

Weathering the Storm: Unraveling the Challenges of EFL Student Teaching in Ukraine

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Abstract: Initiation into teaching is widely acknowledged as a challenging experience. However, these challenges become even more pronounced when compounded by teaching in life-threatening conditions. In light of this, the present study aimed to explore the challenges EFL pre-service teachers face during their school practicum in Ukraine. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed in a complementary manner to offer a comprehensive portrayal of the challenges. The qualitative analysis yielded five intersecting themes encapsulating the challenges of student teaching: “learners,” “instruction,” “teacher identity,” “facilities,” and “initiation into teaching.” Subsequently, the quantitative analysis of the qualitative findings indicated a moderate level of challenge across the identified themes. Unexpectedly, while the qualitative phase highlighted the serious challenges posed by teaching amidst war and the transition to online education, the quantitative data only partly supported these findings. Additionally, while the participants expressed significant challenges regarding their competence in the qualitative phase, the quantitative measurements indicated a high level of confidence in their perceived preparedness to fulfill teaching responsibilities. Finally, the divergence between pre-service teachers’ high appreciation of their practicum experience and their hesitation to pursue a teaching career calls for further investigation to understand the underlying factors contributing to low teaching motivation.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Zorluklar,
öğretmen adayları,
Yabancı dil olarak
İngilizce öğretimi,
öğretmenlik stajı

Fırtınayı Aşmak: Ukrayna’daki İngilizce Öğretmenlik Stajındaki Zorlukların Çözümlemesi

Özet: Öğretmenliğe başlama süreci genellikle zorlu bir deneyim olarak kabul edilmektedir. Ancak, bu duruma hayati tehlikenin olduğu koşullarda öğretim yapmanın eklenmesiyle birlikte öğretmenlerin karşılaştıkları zorluklar da belirgin hale gelir. Bu çalışma, Ukrayna’daki İngilizce öğretmenliği lisans öğrencilerinin okul stajları sırasında karşılaştıkları zorlukları araştırmayı amaçlamıştır. Zorlukların kapsamlı bir portresini sunmak amacıyla hem nitel hem de nicel araştırma yöntemleri birbirini tamamlayıcı bir şekilde kullanılmıştır. Nitel analiz sonuçları, öğretmenliğin zorluklarını kapsayan beş kesişen tema ortaya koymuştur: “öğrenciler,” “öğretim,” “öğretmen kimliği,” “tesisler” ve “öğretmeye başlama.” Sonuç olarak, nitel bulguların nicel analizi, belirlenen temalar boyunca orta düzeyde bir zorluk seviyesini göstermiştir. Beklenmedik bir şekilde, nitel aşama, savaş ortamında öğretim yapmanın ve çevrimiçi eğitime geçişin yarattığı ciddi zorlukları vurgularken, nicel veriler bu bulguları kısmen desteklemiştir. Ayrıca, katılımcılar, nitel aşamada yeterlilikleri konusunda önemli zorlukları ifade ederken, nicel bulgular, öğretim sorumluluklarını yerine getirme konusundaki algılanan hazır olma düzeylerinin yüksek olduğunu göstermiştir. Son olarak, öğrenen adaylarının öğretmenlik mesleğini sürdürme konusundaki tereddütleriyle staj deneyimine yüksek önem atfetmeleri arasındaki fark, düşük öğretim motivasyonuna katkıda bulunan temel faktörleri anlamak için daha fazla araştırma yapılmasını gerektirmektedir.

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1. Introduction

Initial exposure to teaching has often been described as a kind of reality shock caused by the discrepancies between pre-service teachers' preconceived notions and classroom realities (Bertram, 2023; Zorba, 2022). Many prospective teachers enter their first teaching assignments with idealized expectations developed during their years spent in formal preparation, which may not align with the demands and needs of educational institutions (Farrell, 2016; 2006). Furthermore, the feeling of disorientation is intensified by the added difficulties of language teaching arising from the complexities of the discipline itself and the status of English in the globalized world. As the would-be educators navigate the complexities of language instruction, these factors make this early encounter even more daunting.

While numerous studies have explored the challenges faced by pre-service teachers during their field experience, they may not fully capture the nuances of language education and teacher preparation due to their situated nature. From a sociocultural perspective, language teacher education should recognize “the social, political, economic, and cultural histories located in the contexts where L2 teachers live, learn, and work” (Johnson, 2009, p. 6). Sensitizing teacher preparation to the sociocultural context in which it is set is a significant challenge. Moreover, off-the-shelf solution to educational issues is precluded due to the unique nature of language learning and teaching experiences. Therefore, it is crucial to approach research in this area with a finely tuned, context-sensitive perspective to gain a comprehensive understanding of and address the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in language education.

From the existing research on the challenges of language teaching in Ukraine (e.g., Komar et al., 2021; Levrins, 2022), little is known about the difficulties prospective EFL teachers encounter during the initial stages of their professional development in this country, especially in the context of a full-scale military intervention. However, looking into the perceived hardships of early language teaching experiences could offer valuable insights for teacher education programs to improve their relevance and effectiveness. To this end, this paper aims to examine the challenges EFL pre-service teachers face during their school practicum in Ukraine, with a focus on the effects of the ongoing war, including teaching in life-threatening conditions and adapting to an online format. In this study, the term "challenges" refers to the difficulties or hindrances arising in the process of learning to teach. By shedding light on these challenges, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the unique needs of pre-service teachers in the Ukrainian context, identifying areas where teacher education programs can be improved to better prepare new teachers for the demands of language teaching.

