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AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TEACHING COMPETENCE OF FINAL-YEAR PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS AT A NORTHERN UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on investigating the teaching competence of final-year pre-service English teachers of a northern university in Vietnam based on their performance in the practicum experience and how they cope with challenges encountered along the way. The study views the participants' teaching performance through the lens of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Vietnamese Teacher Professional Standards. The data were collected through a mixed-methods approach with the use of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings show that, while the participants possessed high levels of Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Knowledge and Pedagogical Content Knowledge in planning and organizing a lesson, there were noted weaknesses in classroom management and time management and in assessment, especially in the setting of teaching the productive skills. At the same time, a prominent challenge for the participants was the theory - practice gap when implementing communicative approaches in real classroom contexts due to contextual constraints. The results emphasize the need for the integration of theory and practice in teacher education programs.

KEYWORDS: Pre-service teachers, teaching competence, PCK framework, Vietnamese Teacher Professional Standards.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background and Rationale

This study examines the teaching competence of final-year pre-service English teachers in a northern university in Vietnam, against the backdrop of concerns about the English skill of the nation's population and the recent skill-based educational reform in Vietnam's schools. The concept of teacher competence in the study is derived from the view argument that competence includes not only two types of knowledge (pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge) but also the ability to use and adapt the instruction to diverse and changing classroom contexts. In order to describe and analyze the competence of student teachers, their practicum performance is examined in terms of their self-perceived competence, together with challenges related to the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice. The study sheds light on student teachers' ability to manage the classroom and make instructional decision while teaching English as a foreign language in a communicative manner in authentic settings. The study also offers some empirical insights into their strengths and limitations to provide suggestions for how to better prepare them for professional readiness as beginning teachers. The findings of the study may provide insights into the effectiveness of the current teacher education programmes in Vietnam and shed light on possible ways of improving them.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives:

The following are the study's particular objectives:

- To investigate pre-service English teachers' self-perceived teaching competence.
- To examine the common difficulties, they face during practicum and how they cope with those challenges.
- To make recommendations for improving teacher education programs and practicum support.

Based on the above context, this study raises the following central research question:

1. To what extent do pre-service English teachers perceive themselves as competent in key areas of professional and pedagogical competence?
2. What common difficulties do pre-service English teachers encounter during the teaching practicum, and how do they cope with these challenges?

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teaching competence

Teaching competence generally refers to a range of knowledge, skills and professional attitudes teachers need in order to perform effective teaching. In the setting of the rapidly changing technologies and the increasingly diverse classroom settings, the demands on teachers have been increasing, requiring deep subject knowledge, classroom management, effective lesson planning and flexible response to student needs. According to the research of Afalla and Fabelico (2020), good teaching is dependent on both theoretical understanding and the practical application of pedagogical skills. The relationship between competence and performance can be seen as a difference in the two concepts. Competence refers to the underlying capacities of teachers while performance refers to the application of those capacities in specific teaching situations, which can be influenced by the setting (Klieme, 2008). The importance of the distinction between competence and performance, in this case, is critical for pre-service teachers as they can experience a gap

between what they know and what they can do under real conditions such as time constraints, classroom sizes and teaching experience. The teaching competence in Vietnam is heavily influenced by the professional standards set by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2018), focusing on pedagogical knowledge, professional development and instructional competence. Based on Shulman's (1987) Pedagogical Content Knowledge, this study uses a competence approach to explore how pre-service teachers integrate and apply knowledge in real teaching situations.

2.2. Teacher competency framework in Viet Nam

In the field of teacher education, the concept of teacher competency is seen as a function of professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes that form within the framework of competency models used as guidelines for teacher development and evaluation. International models of TESOL emphasize the developing character of teaching competence and the difficulties in measuring complex dynamic classroom practices in quantitative terms. However, in the Vietnamese context, the MOET has adopted a uniform model that not only ensures accountability but also serves as a guideline for the definition of teaching competency norms and its assessment in pre-service education.

The present work uses Circular No. 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT on professional standards for general education teachers as an assessment tool. Standard 2 concerning professional development and teaching practices is of primary importance in this case, as it comprises such crucial components as competency-based lesson planning, effective teaching methods, student assessment, and learner support. These components are directly related to the basic aspects of TESOL.

