

VIETNAMESE EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Internship plays an indispensable role in preparing tertiary learners for their upcoming professional paths. By immersing in genuine working classrooms, pre-service teachers have opportunities to apply, regulate or refine what they have learnt in the university. This study aimed to investigate senior students' perceptions of the internship program they experienced. There were 23 participants voluntarily joining the study after the internship program. To get insights into the research issues, the researcher employed a mixed-methods approach to collect and analyze the data from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that the interns hold a high level of perception towards the internship program. However, some unsatisfactory issues were also reported and could be a premise for bettering the following internship program. This study fulfils the academic literature by providing insights into the nature and connections between the training programme in Vietnam's newly established higher education units and real-world working environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

English holds a high status in Vietnam where the government regards it as a tool for boosting the advancement of the national economy, modernization, and integration in the cosmopolitan economy [1]. In line with the aforementioned visions, Can Tho University of Technology has been offering training for English-majored students since 2021 with the aim of providing qualified human resources to meet the requirements of international integration. Among the various career choices for graduates, teaching English is currently a highly-favored job. Because of the novelty in the aforesaid teaching context, the major needs to be reformed for colossal aspects from the curriculum to other aspects.

Graduation internship is a way of learning by working in which learners have access to practical knowledge and supervised

experience [2] which leads interns to practical expertise nested in industrial and social units under the assistance of academia [3]. It is regarded as a significant element of an academic curriculum in higher education [4], [5], [6]. There are four primary features of the internship including 1) students work as part-time staff; 2) salary is not compulsory; 3) school credits are counted for interns; and 4) both the university and the host industries are the interns' mentors [4], [7].

Albeit having been put into practice for a long time, the internship program remains a topic of debate related to the values it brings to the interns and the employers [8]. In Vietnam, following Decree No. 102-TTg of the Vietnamese Prime Minister about internships issued in 1962, internship implementation has experienced an upward trend. However, there is little research delving into perceptions in EFL at newly established universities like Can

The University of Technology, aiming to adjust the training program and obtain learning and teaching efficiency.

In accordance with the stated gap, this study was conducted with the purpose of probing English-majored interns' perceptions of the internship program that they had experienced. The reason for choosing this topic is to dig into another angle of evaluating the current educational system focusing on learners' voices toward their experiences since "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centred unless the learners' subjective needs and perceptions relating to the process of learning are taken into account" [9].

Through the internship program, learners have opportunities to reflect on, revise, apply and update what they have learned at the educational unit. In this regard, elucidating learners' perceptions towards the internship programme can provide a comprehensive understanding of both objective and subjective perspectives on the quality of academic training in a tertiary institution. It is also suggested that paying attention to learners' perceptions helps teachers reflect on their teaching and classroom practices [10]. In the broader picture, getting insights into learners' perceptions of the internship programme holds a crucial role in adjusting the teaching curriculum to better align with the contemporary demands of the labour market.

Research question:

What are Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the internship program in the context of higher education?

2. THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Theoretical basis

Internships definition

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers [11], an internship is

defined as a form of experiential learning that combines knowledge and theory acquired in the classroom with practical implementation and skills developed in a professional context. Internships not only offer students opportunities to get precious applied experience and make connections in professional areas that they are scrutinizing for career paths but also provide employers with the chance to evaluate gifted candidates.

Involving the internship program, besides, learners can be able to integrate classroom theories with practical applications [12] and learning improvements along with motivation are fostered as well [13]. Additionally, an internship helps boost learners' career focus, graduate employability [14], [15] and interpersonal skills [16]. These factors are reflected in learners' performance during the internship period in which support from the institute and the host internship unit is mutually provided to ensure success. However, it is reported that there are numerous obstacles that interns face during their internship program such as ICT integration, new modalities of teaching-learning, social interaction, and instructional material preparations [17]; classroom management, effective conveyance of subject matter and tackling non-teaching tasks [18]. All of the aforementioned concerns are linked to the effectiveness of the curriculum they experienced prior to the commencement of the internship.

Conceptual model

In this study, the model proposed by [19] was adopted since it contains four categories, namely curricular activities, internship unit support, pre-placement activities and host company's support which were in line with the purpose of evaluation of the internship graduation under the lens of participants who experienced the internship activities.