1.1. Literature Review

Student teaching as a critical requirement of formal teacher education holds profound implications for a smooth transition into the teaching field and subsequent professional development (Goldhaber et al., 2017; Zeichner, 2002). Effective school practicum lends authenticity to teacher education programs by engaging students in real-world professional activities under the guidance of mentors and university supervisors. However, the initialization of any professional activity, particularly the complex task of teaching, is strewn with difficulties. Moreover, pre-service teachers must navigate additional responsibilities of their university programs, such as meeting course requirements and taking examinations,

while simultaneously striving to develop their language teaching competence in the school setting.

Pre-service teachers may be unaware of or oblivious to numerous hidden blocks encompassed by language teaching. As a result, many of them enter the profession with an overestimation of their abilities, feeling ready to handle any task requiring high levels of competence (Norton, 2019). This naïve enthusiasm can get easily bruised against the harsh realities of the classroom, shattering the idealized image students develop before their teaching experience (Farrell, 2016; Kozikoğlu & Senemoğlu, 2021). By all accounts, preparing pre-service teachers for all the contingencies that arise in the course of teaching, even for programs that incorporate cutting-edge research, practices, and extensive training, is highly implausible. The like discrepancies cannot be fully resolved during the initial teacher education because, as Bertran (2023) explains, they are rooted in different domains, including the systems of the classroom, the school, and the macro-educational system (p. 11). However, an effective program should make this first encounter of prospective teachers with professional realities less shocking by helping them form sounder expectations by reexamining their underlying beliefs.

The student-to-teacher role swap is recognized as a critical period with consequences regarding teacher retention and attrition. Unfortunately, the literature mainly discusses the detrimental effects of a rough transition from learning to the teaching role. Thus, excessive challenges experienced by new teachers lead to a decrease in their motivation to teach (Back & Dean, 2020), increased levels of stress (Bozkurt, 2021; Sulis et al., 2021), a tendency to backslide to more authoritative teaching styles, and a preference of more traditional language teaching approaches (Teng, 2017). The inability to effectively cope with these challenges and poor resilience strategies, especially in the early teaching period, often result in many novices quitting the profession (Beltman et al., 2011; Bozkurt, 2021).

Having considered the risks of inadequate preparation for the teaching realities, we now discuss challenges faced by language teachers, particularly emphasizing the documented challenges experienced by prospective language teachers. Challenges have been conceptualized as hardships inducing teachers' cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses (Lőrincz, 2022a). If challenges are perceived as doable tasks, they can facilitate teacher performance and professional development (Zorba, 2022). Conversely, if teachers view them as threats to their competence, this may lead to anxiety, stress, or burnout. Language teaching challenges encompass those inherent to the teaching irrespective of the subject matter area and also those specific to the discipline itself. Moreover, perceptions of challenges transfigure over time, i.e., language teachers' understanding of challenges is prone to diminish in intensity as language teachers mature professionally, although not in a linear fashion (Lőrincz & Greba, 2022; Lőrincz, 2022b; Zorba, 2022).

The available research indicates that practicing language teachers face a range of challenges (Akçor & Savaşçı, 2020), with the perceived adequacy of language proficiency and pedagogical content knowledge being two prominent areas of concern. In terms of language proficiency, pre-service teachers were found to struggle with their own language skills (Koşar, 2020), which consequently impacted their ability to effectively communicate with learners and develop their language competencies (Kabilan, 2013; Mirici & Ölmez-Çağlar, 2017; Ong et al., 2004; Yunus et al., 2010; Zorba, 2022). Another source of challenges is documented in the literature on pedagogical content knowledge. Thus, insufficient knowledge of language teaching methodology and pedagogy made it difficult for pre-service teachers to select appropriate teaching methods and techniques. In a study conducted by Alamri (2018), pre-

service teachers self-reported feeling highly challenged when it came to selecting appropriate teaching methods. Similarly, in the study by Yunus et al. (2010), EFL pre-service teachers expressed serious difficulties in applying the methods they had learned in university settings to real-world classroom contexts.

As highlighted in several studies, the inadequacy of pedagogical knowledge gave rise to various challenges, including classroom management, learner assessment, lesson planning, discipline, and curriculum, among others (Akcan, 2016; Alamri, 2018; Kabilan, 2013; Pasaka et al., 2014; Zorba, 2022). By way of illustration, Pasaka et al. (2014) documented challenges encountered in lesson planning and classroom management as the most daunting activities. In the above study, prospective language teachers reported struggling with lesson planning, especially in selecting instructional materials suitable for diverse learners' needs and mixed abilities. Classroom management was also a major challenge, with disruptive learner behavior posing significant difficulties for practicing teachers. The authors noted that low levels of learner motivation and disparate levels of English proficiency of learners further complicated classroom management. School learners' negative attitude towards pre-service teachers and discipline problems coupled with low language learning motivation were documented as major challenges in the study by Yunus et al. (2010). The participants in this study also had difficulties translating theory into practice and applying appropriate teaching methods.