2.3. Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is defined as the specific knowledge employed by teachers to convert subject matter knowledge into instructional knowledge that is comprehensible and meaningful to the learners (Shulman, 1986). While CK and PK are often regarded as independent and additive, PCK entails an integration of both into a composite “amalgam,” where subject matter knowledge is reconstructed through pedagogical thinking. This comprises the skills of representing subject knowledge effectively, predicting learners' misunderstanding and designing appropriate pedagogical approaches. Pedagogical content knowledge is fundamentally situational. Teachers rely on their understanding of the learners, instructional objectives, and classroom circumstances to identify appropriate representations of content through explanations, examples, and scaffolding. Other research works by Grossman (1990); Cochran et al. (1993) have further elaborated that PCK encompasses the intersection of content, pedagogy, characteristics of the learners, and the situation. Generally, PCK should be understood as a dynamic process of professional reasoning. It is the theoretical framework for this study on how pre-service English teachers convert subject knowledge into instruction.

2.4. The Relationship between the PCK Model and the Teacher Professional Standards under Circular 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT

In Vietnam, the relationship between the Teacher Professional Standards from Circular No. 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) plays a critical role in

determining the competencies of a teacher. PCK is theoretical in nature as it focuses on the need for teachers to integrate content, pedagogy, and learners' knowledge. On the other hand, Teacher Professional Standards act as a practical guide for implementing and assessing the teacher's capacity to achieve such integration. PCK is operationalized by conducting core activities that include lesson planning, teaching, classroom management, and assessment of learners. Such activities demand that teachers convert their content knowledge into learning experiences for students. In addition, the Teacher Professional Standards emphasize professional development among teachers through self-reflection and training; such emphasis is in line with the dynamic nature of PCK. Thus, this study employs an integrative model whereby PCK acts as the conceptual framework and Circular No. 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT becomes the practical framework.

2.5. Alignment between the PCK Framework and the Learning Outcomes of Pedagogical Skills Training Courses

The Pedagogical Skills Training courses describe the required learning outcomes for prospective (pre-service) English teachers. The PST courses provide the progression of the learning outcomes to enable prospective teachers to acquire pedagogical skills to be able to teach; for instance, the acquisition of pedagogical skills using classroom interactions (Pedagogical Skills Training 1), the incorporation of the use of language in teaching techniques (Pedagogical Skills Training 2), and using the language skills to plan for effective learning (Pedagogical Skills Training 3). The development of teacher competencies, as defined in the PST courses, reflects the development of PCK, where the development of teacher competencies begins with general knowledge and moves to the application of knowledge of the subject and knowledge of the learner in establishing pedagogies of instruction. The intended outcomes in the pedagogical skills training courses also align with the national professional teacher standards, which include planning, implementation, management, and professional capability development of the teacher. Based on this premise, the PST practicum becomes an organizational tool in evaluating the relationship between the attributes of a competent pre-service teacher and pre-service teacher competencies.

2.6. Related studies

There has been an increase in the number of research studies on pre-service teacher competence, especially during the teaching practicum phase, which is seen as an important bridge between theoretical and practical teaching (Shulman, 1978). At the practicum stage, competence is seen as a situated (environmentally dependent) and changing ability. This is developed via ongoing cycles of planning, enacting, receiving feedback, and reflecting on each lesson taught. Although empirical research studies confirm that the practical applications of this developing competence are variable (often difficult) to apply (especially in the classroom atmosphere), many researchers studying Vietnamese pre-service teachers have reported many contextual constraints in their studies (e.g., large class sizes, students with mixed levels of ability/motivation) which will continue to widen/prevent the gap between theory and practical teaching as reported by Le Van Canh and Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa. Additionally, the studies by Tang; Tran & Le show that pre-service teachers' actual teaching performance is influenced by classroom management and adaptations to the context of each teaching environment. However, current research studies across the board focus primarily on generalised barriers to and opinions regarding developing competence as a pre-service teacher and rely heavily on self-reported information that lacks adequate alignment to professional

competency standards. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to address this gap by using a standards-based approach to examine the teaching competence of pre-service English teachers in their final year of teacher training while they are on practicum in Vietnam.

3.0. METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design. Participants were selected from among all senior English majors at the Thai Nguyen University of Education. The researchers developed an online survey through Google forms with which information about the students' self-perceived teaching competence and their difficulties were obtained and used as the criteria for selecting potential interviewees. Five students from two classes, including English K57A and English K57B, volunteered to participate in the in-depth interviews. The questionnaire also aimed to gain insights into the ways the students coped with these challenges during their teaching practicum and classroom learning.

