

International practicum: What students gain and are challenged

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to explore the effectiveness of the international practicum designated for EFL Vietnamese students who majored in English language teaching and English Language programs. The overseas practicum is the result of the partnership between the University of Foreign Languages and its university partners in Thailand. Within the theoretical framework of Kirkpatrick's four-level training evaluation model, the study adopted the narrative approach to data collection and analysis, employing in-depth interviews. The study results indicate that the international practicum was effective across the four levels of the model. At the first level, the program effectiveness was manifested in the three aspects, active engagement, high relevance and student satisfaction; at level 2, its effectiveness was exhibited in terms of considerable degrees of knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence and commitment students gained; at level 3, the effective features were demonstrated in substantial extents of application and performance students made; and at the final level, the effectiveness was displayed in significant extents of various impacts the practicum had on the students after the practicum. The findings also show the different challenges students had to face in their overseas placements and also suggestions for improvements from preservice teachers and interns, and their supervisors as well as coordinators. The study findings also suggest noteworthy implications for sustainable practicum outcomes, especially for key stakeholders including students, university faculty and administration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. International practicum as a global trend

International practicum or internship has become a global trend that attracts a wide range of studies. All the studies exploring this tendency can be categorized into four different main groups: (i) those which investigate its impacts, (ii) those which explore practicum contents, (iii) those which concentrate on practicum evaluation approaches or models, and (iv) those which explore practicum evaluation. First, impact studies indicate a great variety of effects, including personal growth such as self-awareness and confidence; personal competences such as adaptability, risk-taking, inter-personal skills; increased knowledge of intercultural competences and professionalism (Cushner, 2009); flexibility, open-mindedness, acceptance of new ideas or views (Robinson and Foran, 2017). The studies in this group also reveal negative impacts including challenges such as conflicting viewpoints between supervisors and interns (Jin et al., 2019); isolations resulting from lack of intercultural knowledge (Gilliland, 2015).

Studies of practicum contents reveal different aspects of contents. Merc (2015) explores six different practicum aspects such as planning-preparation, observation/reflection, cooperating teachers, university supervisors, general organization. Subedi (2009) investigates 5 different content aspects including preparation, lesson transitions, instruction, evaluation, management, and feedback. Altinay & Altinay (2012) concentrate on seven different aspects such as field knowledge, plan and program, communication, professional development,

evaluation, management, and teaching methods. Wikan & Klein (2017) explore two aspects related to intercultural sensitivity and students' abilities. Tome, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie (2004) pay much attention to two aspects: personal and professional understandings.

Studies which deal with evaluation approaches point out various models or approaches. Some examples include including Elayyan's (2017) seven-Ps model (pre-practicum, classroom performance, portfolio, project, peer assessment, principle assessment, preservice teacher assessment, and pupil assessment), Al-Malki & Weir's (2014) seven-task framework (significance, practices, identities, relationship, politics, and sign system and knowledge), Rorison's (2010) critical cycle (describing, informing, confronting, and reconstructing combined with layered analysis including observation, stories, comments, patterns and themes, and principles), and Kirpartrick & Kirpartrick's (2016) four-level model (level 1- reaction, level 2 – learning, level 3- behavior, and level 4 - results).

Finally, practicum evaluation studies show a wide range of evaluation contents, for example, strong and weak points, problems and solutions (Celen & Akcan (2017); satisfaction of practicum stakeholders (Hamdan, 2017); or different types of competences such as teaching, lesson planning, and lesson evaluation (Syamdudarni & Sahraini, 2018).

1.2. Local effects

As a consequence of this global trend and curriculum internationalization movements, University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, Viet Nam, was one of the pioneers that started up its international practicum programs. Since 2009, the university has partnered with various Thai universities (University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, UTCC; Buriram Rajabhat University, BRU; Ubon Ratchathani University, UBRU; Muban Chombueng Rajabhat University; Rajamangala University of Technology, Sakhon Nakhon Campus) as its main practicum sites for EFL students majoring in two different programs (English Language Teaching and English Language). Before 2015, there was fewer than 100 Vietnamese EFL students who chose these universities annually. From 2015 to 2017, the figure increased to more than 100 students. This rise in the number of international practicum interns may result from the appearance of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) at the end of 2015. However, for the two consecutive years, 2018 and 2019, the number dropped down to 96 and 45 respectively. And for the last two years, the international program has temporarily ceased due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3. Need for practicum evaluation research

