

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Bridging Growth: Exploring the Professional Development Needs of Pre-Service and In-Service TESOL Teachers during Placements

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ABSTRACT

Professional placements are integral to teacher education and serve as critical spaces for skill development and identity formation among both pre-service and in-service teachers. However, existing research has not fully examined how the evolving professional development needs of both pre-service and in-service foreign language teachers interact within placement contexts. As such, within a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programme in China, this short communication presents preliminary findings that address this gap by exploring the professional development needs of teachers during placements. Using an exploratory qualitative design, the study involved 21 pre-service and 12 in-service TESOL teachers over an eight-week placement, with data collected through semi-structured interviews and reflection journals. Findings reveal that pre-service teachers require structured support in lesson planning, student engagement, and classroom management while also developing their linguistic proficiency and professional confidence. In-service teachers, in contrast, emphasise mentorship skills, balancing dual roles, and fostering collaborative relationships. Institutional support, including clear mentorship guidelines and structured professional development opportunities, emerged as a key factor in addressing these needs. This study highlights the reciprocal nature of professional growth during placements and underscores the importance of collaborative mentor-mentee dynamics. Using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as

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a framework, the study calls for a more structured approach to TESOL education, which integrates mentorship training, emotional support, and institutional clarity.

Keywords: Professional Development; Placement; Pre-Service Teachers; In-Service Teachers; TESOL

1. Introduction

Professional placements are fundamental to teacher education and provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop instructional skills and integrate theoretical knowledge with real-world classroom experience. These placements are also key sites for professional identity formation, where novice educators learn to navigate institutional expectations, classroom challenges, and the evolving demands of their profession^[1]. For in-service teachers, mentorship roles encourage self-reflection, pedagogical refinement, and professional adaptation to new teaching contexts^[2, 3]. As placements require collaborative engagement between pre-service and in-service teachers, they become spaces for mutual learning and negotiation of professional development needs, shaped by individual aspirations, institutional demands, and teaching realities^[4, 5]. However, research has yet to fully explore how this collaborative dynamic influences the evolving needs of both groups, particularly in specialised fields such as foreign language (L2) education, where pedagogical and linguistic competencies are deeply interconnected.

For L2 teachers, professional placements present unique pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural challenges that shape their development. Pre-service L2 teachers must develop their own language proficiency while acquiring effective teaching methodologies, such as communicative language teaching and differentiated instruction for learners at varying proficiency levels^[6]. They also face difficulties in managing classroom interaction, providing corrective feedback, and fostering learner autonomy, all of which require both linguistic and pedagogical competence^[7]. These challenges often lead to a continuous negotiation between linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and institutional teaching expectations^[8], making placements both formative and demanding. Likewise, in-service L2 teachers in mentoring roles must adapt to evolving L2 education policies and pedagogical approaches^[9], while also reflecting on their own teaching practices and supporting novice educators^[10].

While placements play a pivotal role in L2 teacher development, research has yet to examine how pre-service and in-service teachers interact within these contexts to shape their professional growth trajectories. Therefore, this study, using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)^[11] as a framework, explores how L2 teachers' professional development needs emerge during placements and how they are shaped by institutional and contextual factors within a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) training programme.

2. Research Design

The study, embedded within a broader longitudinal investigation, adopted an exploratory qualitative design. Over an eight-week placement, 21 pre-service teachers (13 females and 8 males, aged 21 to 22) in their third year of an undergraduate TESOL programme at a Chinese university collaborated with 12 English teachers (8 females and 4 males), all senior educators with over five years of teaching experience, at a local secondary school. The sample sizes were considered sufficient to achieve qualitative saturation^[12]. All participants were native Chinese speakers and used English as their second language. With informed consent, participants were purposively recruited based on the following specific criteria: pre-service teachers were required to have completed at least one formal teaching practicum and maintain a reflective teaching portfolio; in-service teachers were required to have a minimum of five years of full-time teaching experience in an English language learning context and have mentored pre-service teachers during the previous academic year.

During the placement, pre-service teachers were paired with in-service mentors in a structured arrangement that began with classroom observation and progressively transitioned to co-teaching and independent teaching responsibilities. Each pre-service teacher was assigned to one mentor and spent approximately 20 hours per week in their designated classroom. Weekly semi-structured interviews were conducted with both pre-service and in-service teach-

ers to explore their experiences and reflections (see **Appendix A** for the protocols). Additionally, participants maintained structured weekly reflection journals (requirements in **Appendix B**) designed to foster introspection and detailed documentation of their professional experiences. The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's^[13] framework, involving familiarisation with data, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and final reporting. Themes were developed inductively to capture key areas such as pedagogical development, mentorship dynamics, and institutional support. To ensure qualitative trustworthiness, triangulation was employed through multiple data sources, member checking was conducted for accuracy, and peer debriefing sessions minimised potential bias in data interpretation.