An extensive body of literature has documented the challenges of online language teaching induced by the Covid-19 pandemic (Tao & Gao, 2022). As highlighted in the study by Back et al. (2021), the sudden shift to remote teaching presented significant problems for practicing language teachers. According to the researchers, practicing teachers of world languages and those with prior experience in online instruction felt "an overall feeling of unpreparedness" (p. 8). The absence of in-person interaction further aggravated their feeling of frustration. The lack of adequate preparation for online language teaching had notable consequences. The participants in this study had to make substantial modifications to their curriculum to suit the online learning environment and struggled to prepare engaging activities. As a result, their expectations for student achievement were significantly lowered. Nevertheless, they reported increasing their flexibility, patience, and empathy in organizing instruction. They also demonstrated enhanced creativity in engaging their students. In the study conducted by Arslan (2021), both beneficial and detrimental effects of online education on EFL teachers' motivation were reported. The research highlighted various intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors associated with online teaching. Interestingly, the challenges of online teaching were perceived by the participants as a source of motivation, encouraging them to persist in the face of financial and mental risks.

Overall, the available research into challenges underscores the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for the realities and expectations of classroom settings. While there is a sizeable body of research on challenges in student teaching, the experience gained by EFL pre-service teachers amidst war makes it unique, thus requiring additional research attention. This paper is thus guided by the following research question: What challenges do EFL pre-service teachers face during their school practicum in Ukraine?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

An exploratory research design was employed to seek answers to the research question, as this design is particularly useful for investigating new or understudied phenomena (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Mixed-methods approach was adopted to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of the problem being studied – the challenges faced by EFL pre-service teachers in Ukraine. This involved the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, which were obtained through a questionnaire and a narrative survey. Narrative inquiry, as defined by Clarke (2023), is “the study of experience interpreted by and through stories of practice” (p. 238). It entails personal accounts of events from the authors' perspectives, providing insights into constructing individual stories from their experiences. Within the field of teacher education research, narrative inquiry is commonly applied to explore teachers' lived experiences recounted by the teachers themselves. By utilizing this research method, the study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the EFL pre-service teachers' personal perspectives and experiences. Thus, combining these two research tools provides a more comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of the identified issue.

2.2. Participants

A total of 140 pre-service teachers expressed their voluntary consent to participate in this study, and out of these, 15 students agreed to commit themselves to narrative writing. The participants were enrolled in English language and literature education programs at the bachelor's level (N=78) and master's level (N=62) across different universities in Ukraine. The undergraduate students typically completed a four-week teaching practicum, while the graduate students had a school practicum lasting from one to two months, depending on their university. The field experience occurred in comprehensive secondary schools or grammar schools in urban and rural areas throughout the country. During this time, the pre-service teachers taught at various educational levels under the guidance of a mentor teacher. All participants were non-native English speakers. The purposeful sampling technique was applied to identify eligible participants for the narrative writing (Creswell, 2012), considering their willingness to contribute voluntarily and their ability to provide detailed insights into the issues examined in this study. Code names (T1 – T15) were assigned to the respondents to maintain confidentiality.

2.3. Context

Among the major aspirations of Ukraine is its effort to integrate into the European education system, which requires the country to achieve compatibility with world-class practices. In response, the country has been working to reform its traditional education system inherited from the former USSR. Unfortunately, this progress was significantly hindered by the full-scale military invasion of its territory on February 24th, 2022, causing severe damage to both human and material resources. Despite the devastating impact of the war on the country's socioeconomic well-being, the Ukrainian education sector remains committed to sustaining and enhancing its quality.

Notably, the preparation of language teachers has not ceased, and students continue to participate in school practicum programs either offline or online around the country. However, student teaching, which is already a challenging experience, has become even more difficult due to the compounding effects of the war and the shift to online practicum mode.

2.4. Data collection

In our study, we utilized two data sources. The first data source consisted of narratives written by the students upon completing their main practicum phase. To ensure the narratives yielded relevant information, we provided students with prompts. In the first section, the students were asked to reflect on their general experiences during the practicum,

including their biggest challenges, perceived causes of difficulties, their impact on teaching style and interaction with learners, the quality of support received from mentors, etc. The second section aimed to elicit specific information about language teaching challenges. Students were prompted to discuss areas such as the development of language skills, classroom management, their own language proficiency, and strategies to engage learners with instructional material. In the final part of the narrative, titled “Lessons learned,” participants were encouraged to reflect on how the practicum experience had influenced them as teachers. Furthermore, participants were requested to evaluate their perceived level of preparedness for their future teaching careers.

The second data source utilized in this study was a researcher-designed questionnaire, primarily aimed at gathering quantitative data that focused on critical aspects of the field experience. By employing this questionnaire, we aimed to collect data from a larger sample size, thus achieving more breadth of the provided information. Additionally, it facilitated a comparison between the study's qualitative and quantitative findings. The content of the questionnaire was selected based on several sources. Firstly, we examined similar problems described in the existing literature. Secondly, the responses the participants provided in their narratives were considered, as they provided insights into their experiences and difficulties encountered during the practicum. Lastly, we sought feedback from practicum supervisors to share their expertise as to the key areas included in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire targeted pre-service teachers' views on the challenges of delivering instruction in English and related difficulties of language proficiency, lesson planning and its implementation, selection of appropriate language teaching approaches, methods, and techniques, establishing rapport with learners, discipline, teaching language aspects and skills, knowledge assessment, challenges of teaching English online, emotional well-being, and initiation into teaching. The participants were also asked to evaluate their level of preparation to assume teaching responsibilities, the value of school practicum experience, and motivation to pursue language teaching as a career.