There were two motives for this evaluation research. First, although the world has seen a great number of researches exploring international practicum, thus contributing to the increased knowledge in the field scholarship, there have been no such research in Viet Nam. Second, as presented above, the decreasing number of interns or student teachers reported so far has raised our awareness of examining the effectiveness of the international practicum implemented up till the present time with a hope for the achievement of better quality after the complete control of COVID-19 pandemic in the region as well as the world over.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study was targeted at two main objectives:

- (1) To evaluate the effectiveness of the international practicum implemented.
- (2) To propose suggestions for the quality improvement of prospective practicums.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research design

This study is a narrative inquiry in which the qualitative data was mainly stories (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) narrated by preservice teachers and interns who participated in the international practicum. To ensure the nature of the data, interviews were employed as the main data collection instrument where the study participants used their natural language to retell the stories of their lived experiences. Then these stories were analyzed through the use of thematic analysis techniques.

3.2 Participants

The research participants were divided into two different groups, (i) Vietnamese preservice teachers and interns, and (ii) Thai university supervisors and practicum coordinators. The preservice teachers and interns, who consisted of 18, were selected randomly from three different cohorts of practicum participants in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The university supervisors and coordinators, who were composed of 9 participants, were chosen randomly on the basis of their professional experience regarding instruction, practicum supervision and coordination.

3.3 Data collection

The fundamental data collection instrument was in-depth interviews. For Thai university supervisors and coordinators, individual and face-to-face interviews were employed while, for Vietnamese preservice teachers and interns, the interviews were focus group and implemented online.

The interview questions were composed based on the four different levels framed within the Kirpartrick and Kirpartrick's training evaluation model (Kirpartrick & Kirpartrick, 2016). Accordingly, questions for level 1

were designed for measuring participants' reactions in terms of their engagement, practicum activity relevance and their satisfaction. Questions for level 2 aimed at measuring the extent to which they acquired knowledge, skills, and formed and maintained their attitudes, confidence and commitment. Questions for level 3 were targeted at collecting data regarding the extent of their application and performance of already equipped knowledge and skills. And the last group of questions focused on measuring the degree of various impacts the practicum can have on their current jobs. The interview questions for supervisors and coordinators centered around the same four levels as they were for student participants with an additional purpose of crosschecking data collected from the students participants. Besides, additional questions for this group included those which investigated their duties and responsibilities, difficulties encountered as well as their suggestions for quality improvements.

3.4 Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was utilized in accordance with the process proposed by Saldana (2016). The data were coded through descriptive codes which were then grouped into categories finally combined to form major themes.

4. RESULT

The presentation of the major findings is organized around the three main groups, four-level results, challenges and suggestions

4.1 Four-level results

The findings are presented according to the four levels beginning with level 1 and ending with level 4.

4.1.1. Level 1- Reaction

Table 1 summarizes the findings at the reaction level in terms of three areas (active engagement, activity relevance and student satisfaction) with detailed indicators and brief explanations related to the indicators.

Table 1 Summary of Level 1

Areas	Indicators	Reasons
Active engagement	<i>Positive</i> - Great efforts put into lesson planning - Active assistance to lecturers - Participation in cultural excursions - Participation variety shows - Participation in “design thinking” training course	- Self + Awareness of own responsibilities + Cultural curiosity + Extroverts + Cost-effective - External + Buddies & students: enthusiastic + Supervisors: enthusiastic and friendly + Activities: plentiful
	<i>Negative</i> - Excursions - Variety shows - Hotel practicum placements	- Inappropriate times - Lack of performance skills - Hotel staff unable to speak English
Activity Relevance	<i>Positive</i> - Professional + Practice teaching + Lesson planning + Class observation + Visits to workplaces - Training + “Design Thinking” training course	All relevant to their needs
	<i>Negative</i> - Exchange activities & variety - Visits to workplaces - Class observations - Supervisors	- Distraction - Lack of detailed guidance - Infrequent contacts
Student Satisfaction	<i>Positive</i> - Practice Teaching - Supervision - Thai people	- Supervisors: friendly, caring - Thai people: friendly, hospitable
	<i>Negative</i> - Practice teaching - Accommodation	- Less time spent on teaching - Hot (atmosphere)

	- Feedback from supervisors - Excursions	- Supervisors: busy - Self exploration: limited
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All the indicators described in the above table were confirmed and supported by the findings from the interviews with supervisors and coordinators. Specifically, in the engagement area, the supervisors appreciated three features of practicum teachers and interns: diligence, efforts and eagerness. Similarly, in the relevance area, supervisors recognized all their students had positive feedback regarding excursions and visits. The same is true for the final area where the supervisors and coordinators reported that all practicum participants demonstrated their overall satisfaction toward the practicum activities.