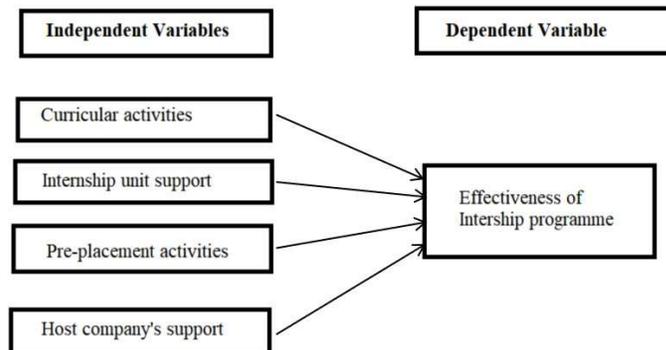


Figure 1. Factors influencing an internship programme

Curricular activities

The curricular activities consist of the knowledge and skills in the university program so that learners are educated and prepared for the professional path. In this study, they are listed as study programs, learning materials, focused practice, teaching-learning methods and lecturers' competence.

Internship unit support (University)

Internship unit support refers to the departmental support of the university in which students are equipped with knowledge and skills before their internship. In this study, the support centralizes on the information about the internship, agreement between the departmental unit and host organizations (company), and the staff.

Preplacement activities

The term stands for the procedures formed by the university and the host organization before finding a training placement. That means students should be well-instructed for the internship programme so that they can possess a clear understanding of the expectations from the university and the host organization.

Host company's support

This support comes from the unit where students implement their internship program. The host company's support plays a vital role in determining the success of a training

programme [20]. Therefore, interns will benefit from a flexible work schedule and a comfortable work environment if there is a close relationship between the university and the host organization.

2.2. Research Methods

2.2.1. Research design

The study is a case study which is "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" [21]. To serve the analytical process, the researchers employed a mixed-methods approach to collect the data. Mixed methods were considered "a third methodology movement" after quantitative and qualitative methods [22]. The primary reason to use mixed methods is that the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods can provide a better understanding of research issues rather than a single method [23], [24].

2.2.2. Participants

This study used a convenience sample of 23 senior students at CTUT aged from 22 to 24. The researchers collected the data from those who were accessible and had just finished the internship program in English language teaching centres without any distinction of gender or learning competence. All of the participants were asked for consent before taking part in the study.

2.2.3. Data collection and analysis

In this study, the researchers made use of the following research instruments and analytical methods:

Questionnaire

Participants' perceptions toward the graduation internship were collected based on a questionnaire adapted from [19]. There are 20 items categorized into four themes such as curricular activities, internship unit support, preplacement activities and host company support. The participants were required to mark their evaluation with a five-point Likert scale from 1- totally disagree to 5-totally agree for each item.

To process the data from the questionnaire, the SPSS package was used to run the reliability of the questionnaire and seek the mean score of each category.

Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview was also employed to find out insights into the abnormal issues occurring in the process of learners' internship relying on learners' responses to the questionnaire. The data was transcribed and selected to illustrate the issues.

3. RESULTS

Mean score analysis

Mean scores are employed to decide if the students have positive or negative perceptions of the internship program (Table 1). With a five-point Likert scale, a mean score of more than three is considered an indicator of a favorable response from the students.

Table 1. Mean score interpretation

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00-1.80	Very low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.20	Medium
3.21-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very high

Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire demonstrating Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the internship program (Questions 1-20) is 0.887 (Cronbach's Alpha), higher than the recommended threshold of 0.70. Thus, there is good reliability among the items. The mean score of the questionnaire is 4.18 which belongs to a high level of perceptions. In terms of the separated variables, Table 2 lists the mean scores of four categories including curricular activities, internship unit support, pre-placement activities, and host company's support. As can be seen, the three variables comprising curricular activities, preplacement activities and host company's support reach a high level of positive perception (Mean=4.1, 4.0 & 4.1, respectively). Meanwhile, the internship unit support achieves a very high level (Mean=4.4). Therefore, it is implied that learners were satisfied with the study program, and support from the departmental unit together with host organizations.

Table 2. Descriptive of variables in the internship program

Variables	N	Means
Curricular activities	23	4.1
Internship unit support	23	4.4
Pre-placement activities	23	4.0
Host company's support	23	4.1

3.1. Curricular activities

Table 3 displays details about pre-service teachers' perceptions of the curriculum activities. The overall mean score value is 4.1 out of 5 (with 1 as strongly disagree and 5 as strongly agree). It means that the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the curriculum activities were positive and at a high level.

As can be seen, what pre-service teachers have learned in the study program well prepared them to enter an internship program related to English teaching (Mean = 4.4). It means that the study program provided

learners with appropriate knowledge related to teaching methods and trained essential skills to meet the requirements in the field of teaching English. In terms of the materials included in the course(s), a majority of participants agreed and strongly agreed that the learning materials in the course(s) prepared them for an internship in teaching English (Mean = 4.2).