In the above close-ended items, the respondents were required to express their views on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 representing the strongest disagreement with the statement and 5 – the strongest level of endorsement (e.g., 1 - not challenging at all to 5 - extremely challenging). The questionnaire's final part requested information about the participants' demographic data, including their major, year of study, educational level, duration of practicum, their learners' age, and language proficiency level.

The study was conducted towards the end of the spring semester of the academic year of 2022/23, indicating that the war has persisted for over a year.

2.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to process the qualitative data obtained from the narratives. Thematic analysis is a robust method for uncovering patterns and themes within the output (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed an inductive approach, which allowed the participants' perspectives to guide the interpretation of their challenges. A four-step procedure recommended by Saldana (2016) was used to process the data. Initially, the narratives were carefully examined, and common issues discussed by the authors were identified and assigned codes. Values coding was employed, which is described as “the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives” (Saldana, 2016, p. 110). The data were then

organized into categories by collating units of information that had similar codes. Through an iterative process of refining the codes and categories, certain codes were merged to form broader categories. For instance, codes like "poor class participation," "laziness," and "refusal to do homework" were combined into the broader category of "motivation." This iterative refinement ensured that the categories accurately represented the data. Finally, the interrelated categories were synthesized into themes. Saldana (2016) explains that a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection (p. 14). These themes offer valuable insights into the research question addressed in the study.

To ensure the coding process's dependability and credibility, analytic memo writing, member checking, and saturation were employed (Dörnyei, 2007; Saldana, 2016). A reflective journal with detailed analytic memos was prepared initially (Saldana, 2016, p. 36). These memos allowed the coder to document reflections and insights throughout the coding process, enhancing the traceability of the analysis. Also, the narratives were thoroughly reread and re-analyzed until reaching the point of saturation. Saturation occurs when no new or additional data can be extracted from the narratives, indicating that the analysis has comprehensively covered the provided information. In addition, member checking was implemented to validate the inferences drawn by the coder. The participants were consulted to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation of their responses. This ensured that the respondents' perspectives were objectively represented in the analysis. The researchers were not involved in organizing or evaluating pre-service teachers' performance during the school practicum, which minimized the effect of researcher bias.

The SPSS software package was utilized to analyze the quantitative data, producing descriptive and inferential statistics that highlighted the general trends in responses about the challenging aspects of EFL student teaching. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test (non-parametric statistical analysis) was conducted, which is employed to assess the difference between two within-subject conditions (Field, 2009). To address the issues of reliability and validity, a panel of experts was invited to evaluate the instrument's quality. Thus, two researchers were involved in language teacher preparation, and two pre-service teachers were requested to comment on the items' relevance and clarity. After careful consideration of their feedback, corresponding changes were introduced. This enhanced the questionnaire's face and content validity while guaranteeing that no questions were misinterpreted during data collection. Given that the questionnaire was administered to non-native pre-service teachers who learned English as a foreign language, particular attention was given to the overall formulation of the items to ensure clarity and understanding. This was done to prevent any confusion or ambiguity in the questions. An internal consistency analysis was conducted using SPSS to assess the reliability of the instrument. Specifically, a correlation coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, was found to be .817. This value indicates an appropriate level of internal consistency among the items in the questionnaire (Field, 2009, p. 675).

3. Findings

3.1. Findings of the Qualitative Analysis

Based on the findings of the narrative inquiry, five intersecting themes emerged in terms of challenges experienced by EFL pre-service teachers during their school practicum in Ukraine (Figure 1). These themes are related to language learners, instruction, teacher identity, facilities, and socialization in teaching. Of these, dealing with learners attracted the largest number of comments by EFL pre-service teachers in this study. This theme encompassed various aspects such as managing disruptive behavior, establishing rapport with learners,

addressing learner motivation, accommodating learners with special educational needs, and handling mixed-ability classes. The second theme, labeled “Instruction,” included issues with lesson planning and management, clear teaching, teaching language competencies (e.g., grammar) and skills, and selecting appropriate language teaching methods and techniques. The “Teacher identity” theme reflected issues related to teaching competence, personal qualities, teaching style, and emotional well-being. The participants viewed Issues as “Facilities” as a consequence of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This theme encompassed challenges associated with online education, power shortcuts, unreliable internet connection, and the need to conduct lessons in sheltered areas during shelling alerts. Lastly, the theme of “Initiation into teaching” focused on the processes of assuming the role of an EFL teacher and integrating into the professional community.

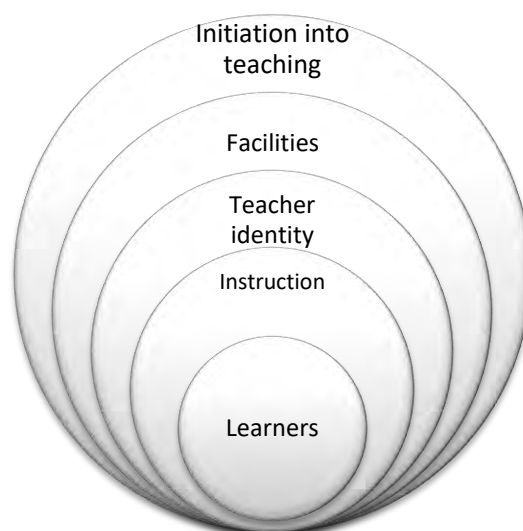


Figure 1. The results of qualitative analysis of EFL student teaching challenges

3.1.1. Learners

The qualitative data analysis revealed that the theme of “Learners” had the strongest impact on pre-service teachers’ perceptions of challenges, as evidenced by the frequency counts and the level of detail in the comments (Table 1).