This study calculated descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations, conducted reliability tests and made comparisons between the PCK structure for teaching practicum and classroom learning experiences. In order to maintain the accuracy of the calculation, Google forms and Google sheets were used to organize raw data that had been filtered and exported to Excel files for further analyses.

4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Result

Table 1: Teachers' deep understanding of subject-matter knowledge (CK) forms the foundation for effective instruction.

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rating levels</i>	<i>Order</i>
1	I am confident in using accurate English grammar when teaching and answering students 'question.	4.13	0.62	High	2
2	I am able to explain differences between similar grammatical structures clearly.	3.97	0.68	High	4
3	I have a strong understanding of English grammar rules and structures.	4.08	0.64	High	3
4	I am able to choose suitable vocabulary and examples to explain lesson content clearly.	4.21	0.59	High	1
5	I am confident in modeling accurate pronunciation, word stress, and intonation for students.	3.76	0.71	High	7
6	I can use English fluently for classroom instructions and interactions.	3.89	0.66	High	5
7	I feel capable of understanding advanced listening/reading texts for teaching	3.675	1.14	High	10

	purposes.				
8	I can write clear English (e.g., instructions, feedback, and board work) with few errors.	3.69	1.159	High	9
9	I understand how English is used in real-life communication contexts.	3.755	1.151	High	2
10	I can identify and correct students' language errors accurately.	3.79	1.138	High	4

As shown in Table 1, in general, all the participants who filled in the form gave High scores to all items at the levels of English skill for teaching purposes. To be specific, they all agreed that they own the required English skills for teaching at a high level, with the means ranging from 3.675 to 4.21. In particular, the standard deviations of items 1 through 6, which show vocabulary selection, the explanation of content and process, making lessons clear and instructive, correcting errors, and making instructions clear and understandable to students, are relatively low at 0.59 - 0.71, respectively, suggesting unanimous consensus. In contrast, items 7 through 10, which pertain to the advanced and higher-order language abilities and skills, gained higher SDs of 1.138 - 1.159, respectively, showing divergent opinions as to these skills and abilities. Of special note are three points. One is that vocabulary selection for teaching got the highest score of $M = 4.21$, which can be undergirded by the high scores of grammatical accuracy and understand ability, with M of 4.08 and 4.13, respectively. The other two are that the participants' higher-order language skills, such as listening and reading comprehension, writing, using English authentically, pronunciation, and error correction, received relatively low means of 3.675, 3.69, 3.755, 3.76, and 3.79, respectively. Overall, the participants' basic knowledge related to content and process, are relatively good but their advanced language use and communicative language use for teaching English require dedicated attention for the purpose of developing higher-level language skill and applying.

Table 2: General pedagogical knowledge (PK), including instructional methods, teaching techniques, and classroom management principles.

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rating levels</i>	<i>Order</i>
14	I can set clear lesson objectives and organize lesson stages logically.	4.18	0.61	High	1
15	I can give clear and effective instructions for classroom activities.	4.05	0.66	High	3
16	I am able to monitor students' work and provide timely support.	3.72	0.71	High	6
17	I can adjust my teaching pace based on students' understanding.	3.54	0.74	Medium	8
18	I am able to select teaching methods that fit the lesson goals and class conditions	3.89	0.69	High	4
19	I can manage lesson time and transitions	3.48	0.76	High	9

	between activities smoothly				
20	I am able to use classroom management strategies to maintain order and learning focus	3.67	0.72	High	7
21	I can use formative assessment (questions, observation, quick checks) during the lessons.	3.81	0.68	High	5
22	I feel ready to use IT tools (slides, videos, LMS, apps) to support teaching and learning	4.12	0.64	High	2

Table 2 demonstrates that the pre-service teachers have a reasonable level of pedagogical knowledge (PK) which can be seen from the mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.61). The strongest ability of the teachers-in-training is related to 'Setting objectives and organizing lesson content and time,' and the second strongest is 'Using IT tools.' While the former has a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.61), the latter has a mean of 4.12 (SD = 0.64).