Moreover, the practice that pre-service teachers involved in the study program was sufficiently designated since the plurality of

them approved that the practice in the course(s) was teaching-focused (Mean=4.0). Additionally, most of the participants met an agreement that the means of teaching and learning met the standards of English teaching (M = 4.1). With regard to the last item belonging to curriculum activities, a variety of participants agreed that lecturers in the course(s) should upgrade their competencies to well prepare learners for the internship program aiming to teach English (M = 3.7).

Table 3. Mean scores of curricular activities

Items	Mean
1. The study program provides course(s) supporting the preparations for an internship program in English language teaching.	4.4
2. The materials presented in the course(s) are in line with the competencies needed for an internship program in English language teaching.	4.2
3. The practice conducted in the course(s) is teaching-focused.	4.0
4. Teaching-learning media in the course(s) fulfil the standards of English teaching.	4.1
5. Lecturer (s) in the course(s) are needed to enhance the competencies needed for an internship program in teaching English.	3.7

To illustrate this concern, one of the participants expressed:

“I think that the teaching methods we experienced at university were quite different from the requirements of the teaching jobs we encountered in the workplace. There should be some authentic teaching techniques or practice activities which can well equip us prior to the internship program.”

In general, participants in this study highly appreciated the curriculum activities designed by the unit. In other words, the study program,

learning materials, practice, learning and teaching methods gained high satisfaction for learners’ needs whereas lecturers’ current competencies are an exception.

3.2. Internship unit support

Table 4 describes the pre-service teachers’ perceptions toward the Internship unit support (the departmental staff of the university) during their internship period which accounts for 4.4 out of 5 in the overall mean value - a very high level.

Table 4. Mean scores of internship unit support

Items	Mean
6. The internship unit provides clear initial information about an internship program in English language teaching.	4.2
7. The internship unit sets a clear agreement about the internship program with the English language teaching centers.	4.0
8. The internship unit staff are always available when required.	4.6
9. The internship unit staff are always helpful.	4.6
10. The internship unit staff attends to arising issues promptly.	4.6

Commencing with the internship information delivered to participants before entering the internship program, the mean score (4.2- high level) indicates that the internship unit did excessively support them in clarifying necessary information. Adding to that, pre-service teachers held a high awareness of the clear agreement about the internship program between the internship unit and the internship place (Mean = 4.0). The three items related to the support from the internship unit staff make up a very high mean level, reaching 4.6 out of 5. That is, during

performing their internship, the internship unit staff was always available to give essential support with a willingness when interns faced obstacles. In one word, pre-service teachers exhibited a very high satisfaction with the support provided by the internship unit.

3.3. Pre-placement activities

Table 5 demonstrates the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the activities that the internship unit prepared to welcome interns to the internship program, ranking at a high level (Mean= 4.0).

Table 5. Mean scores of Pre-placement activities

Items		Mean
11	Comprehensive guideline about internship registration is provided by the internship unit.	3.9
12	An efficient placement procedure is carried out to select internship places.	3.9
13	A rigorous selection is carried out by the internship unit	3.7
14	The briefing given by the internship unit is sufficient and informative.	4.1
15	The briefing given by the internship unit helps the students interns prepare for the internship in teaching English.	4.2

With the common mean score of 3.9 out of 5, it can be interpreted that the interns highly evaluated the all-inclusive instructions serving internship registration and the way to distribute the options for the internship venues. Moreover, participants mostly agreed that the internship units conducted a severe selection among the interns. To illustrate this issue, one of the participants shared as follows:

“Not all internship candidates were accepted, the internship unit would look through our study results and investigate our attitudes by posing questions via interviews.”

Concerning the briefing supplied by the internship unit, more than four-fifths of participants agreed and strongly agreed that the clear working guidelines and internship-related information were not merely adequate and informative, but helped them effectively prepare for the internship in teaching English (Mean = 4.1 and 4.2, respectively).

In general, before the internship program was conducted, the internship units had carried out a deliberate procedure to help interns gain a full understanding of the working rules, missions, responsibilities and so forth. These activities received a very high level of the participants' positive feedback.

3.4. Host company's support (English language teaching centers)

The pre-service teachers' perceptions towards the host company support belong to a high level (Mean = 4.1). Details are demonstrated in Table 6.

To begin with, a majority of pre-service teachers perceived that the place where they served the internship allowed them to experience real jobs and workplace experience (Mean=4.3). Some teachers shared that they had a chance to experience paperwork and teaching practice. Others delved into activities aiming at event organizing and promotion. Regarding the

training, half of the participants showed their agreement that the training from the foreign language teaching centers included all areas of

the centers. In contrast, the remaining expressed that they were shown some parts of the jobs that existed in the place.