Table 1.

Details in the “Learners” theme of EFL student teaching challenges

Nº	Categories	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
1	Disruptive learner behavior and discipline	10	67
2	Learner motivation	8	53
3	Rapport	6	40
4	Learners with special educational needs	6	40
5	Mixed-ability learners	5	33

Specifically, pre-service teachers reported facing significant challenges related to disruptive behavior and discipline issues among learners, with many considering it the biggest challenge encountered during their practicum (10 respondents). Additionally, eight participants struggled with learners’ reluctance to do homework or complete class assignments, described in the narratives as “*laziness*,” “*a lack of understanding of the importance of English*” among pupils, or having “*passive learners*.” The following excerpts illustrate these challenges:

T3: Overly active learners disrupted lessons. Some of them kept interrupting others and didn't allow shier students to speak.

However, as explained by T11, learners' misbehavior is not necessarily a reflection of them being inherently "bad" but rather a way for them to seek attention. This student-teacher believed that most of the discipline problems could be resolved by providing the necessary support and care. T11 stated:

T11: Sometimes, to gain attention, students do a lot of bad things because they need support and care, not because they are inherently bad.

Furthermore, six students reported significant challenges in teaching learners with special educational needs, primarily due to their lack of competence and experience in this area. T2 noted:

T2: I had to teach a dyslexic girl in the 5th grade. At times, she would get unruly, disrupting my lessons and disturbing other children who were trying to learn and focus on the material.

T15 reported even more severe difficulties in dealing with learners with special needs, e.g., such as instances of cursing during lessons and throwing objects at others.

Six pre-service teachers also reported experiencing difficulties with establishing rapport with learners, as mentioned in the excerpts below:

T13: At first, it was difficult to find common ground with the pupils, as each of them had their own unique characteristics.

T7: There were some students who wanted to test me and my knowledge. They would ask tricky or even personal questions. It took time and effort to gain acceptance from the learners.

T15: At first, the children misbehaved, so I attempted to prepare interesting activities and games and select topics relevant to their lives. It was difficult at the beginning, but little by little, we began to understand each other. The students became calmer and started participating more actively in the lessons.

Furthermore, learners emerged as a powerful motivating factor, as recounted by the participants (Table 2).

Table 2.

Learners as a source of motivation

Nº	Categories	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
1	Positive attitude of learners	8	53
2	Positive feedback from learners	5	33
3	Motivated learners	5	33
4	Respect from learners	3	20

The following comments exemplify this perspective:

T13: Working with children was fascinating. Receiving positive feedback from the learners was one of the most rewarding aspects of my school practicum.

T5: One of the highlights of the practicum was the students' respect and positive attitude. They seemed to be genuinely interested in my lessons!

Overall, while learners played a role in pre-service teachers' perceptions of challenges, they were often portrayed positively.

3.1.2. Instruction

Various challenges related to EFL instruction surfaced as the second most frequently discussed theme, as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3.

Details in the "Instruction" theme of EFL student teaching challenges

No	Categories	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
1	Lesson planning and management	8	53
2	Clear teaching (effective explanation of new material)	7	47
3	Subcategories in teaching language competencies:		
	• Grammar	5	33
	• Vocabulary	1	7
4	Subcategories in teaching language skills:		
	• Speaking	8	53
	• Listening	3	20
	• Writing	3	20
	• Reading	2	13.3
5	Selecting appropriate instructional materials and methods	7	47
6	Personalizing instruction	4	27

Table 3 showcases that the theme of instruction encompassed lesson planning and management, which pre-service teachers closely associated with selecting appropriate materials and approaches. A notable finding was that the respondents made efforts to provide learners with engaging materials and tasks, particularly through the use of games and technological aids, in order to address low learner motivation and disruptive behavior. Several pre-service teachers noted that adapting their instruction to learners' needs and interests and eliminating boredom helped them tackle student misbehavior and promote class participation. They also believed that this contributed to establishing rapport with learners. The following excerpts illustrate this:

T9: At first, it was difficult to select tasks and organize them in a way that students could understand and perform them effectively. Planning the lesson and ensuring a smooth transition between activities was not always easy. It was also challenging to find and design tasks that would be interesting, enjoyable, and, most importantly, useful to students. There were overly active students in the classes who were used to being the center of attention, and I struggled to find the right approach and communication style for them.

T7: At the beginning of the practicum, I had problems with student discipline, so I decided to try out various interesting tasks. I made an effort to learn about the backgrounds and needs of my students and observed them closely. This helped me to gain better control over the classroom and manage the children.

T5: I realized that I enjoyed experimenting with different teaching methods. This helped me to understand how they can be combined to facilitate learning for the students.

An issue attracting considerable attention was the clear explanation of new material, particularly grammar.

T5: I encountered difficulties in selecting the most suitable way to present new topics, as each age group requires a different approach.

T11: Explaining material proved difficult because of the terminology I had to use when I talked about grammar. I had to translate everything to ensure better understanding, which added to the challenge.