4.1.2. Level 2- Learning

Table 2 shows the detailed description of what practicum participants learned from the practicum in such areas of knowledge, skills, attitudes, confidence, and commitment.

Table 2 Summary of Level 2

Areas	Indicators	Reasons
Knowledge	- Culture and people + Globalization + Thailand and its people + ASEAN - Professional + Project planning + Lesson planning + Awareness of pronunciation errors - Language + Thai language + Teaching Vietnamese to Thai students	N/A
Skills	- General + Communication + Problem-solving + Dealing with students + Time management + Activity organization - Specific + Adapting communicative methods + Pedagogical skills + Goal setting + Textbook adaptation	N/A
Attitude	- Increasing degrees of positive attitudes - Increasingly positive relationships (students & supervisors)	- Contextual adaptability - Supervisor support - Self-awareness of needs for knowledge expansion
Confidence	- Increasing degrees	- External support (class students, practicum participants) - Self (good language competence, contextual adaptability)
Commitment	- Increasing degrees - Willingness to recommend to prospective students	- External support (enthusiastic supervisors, friendly Thai people) - Self (Increasing experience and life skills, and confidence, personal responsibilities, love of Thai culture and people)

All these indicators presented in the table were also supported by supervisors' and coordinators' opinions collected from the interviews. Specifically, as for the knowledge area, supervisors and coordinators highly appreciated practicum participants' abilities to acquire cultural knowledge. Regarding the skills area, they were especially impressed by preservice teachers' well-planned lessons, their skills in implementing and adapting their lessons in the classrooms. Likewise, participants' skills of oral presentation and games and class management were highly appreciated. Besides, their good practice of discipline and flexibility were also evident in the supervisors' and coordinators' comments. Finally, comments from the supervisors and coordinators were clearly characterized by the participants' tendency of increasing confidence of and commitment toward all the activities to the end of the practicum.

4.1.3. Level 3 – Behavior

Table 3 presents an overview of what practicum participants demonstrated themselves during the practicum in terms of their application and performance.

Table 3 Summary of Level 3

Areas	Indicators	Reasons
Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General competences + Leadership + Networking + Critical thinking - Skills + Teaching method selection + Interaction + Problem solving + Self-observation & adaptation - Activities + Games/physical activities + Lead-in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prior knowledge - Supervisor and student support - Self enthusiasm - Attention to variety and inspiration
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constructing positive environment + stress-free atmosphere + cheerful atmosphere - Flexibility - Contribution to extracurricular activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing confidence - Adapted to practicum duties - Prior knowledge - Well-planned lessons - Student enthusiasm - Self-determination

All the indicators regarding applications and performance presented in the table were strongly supported by the findings from the interviews with supervisors and coordinators. Particularly, supervisors and coordinators highly appreciated their lesson planning and implementation, as well as their abilities to establish and maintain relationships with students so that they could create a stress-free classroom environment. The supervisors were also impressed by their performance of a teaching style like an actual teacher. Besides, their performance was also reported to be evident in their adaptation to Thai culture where there were radical differences. Additionally, coordinators showed their deep appreciation for practicum participants' ability not only to adapt to the target culture but also to disseminate their own culture in a multi-cultural environment.

4.1.4. Level 4 – Results

The table below summarizes the major findings of the final level of the model. The indicators points out the specific impacts the practicum have had on their current work. All the findings were collected from the preservice teachers and interns, and not from the supervisors and coordinators as they were not in their work contexts in Viet Nam.