3. Findings

Figure 1 organises the findings, focusing on both pre-service and in-service TESOL teachers. For pre-service

teachers, their professional needs—identified as the *object*—centred on improving pedagogical knowledge in planning and delivering effective lessons (developing structured, interactive, and student-centred teaching approaches), engaging students (employing techniques to sustain student interest and participation), and managing classroom behaviour (establishing authority and handling disciplinary challenges). Their language proficiency needs included overall English ability (enhancing fluency, accuracy, and communicative competence) and pedagogical language awareness (understanding language-related explanations and scaffolding techniques for learners). Additionally, affective growth was highlighted in building confidence (developing self-assurance in teaching) and reflecting on emerging teacher identities (negotiating personal and professional roles within the classroom). Finally, their agency needs involved adapting to real workplace settings (adjusting to institutional expectations and teaching realities) and fostering self-directed learning (seeking professional development opportunities beyond formal instruction).

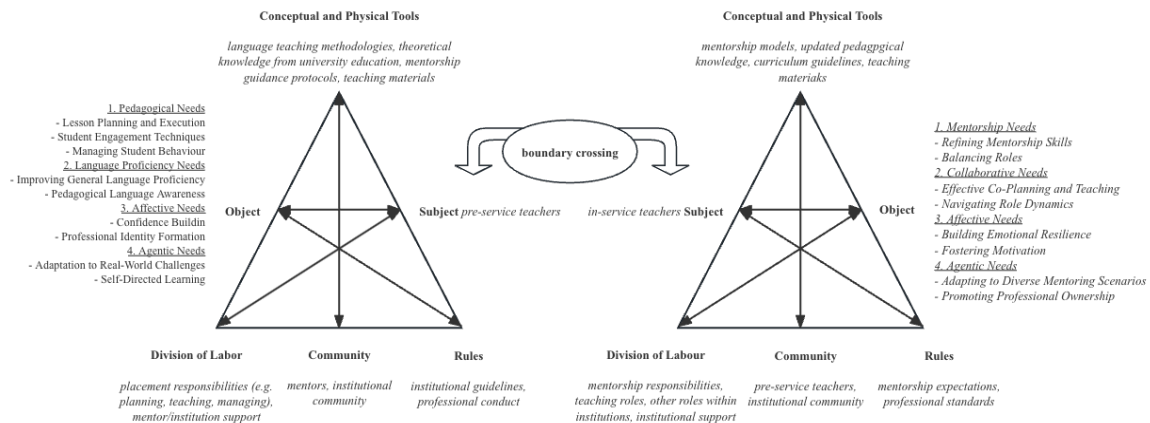


Figure 1. Qualitative findings.

“Planning lessons was one thing, but making them engaging and handling [unexpected] student reactions was another. I struggled to keep their attention while ensuring they understood the material.” (Pre-service Teacher, Interview)

“Speaking English fluently in class was easier said than done. I had to think about my own accuracy while also explaining concepts clearly, which made me often second-guess myself.”

(Pre-service Teacher, Interview)

“At first, I felt like an outsider in the school. Adapting to the real teaching environment took time... [but] observing my mentor and adjusting my approach helped me feel more like a teacher.” (Pre-service Teacher, Reflection Journal)

For in-service teachers, their needs focused on enhancing mentorship skills (providing structured guidance and

constructive feedback to pre-service teachers) and balancing the dual roles of teacher and mentor (managing teaching responsibilities while supporting mentees). They also required support in fostering collaborative dynamics with pre-service teachers in the workplace (establishing effective communication and professional relationships), strengthening resilience and motivation (maintaining enthusiasm and coping with workload pressures), and developing agency through responsiveness to mentees' needs (adjusting mentoring approaches based on pre-service teachers' progress) and a stronger sense of accountability for their own professional growth (actively engaging in reflective practice and continuous learning).

"Guiding a pre-service teacher while handling my own classes was demanding. I had to plan lessons not just for my students but also think about how to explain my teaching choices to my mentee." (In-service Teacher, Interview)

"Building a good working relationship took time... At first, communication felt a bit formal, but once we started discussing lesson ideas and sharing classroom challenges, it became more natural. Their fresh perspectives also helped me reflect on my own teaching." (In-service Teacher, Interview)

"Having a mentee made me realise I should continuously improve. I found myself reading more about teaching strategies and reassessing my own methods... Their progress depended on my guidance, and that [responsibility] pushed me to be more self-reflective." (In-service Teacher, Reflection Journal)

These needs were shaped by various factors, one of which was the availability of *conceptual and physical tools*, such as sufficient and updated pedagogical knowledge provided to pre-service and in-service teachers and adequate guidelines or appropriate teaching materials to support the co-existence of these teachers during the placement. Within the *micro-community* of mentees working with mentors and the *macro-institutional community*, the *division of labour*, namely pre-service and in-service teachers' diverse responsibilities, rendered their needs multidimensional—extending beyond teaching and mentorship to include emotional and agentic support. The role of institutions was particularly

important, with *rules* such as clearer guidelines specifying mentorship expectations and professional standards for both groups of teachers. Within the activity system of placements, *boundary crossing* was a key dynamic, with both groups of teachers emphasising the need for continuous professional development to foster collaborative apprentice-mentorship for improved teaching and learning.