Teaching speaking was identified as one of the most challenging skills to develop by the respondents (n=8). Pre-service teachers often mentioned that learners were shy and nervous about speaking English. Additionally, three students highlighted the difficulties of teaching writing.

T7: Developing writing skills posed serious challenges for me. It was hard to encourage learners to write stories or essays. They told me they hated it!

Poor language command among learners posed difficulties in teaching listening, as described by a pre-service teacher:

T12: There were pupils who didn't understand the basics, which made it challenging for me to select appropriate listening tasks that matched their level. The materials provided in the coursebooks were often too complicated for them.

Two comments highlighted the challenges of teaching reading due to learners' reluctance to read in English.

Personalizing instruction was a recurring topic in the narratives. Teaching learners with varying proficiency levels, different needs and interests, diverse nationalities, and varying levels of motivation was a cause of concern for pre-service teachers.

T11: Trying to find "a key" to each child in the classroom is not an easy task. It takes a lot of time and patience.

3.1.3. Teacher identity

Table 4 presents pre-service teachers' views on challenges arising from their individual characteristics.

Table 4.

Details in the "Teacher Identity" theme of EFL student teaching challenges

No	Categories	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
1	Competence and self-development	8	53
2	Subcategories in personal qualities:		
	• Self-confidence	7	47
	• Patience	5	33
3	Authoritative teaching style (strictness)	3	20
4	Emotional well-being (fear, stress, insecurity)	8	53

The participants consistently emphasized the significance of competence development and self-improvement as crucial factors (n=8). These factors were closely related to pre-service teachers' perceived self-confidence, which was influenced by their self-assessment of

competence. Students acknowledged that they lacked confidence stemming from their current level of competence.

T10: I think the lack of competence was the main source of the challenge. I encountered numerous unexpected situations where I didn't know what to do, e.g., dealing with a learner with special educational needs.

T2: Teaching is really difficult and not as easy as I had initially believed. School practicum taught me the importance of thorough preparation, continuous knowledge enhancement, and readiness to handle situations that may occur during lessons.

Five participants realized that they were patient in their interactions with learners.

T4: I discovered that I can be remarkably patient with children, and I feel highly motivated when I see my pupils learning something new and useful with my help.

The emphasis placed on the importance of being stricter with learners indicates that pre-service teachers may lean towards adopting a more authoritative teaching style in their future professional pursuits.

T1: I should have been stricter with the pupils because some of them didn't take me seriously.

A common issue discussed by the participants was the emotional reactions triggered by teaching. More than half of the respondents (n=8) reported feeling fear or stress and a sense of insecurity when performing various teaching tasks, highlighting the need for greater resilience. According to their accounts, they were afraid when pupils asked for translations of unfamiliar words (e.g., T4, T7) or posed difficult grammar questions (T5). T10 felt stressed due to the negative atmosphere in the classroom. T7 also mentioned feeling afraid to engage with the learners and “look them in the eyes.” T3 and T7 expressed stress related to their language proficiency. However, this was more of an exception, as the majority reported no difficulties in speaking English. The following excerpts illustrate this:

T4: Some pupils would bring up “interesting” words from songs or films that were difficult to translate. Sometimes it took really long, or they made no sense. So it was quite scary.

T8: I realized that I need to be more self-confident and resilient to stress so that pupils would perceive me as a “real” teacher.

3.1.4. Facilities

The analysis of the data revealed that various factors, such as teaching in shelters amidst air alarms (n=3, 20%), online teaching (n=5, 33%), electricity shortages, and poor internet connection (n=6, 40%), negatively impacted all participants in the instructional process. As reported by pre-service teachers, the context of war had a deleterious effect on motivation and attitudes toward language learning. Even experienced educators expressed serious concerns, as mentioned by the participants. The learners displayed a decrease in motivation, increased truancy, discipline problems, and a loss of self-discipline. Pre-service teachers faced challenges in maintaining learners' attention and interest during online teaching. Many misbehaved and cheated, e.g., as intentionally turning off the camera or playing music. Two respondents specifically mentioned difficulties in disciplining young learners during online teaching, while no such issues were encountered with adolescents. The following responses illustrate the challenges associated with this theme:

T1: The biggest challenge I faced was teaching in the shelter, where there were multiple classes held simultaneously.

T4: Unfortunately, learners tried to do their best, but due to frequent power cuts and air alarms, it was extremely hard for them. In addition, many of them were unable to attend lessons regularly, making it difficult to introduce and teach new material consistently.

T15: Online teaching was different from in-person classes, as students were not serious about studying most of the time. The level of their effectiveness and attention span significantly decreased. They viewed online studying as an unplanned vacation. As a result, some of them rarely joined online classes or were inattentive most of the time.

The participants also mentioned difficulties in choosing engaging activities suitable for an online format.

T8: One of the major challenges was being able to connect to the online class because my street never had electricity. Another challenge was creating interesting games and quizzes for the students.

3.1.5. Initiation into teaching

Integration into the educational community was identified as a particular area of concern for the respondents, particularly when taking on the role of an EFL teacher (n=4, 27%) and seeking acceptance from colleagues (n=3, 20%). Data from the narratives revealed that being accepted by the teaching staff, adapting to the school environment and expectations, and transitioning from the role of a learner to that of a teacher were among the biggest challenges encountered by pre-service teachers. The following excerpts exemplify these challenges:

T3: During my practicum in school, some of the biggest challenges I faced were adapting to the school's culture and routines, establishing connections with colleagues and students, and managing classroom behavior. It took me some time to understand the school's expectations and procedures, as well as to build rapport with the students. However, with the support of my cooperating teacher and other mentors, I was able to overcome these challenges and evolve as a teacher.