Table 4 Summary of Level 4

Areas	Indicators
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fast adaptation to new environments - Critical thinking - Skillful dealing with others - Recognition of linguistic errors - Problem solving - Youth Association skills - Communication skills (especially with foreigners) - Class management applicable to skill training - Use of game and physical activities
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Autonomy - Patience - Practicality
Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motivation for prospective overseas trips - Repertoire of instructional experiences

Interestingly, the extent of the practicum impacts was found to reach beyond the areas recorded in the Table 4. The impacts lay in the value the students acquired and also in the way they made their ways into the practicum participants' professional and personal lives. In other words, the practicum was considered by the participants as unique and unforgettable professional and personal experiences. In addition, the powerful impacts were permeated incrementally unrecognized by the participants.

4.2. Challenges encountered by preservice teachers and interns

The study results revealed four main challenges faced by the student teachers and interns: (i) an imbalanced proportion of teaching and other activities, (ii) lack of detailed guidance, (iii) improper extra activities (excursions), and (iv) infrequent contacts with supervisors. The first challenge was evident in the fact that too little time was reserved for practice teaching in comparison with too much time for other activities, which was recognized as the main cause for students' reduced satisfaction. The second challenge occurred to visits to workplaces where the practicum participants were left unattended in their exploration, which resulted in their confusion, lack of deep understandings, and their feelings of a waste of time. The third challenge was characterized by extra activities regarding improper time setting, lack of careful activity selection, which conflicted with their personal plans. The final challenge was manifested in the lack of frequent contacts with the participants' supervisors due to the supervisors' full schedules, which brought about the student participants' most decreased satisfaction.

4.3. Suggestions for practicum improvements

The suggestions can be categorized into three main groups: (i) organizational, (ii) technical, and (iii) content. The organizational suggestions included the provision of students' profile well before the practicum, and practicum participant evaluation form modification. The technical suggestions encompassed the selection of more relevant practicum students (either university or general education students), relevant practicum time length, and pre-practicum intercultural and language training seminars. The last suggestions included the consideration of the proper proportion of either professional and tourist contents.

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion will focus mainly on the following four main issues: (i) emergent themes pertinent to international practicum, (ii) the role of the Thai buddy network, (iii) the element of confidence, and (iv) some suggestions made by supervisors and coordinators.

Firstly, two of the emergent themes selected to represent international contexts were participants' increased attention to pronunciation errors and the use of games. For the first theme, pronunciation errors may not become a distinctive feature in domestic contexts as both student teachers and school students share the same language. However, in international contexts where both do not have a shared language, communication breakdown can possibly occur due to mispronunciation unless compensation strategies are employed. The contextual specifics prompt preservice teachers to pay increased attention to the correct use of pronunciation in their teaching practice, especially its mistakes. Tambyah (2018) highlighted the concept of *heightened sensitivity*, which can be used to explain such special attention to pronunciation errors.

In the international context where both preservice teachers and students use different languages, mispronunciation that may affect the quality of communication forces students teachers, also as co-communicators, to pay much more attention to pronunciation with a view to ensuring effective communication. For the use of games, the major purpose is evident: to make them active a while inspiring them to participate more in class activities. However, in the Thai cultural context, a stress-free and relaxing atmosphere emerges as an issue more of cultural than technical nature. According to Gunawan (2016), Nicholls and Apiwattanakorn (2015) and Gilliland (2015), the cultural element that affects the class environment is "sanuk" meaning being cheerful and happy. Accordingly, such stressful and uninteresting activities as debates and discussions should be avoided. Instead, a element of humor should be introduced to create an inspiring atmosphere. In this way, games can be a proper choice. These two examples show that the international contexts can open up unique possibilities and potentialities the domestic context fails, and, therefore, can lead naturally to the participants' special attention to the effective use of various instructional methods and techniques.

Secondly, the Thai buddy network can be a unique feature of Thai education system. The findings revealed preservice teachers' and interns' appreciation of this significant support system and also its effectiveness in facilitating international interns' integration into a different cultural context. Marx and Moss (2012) proposed two important concepts, "cultural translator" and "intercultural development guide". A cultural translator can help explain cultural differences to newcomers while an intercultural development guide can help guide them in their integration into a new culture, overcoming cultural differences. In this case, Thai buddies act as both of these roles in ensuring Vietnamese practicum participants' integration into satisfying campus life.