Looking into details, the most comfortably handled abilities by the trainee teachers are 'instructing and giving feedback,' 'planning lessons,' 'selecting appropriate teaching methods,' 'adjusting teaching pace,' 'managing lesson time,' and 'adjusting teaching pace.' The former three have relatively high means of 4.05, 4.05, and 3.89, respectively, and the latter two have slightly lower but still reasonable means of 3.89 and 3.48, respectively. It shows that the trainee teachers are confident in planning lessons but not confident in the implementation of the lessons. On the other hand, the least comfortably handled ability is 'managing lesson time and transitions.' Although it is reported that the pre-service teachers have the ability in PK, which has been labeled as 'High,' its mean is only 3.48 (SD = 0.76). It shows that the trainee teachers have some difficulties in controlling lesson time and linking activities to achieve lessons' objectives.

Table 3: Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rating levels</i>	<i>Order</i>
23	I can choose effective ways to explain difficult grammar points to students at different levels.	3.76	0.70	High	5
24	I am able to design communicative activities that help students use vocabulary in real contexts.	3.88	0.684	High	3
25	I can identify common pronunciation problems of Vietnamese learners and correct them effectively	3.42	0.754	Medium	9
26	I feel capable of adapting textbook materials and tasks to match students' needs and learning goals.	3.91	0.626	High	2

27	I am able to design speaking/writing tasks and use clear rubrics to assess students fairly.	3.58	0.73	Medium	8
28	I can select appropriate teaching techniques for different English skills.	3.84	0.692	High	4
29	I can anticipate students' learning difficulties and prepare suitable explanations.	3.67	0.71	High	6

The provided data in table 3 below reveals that teachers' PCK is at the levels of Medium and High (mean from 3.42 to 4.02). Most of the statements were evaluated as high, which implies that teachers feel confident about their ability to combine their content knowledge with the most appropriate pedagogical approach. The fact that standard deviations are relatively small (0.626–0.754) testifies to quite good consistency of the sample with no significant variations in different statements. In regard to ranking, the statement, which received the highest mean score, concerns teachers' ability to design activities according to students' language proficiency level (M = 4.02). Other high-scored competencies such as adapting materials (M = 3.91) and designing communicative activities (M = 3.88) are associated with the use of the communicative language approach. Still, there are several other competences that receive rather low evaluations, namely, integrating language skills (M = 3.49), handling pronunciation problems (M = 3.42), and designing tasks that involve assessment criteria (M = 3.58). Thus, one may assume that although teachers have rather good foundational PCK, they lack more complex competences and abilities.

Table 4: Difficulties during Teaching Practicum

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rating levels</i>	<i>Order</i>
30	I have difficulty managing classroom discipline.	3.74	0.715	High	2
31	I find it challenging to keep students engaged in learning activities.	3.68	0.732	High	3
32	I struggle to apply communicative teaching methods effectively.	3.45	0.764	Medium	7
33	I find it hard to manage time during lessons.	3.59	0.745	Medium	6
34	I have difficulty adapting lesson plans to real classroom situations.	3.63	0.723	Medium	5
35	I feel anxious or nervous when teaching in real classrooms.	3.82	0.694	High	1
36	I have difficulty assessing students' performance effectively.	3.51	0.755	Medium	8
37	I find it difficult to handle unexpected classroom situations.	3.66	0.739	Medium	4

38	I have difficulty giving clear instructions to students.	3.28	0.784	Medium	10
39	I struggle to deal with mixed-ability classes.	3.47	0.774	Medium	9

The medium to high level of difficulty for preservice teachers in real classrooms can be illustrated in table 4, with the most significant challenge being caused by anxiety when working in a live classroom setting ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.694$). The next most significant challenges to preserve teachers are managing classroom discipline and motivating and engaging students in learning ($M = 3.74$; $M = 3.68$, respectively). This indicates that novice teachers are under a great deal of pressure emotionally and with regard to classroom management issues.

There are also moderate-level challenges for preservice teachers in responding to unanticipated events ($M = 3.66$), making the lessons that were planned meaningful in the actual classroom ($M = 3.63$), and effectively managing the amount of time available to complete lessons ($M = 3.59$). Additionally, preservice teachers report moderate-level difficulties implementing communication-based approaches to teaching ($M = 3.45$) or working with heterogeneous groups of students ($M = 3.47$). Finally, the mean scores related to assessing student performance ($M = 3.51$) or providing sufficient instructions for students ($M = 3.28$) are lower than the previously discussed areas of difficulty.