T6: Personally, my biggest challenge was fitting in and getting accepted by the teachers.

T 10: It was a great opportunity to fully immerse myself in the school atmosphere and "try on" the role of an English teacher, to see everything from within, so to speak.

T11: Although teaching was a bit hard, especially at the beginning, but it was a worthwhile experience to taste the life of a teacher.

Overall, the data analysis indicates that despite the numerous challenges encountered by pre-service teachers, the school practicum had a positive impact on their attitude and motivation toward teaching. As summarized by T12: "These challenges in the final run turned into benefits." There was only one report by T6, who realized after completing the practicum that teaching was not the career path they wanted to pursue.

T6: The practicum didn't provide me with enough preparation to give me the confidence and motivation to engage myself in teaching.

Similarly, T2 remarked that some of the challenging aspects of language teaching led her to doubt her competence and reconsider her intention to become a language teacher.

T2: There was an incident during my practice that made me question my teaching skills and whether I truly wanted to become a teacher.

Interestingly, many pre-service teachers emphasized creativity in language teaching as a way to resolve various issues and overcome challenges. Based on their responses, they reported experimenting or planning to experiment with language teaching approaches that cater to students' interests and needs to stimulate language learning motivation and mitigate disruptive behavior.

3.2. Results of the Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis results, displayed in Table 5, illustrate the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the challenges they experienced during their school practicum.

Table 5.

EFL Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Challenges

Aspects of EFL student teaching	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. How well were you prepared for your school practicum experience?	4.01	.749
2. How confident were you in speaking English to learners during your school practicum?	3.90	.742
3. How challenging was it for you to develop and deliver lesson plans during your school practicum?	2.59	1.04
4. How challenging was it for you to select appropriate language teaching methods and techniques?	2.51	1.01
5. How challenging was it for you to establish rapport with your learners?	1.89	.968
6. How challenging was it for you to manage student behavior?	2.43	.891
7. How challenging was it for you to develop your learners' speaking skills?	2.66	.958
8. How challenging was it for you to develop your learners' listening skills?	2.59	1.05
9. How challenging was it for you to develop your learners' reading skills?	2.30	1.13
10. How challenging was it for you to develop your learners' writing skills?	2.54	1.08
11. How challenging was it for you to teach grammar?	2.50	1.01
12. How challenging was it for you to teach vocabulary?	1.93	.903
13. How challenging was it for you to assess students' knowledge?	2.33	.999
14. If you had teaching experience, how difficult was it for you to manage the shift to online teaching and learning?	2.28	1.01
15. How well did you maintain your own emotional well-being during practicum?	4.00	1.05
16. How challenging was it for you to get accepted by school teachers?	2.15	.937
17. How challenging was it for you to assume the role of a teacher?	2.65	.740
18. How much did you learn from your school practicum experience?	4.34	.811
19. How likely are you to pursue a career in teaching a foreign language after your school practicum experience?	3.13	1.27
20. How valuable do you believe your school practicum experience was in preparing you for a career in teaching a foreign language?	4.03	.913

Based on the data, the respondents expressed confidence in their level of competence. They felt adequately prepared for the responsibilities of language teaching (M=4.01) and confident in their ability to speak English to learners (M=3.90), indicating a perceived level of language proficiency. The challenges they reported were moderate in relation to lesson plan

preparation and delivery (M=2.59) and the selection of appropriate methodology (M=2.51). Discipline issues (M=2.43) and establishing rapport with learners (M=1.89) were not considered major challenges. Surprisingly, the shift to online teaching posed only a moderate degree of challenge (M=2.28). The pre-service teachers' emotional well-being was not under serious pressure either (M=4.00). Overall, the participants did not perceive any aspect of language teaching as very or extremely challenging.

The results of the respondents' perceptions of the challenges of teaching language competencies and skills indicated a moderate level of challenge. Teaching speaking emerged as the most challenging aspect, followed by teaching listening, writing, grammar, and reading. Conversely, the pre-service teachers perceived teaching vocabulary as a less challenging area. These findings are consistent with the qualitative data obtained earlier in this study.

Next, the qualitative data analysis suggested that the pre-service teachers were significantly influenced by their interactions with learners, particularly in terms of discipline issues. The second most frequently discussed theme was related to instruction. It was of interest to examine whether the level of challenge associated with the "Learners" theme was higher than that of the "Instruction" theme. For this, the variables pertaining to lesson planning and management, as well as selecting appropriate methodology, were merged to form the "Instruction" theme. Similarly, the variables encompassing learner rapport and student misbehavior were likewise merged to represent the "Learner" theme. A Wilcoxon test was conducted to compare the responses regarding these two themes (Table 6).

Table 6.

Results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Ranks</i>	<i>Test Statistics a</i>	
"learners" – "instruction"	Negative Ranks	28 ^a	43.14	1208.00	Z	-4.586 ^b
	Positive Ranks	72 ^b	53.36	3842.00	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Ties	40 ^c			a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test	
	Total	140			b. Based on negative ranks	

a. learners < instruction
b. learners > instruction
c. learners = instruction

The test results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the respondents' perceptions of challenges related to learners and instruction ($z = -4.586$, $p > .001$). Based on this finding, it can be inferred that the respondents consider organizing instruction (Mdn=5.00) more challenging than dealing with learners (Mdn=4.00).