Thirdly, confidence, which emerged as a noticeable theme in the study, was reported as an increasing tendency. The finding was in line with that of other studies. Robinson and Foran (2017) indicated that international practicum generally increased confidence. Ateskan (2016) found that it helped boost confidence not just in teaching but also their instructional skills. Cushner (2007) claimed that overseas contexts enhanced self-confidence as practicum participants had to encounter contextual challenges and made tough decisions. It is clear that there is a confirmed relationship between international practicum and confidence, which seems to be positive.

Finally, supervisors' and coordinators' suggestions deserve deep discussion and insights, which deals with three important issues: (i) relevant time length, (ii) pre-departure language training, and (iii) maintaining

balance between professional and tourist contents. The first issue is proper time length. Although this theme did not appear in the student participants, the theme has become a theme that attracts a great deal of discussion in the literature. Cushner (2009) pointed out that the short time length, if it is too short, will not be enough to maintain its impacts until after the practicum completion, and that the longer the practicum, the greater its potential impacts will be. Sharing the same viewpoint, Dwyer (2004) claimed that the longer a practicum is, the better. His study findings showed that a practicum which lasts about five weeks will not show its evident effects; a practicum that lasts for 6 weeks will not exercise powerful impacts unless it is well planned, skillfully implemented with its considerable resources; a practicum that lasts for one year will create the most remarkable effects. However, the study findings were not consistent with those findings. As presented above, level 4 results demonstrated that despite its limitations in its planning, implementation and resources, a four-month practicum was able to affect its participants in terms of skills, characteristics and sources. The extension of the practicum time beyond a four-month length of time needs to be examined with caution as an extended practicum might possibly result in a financial burden for students.

The second issue is the provision of pre-departure language training for those who participated in international practicum. The language refers to the local one, Thai. Cushner (2009) indicated that in a different language context, it will take longer to develop trust and cultural understandings necessary for the discussion of sensitive matters. Therefore, in case of language difference, there will be a real need for Thai language training as it is done for the time being. The training of this kind should be conducted at both ends, home and host universities.

The last issue is the suggestion regarding the combination of professional and tourist contents in one and the same practicum. This is not simple as it is perceived. Quezada (2004) claimed that while various universities implement different international practicum programs, the fact that what type of knowledge, skills and attitudes are necessary for a preparation program is still vague. The researcher indicated that international practicum should be targeted at the integration of students teachers and interns into an international environment where they can develop for professional and personal growth so as to teach and adjust their teaching effectively. Therefore, what should be avoided is educational tourism where practicum participants become tourists who do a great deal of touring without any deep understandings of the places they visit. Therefore, there is a need to consider an proper proportion of professional and tourist contents introduced into the program.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite limited resources and lack of expert implementation of the practicum, the program has achieved its effectiveness which is characterized by its degrees as well as its value. By degrees it is meant that effectiveness indicators are manifested at all the levels stipulated in Kirpatrick and Kirpartrick's model. By value it is meant that the practicum benefits are greatly understood by its participants and that its impacts are deeply felt not only during but long after the practicum ends.

7. RECOMMENDATION

7.1. There were seven suggestions made based on the findings

First, there should be a combination of professional and cultural and social contents inserted in the program. What needs to be considered includes (i) what a proper proportion is, (ii) what other contents are included besides the professional one.

Second, practicum targeted groups, either university students or general education students, should be diversified in a way that a proper proportion of university and school students needs to be examined.

Third, intercultural competence training should be maintained and local language training should be added to the preparation of students so that they can be interculturally and linguistically competent.

Fourth, there needs to be the continuity of the support system through the Thai buddy network so as to facilitate the smooth integration of Vietnamese students into Thai campus life.

Fifth, time length should be reconsidered so that the program can accommodate adequate activities and contents, ensure quality student evaluation, and sustainable post-practicum impacts, as well as exercise no additional financial burden over students.

Sixth, there needs to be an inspection mechanism established to oversee the practice with a view to restricting the infringements of practicum regulations and students complaints.

Seventh, supervisors' and interns' suggestions should be carefully considered, especially organizational and technical ones.

7.2. Suggestions for future study

This study is qualitative in nature as it aims to focus on the exploration of deep insights into stakeholders' thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences of the international practicum. There will be a need for an evaluation research that pursue the quantitative approach so that the practicum can be evaluated on a larger scale.

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