. Several students reported developing self-confidence, emotional resilience, and adaptability, especially after confronting personal barriers such as stage fright, imposter syndrome, or anxiety about student discipline. These internal changes align with the findings of D’Rozario et al (2012), who highlighted that service-based learning promotes emotional intelligence and a strong sense of professional identity among teacher trainees. Volunteer teaching, in this case, served not only as a platform for practicing pedagogy but also for developing the maturity required to sustain long-term teaching careers.

An important theme that emerged was the mastery of student engagement techniques. Participants employed a wide range of interactive approaches such as games, songs, storytelling, and ice-breaking activities to manage young learners’ attention and interest. These methods, often discovered through trial and error, discussions with peers, or mentor suggestions, proved effective particularly in primary school contexts. Rios Gonzalez et al (2019) support this notion by emphasizing that student engagement practices learned through action are often more durable and adaptable than those learned passively in lectures. Moreover, participants reported increased creativity and flexibility in modifying teaching approaches based on the energy level, emotional state, and responsiveness of the students.

Mentorship and feedback played an essential role in accelerating teaching development. Many participants cited that mentor and peer feedback helped them

identify blind spots, improve clarity in delivering instructions, and better manage class time. Some participants described how video-recorded reflections or group debriefing sessions offered valuable insights into their teaching performance, leading to continuous improvement. Lee et al (2018) emphasized that structured feedback loops within service-learning environments can foster transformative learning by encouraging reflection, dialogue, and critical self-evaluation. These processes support teachers in becoming not only more effective but also more reflective practitioners.

Despite the numerous benefits, volunteer teaching also presented challenges. Participants reported difficulties in managing noisy or disengaged students, dealing with the lack of teaching resources, coping with miscommunication between organizers, and struggling with confidence issues. These findings mirror those of Forster et al (2015) who found that volunteer teachers, although enthusiastic, often lack the pedagogical tools or emotional support to address difficult classroom scenarios. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate structured mentoring, curriculum support, and differentiated instruction strategies into volunteer programs. Challenges such as differentiated learning levels, behavioral issues, and cultural adjustments require scaffolding that goes beyond goodwill alone.

Lastly, the volunteer experience had a meaningful impact on the academic and career development of participants. Students felt more confident in conducting microteaching, performing public speaking, and managing class interactions in subsequent academic projects. For many, the experience clarified their professional interests and strengthened their commitment to becoming educators. These findings echo those of Lee et al (2018) who argue that service-learning helps pre-service teachers bridge the gap between university coursework and the demands of real classrooms. By being immersed in authentic educational environments, students are able to make informed decisions about their careers and develop the resilience and skills necessary for long-term success in teaching.

In summary, volunteer teaching served as an effective platform for holistic teacher development. It provided English Education students at Universitas Sriwijaya with both technical skills and emotional preparation for the teaching profession. While

the experience offered transformative learning opportunities, its full potential can only be realized with proper institutional support, ongoing mentorship, and reflective integration within teacher education programs.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that volunteering as pre-service teachers significantly contributes to the professional development of English Education students at Universitas Sriwijaya. Participants reported enhanced teaching competencies, including classroom management, lesson planning, and instructional delivery, as well as improvements in affective domains such as confidence, empathy, and adaptability. Although challenges related to limited resources and classroom dynamics were evident, these experiences served as valuable opportunities for growth and reflection.

These results highlight the importance of integrating volunteer teaching into teacher education programs as a complementary form of experiential learning. Beyond strengthening pedagogical skills, such initiatives foster personal growth and professional identity formation, preparing pre-service teachers for the realities of the classroom. Future research could further explore the long-term impacts of volunteer teaching on career readiness and educational outcomes, as well as how structured institutional support might maximize its transformative potential.

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