Table 6. Mean scores of Host company's support

Items		Mean
16	The foreign language teaching centers provide real job and workplace experience.	4.3
17	The foreign language teaching centers provide well-structured training to cover all areas in the centers.	3.8
18	The foreign language teaching centers carry out an evaluation upon the completion of the internship program.	4.6
19	The foreign language teaching centers are supportive in providing transport/meals/allowance for student interns.	3.2
20	The foreign language teaching centers set standard working hours for student interns.	4.5

Adding to that, a large majority of interns approved that an evaluation upon the completion of the internship program was seriously conducted (Mean = 4.6). However, participants' satisfaction with the support regarding transport/ meal/ allowance stood at a moderate level (Mean = 3.2). To clarify this issue, an intern shared as follows:

"Some days in a week I had to work more than 10 hours and took a business trip to a very distant place. At that time, a slight financial support could be a way to ease our fatigue and boost our working motivation".

For the last item related to the designated working hours, the mean value reaches 4.5 (very high level). It can be understood that interns well acknowledged their working time and needed to work in the center within the time duration set in advance.

In general, most of the issues stated in the host company support such as job characteristics, training, evaluation, and working agenda uncovered a very high level of satisfaction. However, the support in terms of transport/meals/ allowance failed to make an impression on interns.

3.5. Learners' attainment after the internship program

Through the data collected from the interviews, there are two pivotal aspects that

learners acquired and made progress after the internship program.

In terms of teaching practice, they had opportunities to improve their teaching performance which was accumulated via activities such as lesson planning, material and task designing, classroom observing, teaching assisting and technology application. Additionally, by accessing different classes run by experienced teachers, interns could compare various teaching methods and identify their consistency with the distinct characteristics of learners, contributing to the success of a teacher in their teaching practice. Besides, some other capacities pertaining to classroom issues were enhanced among interns such as dealing with unexpected situations, time management and work pressure.

Last but not least, interns improved their soft skills considerably thanks to the involvement in in-person interactions with learners, colleagues, coaches and parents. The skills were listed as communicative skills, social skills, problem-solving skills, collaborative skills and the like.

4. CONCLUSION

The study showed that Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers were satisfied with the internship program included in the curriculum

at a high level. This proved the efficiency of curricular activities, internship unit support, pre-placement activities and host company support. The findings contribute to shortening the distance between tertiary training in Vietnam's nascent higher education institutions and real-world working settings.

The result of this study was in line with some other studies conducted in the context of Vietnam at the point that interns positively perceived the internship program [25], [26]. However, there remained some issues which were in need of improvement in terms of innovation and authenticity in teaching methods, the obvious commitment between the tertiary unit and the host companies toward working time or payment before the internship.

As mentioned, the research mainly focused on the interns' perceptions of the internship program digging into the objective and subjective points of view of individuals who directly experienced the program. The lesson obtained from the study is that teachers should fine-tune their didactic method and update teaching activities to fit the genuine teaching environments. Moreover, the university should work with the internship units to negotiate reasonable terms regarding working time and welfare. Further research should delve into various channels of perspectives from teachers, parents, and host companies to gain multidimensional views towards the effectiveness of the internship program.

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NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH THỰC TẬP VỀ CHƯƠNG TRÌNH THỰC TẬP: MỘT TRƯỜNG HỢP TRONG GIÁO DỤC ĐẠI HỌC

TÓM TẮT

Thực tập đóng vai trò không thể thiếu trong việc chuẩn bị cho sinh viên năm cuối bậc đại học bước vào con đường sự nghiệp sắp tới của họ. Bằng cách hòa mình với công việc thực sự, các giáo viên thực tập có cơ hội áp dụng, điều chỉnh hoặc hoàn thiện những gì họ đã học ở trường đại học. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích điều tra nhận thức của sinh viên năm cuối về chương trình thực tập mà họ đã trải qua. 23 sinh viên đã tự nguyện tham gia nghiên cứu sau chương trình thực tập. Để có được cái nhìn sâu sắc về các vấn đề nghiên cứu, nhà nghiên cứu đã sử dụng phương pháp tiếp cận hỗn hợp để thu thập và phân tích dữ liệu từ bảng câu hỏi và các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Các phát hiện chỉ ra rằng các thực tập sinh có mức độ nhận thức cao đối với chương trình thực tập. Tuy nhiên, một số vấn đề không thỏa đáng cũng đã được báo cáo và có thể là tiền đề để cải thiện chương trình thực tập tiếp theo. Nghiên cứu này góp phần hoàn thiện tài liệu học thuật bằng cách cung cấp hiểu biết sâu sắc về bản chất và mối liên hệ giữa chương trình đào tạo tại các đơn vị giáo dục đại học mới nổi của Việt Nam và môi trường làm việc thực tế.

Từ khóa: *Chương trình thực tập, giáo viên thực tập, nhận thức*