Table 5: Coping Strategies for Teaching Practicum Challenges

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rating levels</i>	<i>Order</i>
40	I set clear rules; use consistent discipline; apply positive reinforcement.	4.32	0.58	Very high	1
41	I use interactive activities; vary techniques; integrate multimedia.	4.08	0.64	High	3
42	I attend CLT training; observe teachers; use pair/group work.	3.76	0.70	High	6
43	I plan time allocation; prioritize objectives; adjust pacing.	3.68	0.72	High	7
44	I prepare flexible plans; use backup activities.	3.59	0.74	Medium	8
45	I practice regularly; seek feedback; use stress management.	3.59	0.69	High	5
46	I use varied methods; apply clear rubrics; give feedback.	3.67	0.73	Medium	9
47	I prepare alternatives; develop problem-solving skills.	3.63	0.75	Medium	10
48	I use simple language; model tasks; check understanding.	3.55	0.62	Very high	2

49	I differentiate tasks and use flexible grouping.	4.15	0.67	High	4
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Based on Table 5 analysis, pre-service teachers implemented a diverse range of coping mechanisms to address challenges encountered during their teaching practicum—these can be frequently referenced by instructors as they are often utilized at a high frequency level. Defining classroom rules, keeping strict discipline, and applying positive reinforcement (M = 4.32) represent an example of how students create a well-organized and comfortable learning environment for themselves as a response to the various issues that occur during the course. The use of a variety of tasks and modes of group formation to enhance classroom cooperation (M = 4.15) and the inclusion of active instructional strategies and multimedia tools to promote engagement (M = 4.08) are also highly regarded by instructors as more effective methods of working with groups of students in a positive way.

Overall, we can see that pre-service teachers used many other techniques to improve their teaching ability. The use of CLT training courses, observing lessons taught by experienced teachers, using pair/group activities (M = 3.76), and planning for appropriate time and space (M = 3.68) are examples of how pre-service instructors are trying to develop relevant skills and competencies. There are some strategies that have moderate ratings, such as making flexible plans (M = 3.59), using rubrics and feedback clearly (M = 3.67), and enhancing problem-solving skills (M = 3.63). These results indicate that although pre-service teachers know the proper coping strategies, the actual application of these strategies, especially those that require adaptability and complexity, is not yet fully realized.

Thematic Map of Pre-service English Teachers' Teaching Competence After Practicum



Note. Arrows indicate influences and interconnections among themes.

Figure 6: Thematic map of Pre - service English Teachers' teaching competence after practicum

A comprehensive synthesis of pre-service teachers' views regarding their competence in teaching, after having completed the teaching practicum, can be found in Figure 6 below. Generally speaking, moderate self-confidence was identified among participants in terms of various aspects of their competence. Pre-service teachers felt quite confident about their pedagogical knowledge in terms of designing lessons, explaining grammatical rules and using different kinds of teaching materials. This suggests that they were well-trained in university classrooms in order to acquire some basic skills for teaching. However, several shortcomings could be identified as well, specifically in classroom management, keeping students motivated and adjusting teaching pace according to situational needs. In fact, all the above issues indicate that a theory-practice gap appeared due to some contextual constraints such as exam-oriented teaching.

The map shows that pre-service teachers use coping strategies to deal with the challenges they face in their defense of their designs and their "things" supporting them in getting and maintaining their jobs. Examples of coping strategies are the following: Simplifying the instructional task, seeking and receiving assistance from colleagues, and adjusting their delivery of instruction based upon individual needs. Other important areas supported through the practicum support system are mentorship and institutional guidance, both of which need improvement. The findings indicate that a pre-service teacher's competence as a teacher is influenced by their own knowledge, skills, and experience as well as contextual and institutional factors. Because of these influences, the current practicum model has to improve to be more "hands-on" with teaching and continuing professional support after the completion of their initial teacher training program.

4.2. Discussion

The findings offer key insights into the teaching competence of final-year pre-service English teachers, broadly aligning with and extending existing international and Vietnamese research.