"Having clear guidelines and structured materials would have helped me feel less lost [during the placement]. I often had to rely on trial and error because I wasn't sure what was expected in co-teaching or how to balance my role with my mentor's." (Pre-service Teacher, Interview)

"Without proper mentorship guidelines, it was difficult to know how much support to provide while still allowing mentees to develop independence... More institutional support would help us structure the experience better for both sides." (In-service Teacher, Interview)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study enhances our understanding of teachers' professional development by contextualising previous findings on pre-service TESOL teachers' needs to develop pedagogical and linguistic competencies^[1, 6] and in-service teachers' needs to strengthen mentorship skills and collaboration with mentees^[2, 10] within the co-system of school placement. However, our study highlights the importance of extending beyond the mere acquisition of technical or pedagogical expertise. By acknowledging the emotional labour involved in teaching and the role of agency in shaping—and being shaped by—the co-teaching and co-learning environment, English teachers can gain a deeper appreciation of how their evolving professional identities emerge through ongoing negotiation among personal aspirations, relational obligations, and the complex realities of classroom practice.

Findings from this study underscore the interconnectedness of professional learning experiences and demonstrate pre-service and in-service English teachers mutually influence each other's growth trajectories^[2, 5]. For pre-service teachers, engaging in structured mentorship provides invaluable exposure to real-world teaching dynamics and offers a

clearer sense of the professional competencies required in diverse classroom settings. At the same time, in-service teachers, through mentoring less-experienced colleagues, engage in reflective practice, prompting them to re-evaluate and refine their instructional methodologies, particularly student-centred approaches (e.g., task-based language learning, communicative language learning) that contrast with the teacher-centred methods (e.g., the grammar-translation method) commonly adopted in the studied context^[14]. This reciprocal learning process suggests structured placements, when adequately supported, have the potential to create a sustainable professional development ecosystem within TESOL education.

The study also emphasises the factors shaping teachers' professional needs and highlights important implications. Continuous professional development is essential for cultivating adaptive, reflective, and empowered L2 educators^[1, 9, 15]. This development should not only focus on equipping pre-service teachers with pedagogical and professional skills during their teacher education and enhancing in-service teachers' mentorship capabilities and pedagogical knowledge but must also integrate humanistic care that addresses the emotional labour experienced by both groups during placements and fosters their teacher agency. Recognising the psychological demands of placements—such as managing the complexities of classroom interactions, dealing with unpredictable student behaviour, and maintaining professional confidence—is vital in designing effective teacher support systems.

Collaboration between language teacher education providers and placement schools is also essential in fostering meaningful learning experiences^[16]. Such partnerships should facilitate a clearer articulation of mentorship expectations and ensure both pre-service and in-service teachers receive adequate institutional support. Policies should be developed to provide structured guidelines that define the roles and responsibilities of mentors, ensuring they are adequately trained to support pre-service teachers in ways that go beyond general instructional supervision. Furthermore, targeted training workshops that address mentorship strategies and classroom management techniques could help bridge the divide between teacher education theory and practice.

Beyond mentorship, language teacher education programmes should also consider developing structured placement curricula that include explicit training on reflective

practice, co-teaching strategies, and classroom adaptability. Encouraging pre-service teachers to engage in self-regulated learning^[3], such as setting personalised development goals and engaging in peer collaboration, could further enhance their preparedness for professional practice. Likewise, integrating mentorship preparation courses within TESOL programmes could better equip in-service teachers to support novice educators effectively and foster more meaningful mentor-mentee relationships. Additionally, teacher education programmes should incorporate mechanisms for ongoing support^[17], such as mentorship discussion forums, peer mentoring networks, and structured debriefing sessions. These initiatives could help mitigate placement-related stress and reinforce professional confidence.