In the first part of the study, pre-service teachers were requested to evaluate their competences in performing various instructional acts. The results show that the teachers ranked themselves high on their ability to apply their content knowledge, CK and pedagogical knowledge, PK, with pedagogical content knowledge, PCK, also being high. These high scores of teacher self-efficacy in the practicum experiences are compatible with findings in the research on teacher self-efficacy and practicum experiences. Planning a lesson, organizing the instruction, and setting lesson goals were the highest-rated acts, while organizing lesson stages and selecting appropriate language were rated high. These results may show that university training has been successful in the selected areas. However, there is a noticeable disparity between theoretical knowledge and practical performance. The low ratings on performing certain instructional acts such as classroom management and time management show difficulties in applying theoretical knowledge to real teaching contexts. Klieme (2008) argues that the nature of the competence to perform instructional acts is largely dependent on the conditions of performance, leading to a reality shock for the teacher since teaching performance in real classroom contexts does not necessarily match theoretical competence.

Secondly, results show there is a divide between theory and practice in that while there is an understanding of both the importance of CLT and how to implement it, CLT is generally not used by trainees due to contextual constraints such as large class sizes, learners with differing abilities, and the use of examinations as an instructional tool, forcing trainees to consider less workable, traditional methods than CLT.

Thirdly, according to Tang (2019), classroom management skills and other “soft skills” serve as operational conditions for good language instruction, which is consistent with the current research findings. The relative lack of proficiency in managing classes, pace-setting, and reacting to classroom events indicates that these skills are not developed at university but must be cultivated through experience in actual classes. As a result, even carefully planned CLT techniques cannot be implemented properly without these skills. Moreover, similarly to Tran & Le (2021), CLT is adapted or modified by context-related factors like requirements of curriculum and tests. Thus, overall, teaching proficiency seems to be influenced by a complex set of contextual factors.

Fourthly, From a standards-based perspective (aligning with MOET's 2018 framework), about their strengths (planning lessons, completing lesson activities) and weaknesses (effectively managing classrooms, integrating skills into the curriculum, independently assessing students) as part of the analysis is identified as a more complicated analysis than previously completed. As well, similar to past studies, the findings in this study confirm past studies have found self-report measures are limited because they do not provide an accurate representation of an individual's or teacher's competencies. The results of this qualitative research support the necessity to include a variety of forms of evidence (e.g., observations, portfolios) when developing assessments for the purpose of establishing safety and trust in educators, as well as providing a more detailed account about a teacher's competencies. Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa's "compliance discourse" theory also supports this finding because participants appeared to have greater competency in the areas that could be measured and measured (e.g., lesson plans and use of technology) and lower levels of competency as it relates to instruction or teaching.

Lastly, the results have revealed that pre-service English teachers in the final year have a positive perception of their teaching abilities on a rather high level in terms of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, as it corresponds to the expected outcomes of Pedagogical Skills Training 1, 2, and 3. Competence in lesson planning, objectives, lesson organization, and activity creation is associated with the effectiveness of the training course and the acquisition of core competencies by participants. Nevertheless, there are some expected outcomes that have not been fully achieved. Pre-service English teachers demonstrated low proficiency in classroom management, time management, adaptability, pronunciation instruction, and productive skills assessment and development.

Overall, the results are consistent with the existing body of literature while contributing to it by emphasizing the importance of contextualization of teaching competencies and the theory-practice gap that exists. While the program offers a good base, it is essential that more attention be paid to practical learning in the context of reflection and mentoring.

5.0. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the study is to assess the level of competence of pre-service English teachers after graduation according to pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and the Vietnamese teacher professional standards. In general, pre-service English teachers considered themselves as having high levels of knowledge for content knowledge, pedagogy, and content, and some areas such as lesson planning, instructional organization, and adapting teaching materials all demonstrate a sound theoretical and pedagogical foundation for the students' training.

Nevertheless, the level of competence varies from domain to domain. Low levels of proficiency were recorded for classroom management, time management, adapting to classroom situations, integrating skills teaching, phonetics teaching, and assessing productive language skills. Therefore, there seems to be a large gap between theory and practice since many pre-service English teachers cannot implement their theoretical knowledge in the classroom. There are contextual factors that make it difficult for pre-service teachers to use communicative techniques, such as the large number of students in each class, mixed-ability students, and a curricular focus on testing and examinations. Moreover, the study reveals that teaching competence is a contextual and developmental concept and not a static one. Although pre-service teachers prove to be competent at planning aspects of teaching, they lack competency when placed in dynamic classroom contexts. This indicates the need for training programs aimed at equipping pre-service teachers with skills and competencies in dynamic teaching contexts. In general, the results have implications for conceptualizing pre-service teacher competence based on standards.

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