Ultimately, by strengthening mentorship structures, addressing the affective and cognitive demands of placements, and fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous professional learning, this study advocates for a more holistic and sustainable approach to TESOL teacher education—one that prioritises both pedagogical excellence and teacher well-being. Future research could further explore how institutional policies and cross-institutional collaboration contribute to optimising mentorship frameworks in teacher placements. Additionally, examining the long-term impact of structured mentorship programmes on both pre-service and in-service teachers could provide deeper insights into how placements can serve as a foundation for sustained professional development.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu); Methodology: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu) and A.M.; Validation: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu), A.M., and H.C.; Formal analysis: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu); Investigation: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu), A.M., and H.C.; Resources: H.H. (Harwati Hashim); Data curation: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu) and A.M.; Writing—original draft preparation: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu) and A.M.; Writing—review and editing: H.C., and H.H. (Harwati Hashim); Supervision: H.C. and H.H. (Harwati Hashim); Project administration: H.H. (Hengzhi Hu), and A.M.; Funding acquisition: A.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Xichang University. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights.

Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in the study are available from the correspondence author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Interview Protocols

A. For Pre-Service Teachers

The interview protocol for pre-service teachers is designed to elicit detailed accounts of their classroom experiences, challenges, and developmental insights during the placement. Sample questions include:

- "Can you describe your overall experience during the placement and how it has influenced your professional development as a TESOL teacher?"
- "What challenges have you encountered when planning

and delivering lessons? Please provide specific examples of when you had to adapt your approach to meet student needs."

- "How have you managed student engagement and classroom behaviour? Can you describe a particular instance where you faced unexpected challenges and how you responded?"
- "In what ways has your English proficiency, both in general and as it relates to teaching language concepts, affected your classroom practices?"
- "How has your experience during the placement contributed to your evolving teacher identity? What personal insights have you gained regarding your strengths and areas for growth?"
- "How has working with your in-service mentor influenced your teaching practice? What aspects of this mentoring relationship have been most beneficial or challenging?"
- "What types of support (from the institution, your mentor, or peers) have been most helpful during your placement, and what additional support do you feel would enhance your professional development?"

B. For In-Service Teachers

The in-service teachers' interview protocol focuses on capturing their experiences in the dual roles of teaching and mentoring. Sample questions include:

- "Can you describe your experience as a mentor during this placement? How has mentoring influenced your own teaching practices and professional development?"
- "What strategies have you employed to balance your classroom teaching responsibilities with your mentoring role? What challenges have you faced in this balancing act?"
- "Can you share a specific example where you encountered a challenge in guiding a pre-service teacher? How did you address or adapt to this situation?"
- "How do you foster a collaborative environment with pre-service teachers? In what ways have interactions with your mentees provided insights or prompted you to reflect on your own practices?"
- "What kind of institutional support or resources (e.g., clear mentorship guidelines, professional development workshops) do you believe would further enhance your

ability to mentor effectively?”

- “How has your mentoring experience encouraged you to engage in reflective practice? Can you discuss any changes you have made in your teaching or mentoring approach as a result of this reflection?”

Appendix B. Reflection Journal Writing Requirements

A. For Pre-Service Teachers

Each pre-service teacher is expected to maintain a weekly reflection journal throughout the placement. The journal should provide a detailed account of their experiences, challenges, and insights. Specific requirements include:

- Frequency and Length:
 - Submit one entry per week, with a minimum of 300–500 words per entry.
- Content Guidelines:
 1. Teaching Experiences:
 - Describe specific teaching sessions or classroom observations, noting both successes and challenges.
 2. Challenges in Pedagogy:
 - Reflect on difficulties in lesson planning, engaging students, managing classroom behaviour, or maintaining language proficiency.
 3. Mentorship Interactions:
 - Detail your interactions with your in-service mentor, including any feedback received and how you have implemented it.
 4. Professional Identity and Emotional Growth:
 - Explore how your experiences are shaping your teacher identity and discuss any emotional responses or shifts in confidence.
 5. Suggestions for Improvement:
 - Identify what additional support or resources would have been helpful and propose ideas for enhancing future placements.

B. For In-Service Teachers

Each in-service teacher is also required to keep a weekly reflection journal, focusing on their mentoring role as well as their ongoing professional development. Specific

requirements include:

- Frequency and Length:
 - Submit one entry per week, with a minimum of 300–500 words per entry.
- Content Guidelines:
 1. Mentoring Experiences:
 - Reflect on your weekly mentoring activities, highlighting instances of both successful guidance and challenging interactions with pre-service teachers.
 2. Balancing Dual Roles:
 - Describe how you manage the dual demands of classroom teaching and mentoring, and discuss any strategies or adaptations you have employed.
 3. Collaborative Dynamics:
 - Comment on the collaborative relationship with your mentees, noting any moments of mutual learning or reflection that have influenced your teaching practices.
 4. Professional Growth:
 - Reflect on how the mentoring process has contributed to your own professional development, including any shifts in instructional practices or approaches.
 5. Institutional Feedback and Recommendations:
 - Discuss the impact of institutional support (or the lack thereof) on your mentoring experience and offer suggestions for improvements in mentorship guidelines or resources.

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