The evaluation results of the school practicum experience revealed that the participants highly valued the experience gained from the practicum. A significant proportion of the respondents, 76 individuals (54.3%), reported learning a great deal from the practicum, while 38 participants (27.1%) explained that they learned quite a bit. Only two students (1.4%) mentioned that they learned very little. Furthermore, the majority of participants, 48 (34.3%), considered student teaching extremely valuable, and 60 participants (42.9%) regarded it as

very valuable in preparing them for a teaching career. However, despite the positive experiences and perceived value of the practicum, the respondents expressed hesitancy in pursuing teaching as a career. Thus, only 22 respondents (15.7%) expressed a strong determination to choose teaching as their career path, while an additional 34 individuals (24.3%) indicated a high likelihood of pursuing a teaching career. However, 46 participants (32.9%) had doubts regarding their professional choice, and 22 individuals (15.7%) were firmly opposed to pursuing the teaching profession.

4. Discussion

This study explored the perceptions of challenges EFL pre-service teachers face during their school practicum experience in Ukraine. To this end, qualitative and quantitative data were collected to elucidate the challenging aspects of student teaching. In-depth qualitative information about language teaching challenges was garnered through narratives from 15 EFL pre-service teachers. Additionally, quantitative data were gathered through a researcher-designed questionnaire, which was completed by 140 pre-service teachers, allowing for a broader examination of the challenges encountered during the practicum.

Initiation into professional activity has been described in the literature as the most challenging stage in a teaching career. During the school practicum, pre-service teachers are confronted with multiple expectations from their educational program, learners, and school administration. In Ukraine, these difficulties are compounded by the ongoing military intervention, which necessitates the organization of instruction both offline and online amidst life-threatening conditions. For pre-service teachers who are still in the process of learning to teach amidst such war-induced circumstances, this presents a significant hurdle. Therefore, the study of challenges in this setting was deemed highly relevant.

The qualitative analysis revealed five interwoven themes that encompass the challenges experienced by pre-service teachers, including “learners,” “instruction,” “teacher identity,” “facilities,” and “initiation into teaching.” These themes link to challenges related to interacting with learners, teaching EFL, adapting to online education and the classroom environment, individual characteristics, and transitioning into the teaching profession. While the participants acknowledged the significant challenges associated with working with learners, they also described it as a rewarding experience.

Addressing discipline issues, disruptive behavior, and learners’ reluctance to engage with the instructional material were among the most frequently discussed aspects of the practicum. These findings were anticipated, as discipline problems and low learner motivation are common challenges even for experienced teachers (Akcan, 2016; Yunus et al., 2010). However, in line with earlier research, motivated learners who displayed a positive attitude and respect toward the pre-service teachers acted as a significant source of motivation for them (Arslan, 2021).

In relation to instruction, the participants reported difficulties with various aspects, including lesson planning and management, clear teaching, and the selection of appropriate language teaching methodologies. Interestingly, the quantitative follow-up did not fully corroborate the qualitative findings suggesting that learners and organizing EFL instruction were perceived as challenging. The pre-service teachers self-reported only moderate challenges with discipline issues and learner rapport. Similarly, organizing instruction was also perceived as only moderately challenging. Furthermore, the results of a Wilcoxon test indicated that organizing instruction posed a higher challenge than dealing with learners. This suggests that

the participants perceived instruction as more demanding than managing learner-related issues.

Speaking was found to be the most challenging area of the language-specific aspects of EFL teaching, thus reprising previous research (Copland et al., 2014; Faez & Karas, 2019). This observation was consistent throughout the qualitative phase of the study and was further supported by the quantitative data. The participants consistently rated teaching speaking as the most challenging area, while vocabulary teaching was viewed as the least challenging. This suggests that the participants consider teaching speaking as the most demanding aspect and vocabulary instruction as comparatively less challenging in the context of EFL instruction.

As suggested by the results of qualitative analysis, the respondents were seriously challenged by having to teach amidst war, which involved the transition to online education or teaching in a shelter. In their narratives, the pre-service teachers recounted its negative effect on all participants of the instructional process, particularly the learners' attitudes. However, the quantitative data failed to confirm this finding, as online teaching only moderately challenged the respondents. This finding contradicts the general observations made in the literature regarding the perceived level of challenge associated with online language teaching (Back et al., 2021).

A significant discrepancy between the study's quantitative and qualitative phases was documented in relation to the theme of "identity," which encompasses the pre-service teachers' individual characteristics. While the qualitative data indicate that the participants view their level of competence as evolving and far from their aspirational selves, underscoring the significance of self-development, the quantitative data contradict this. Interestingly, the students expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to fulfill teaching responsibilities in the questionnaire. They also felt very confident in their EFL proficiency, which runs counter to previous research in this field (Bozkurt, 2021; Kabilan et al., 2020).

Analogously, the findings revealed mixed results when examining the pre-service teachers' emotional well-being in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this inquiry. In the narratives, fear and stress experienced during practicum surfaced as a matter of concern. However, a similar question asked in the questionnaire produced a relatively low indicator of stress. This also runs counter to observations made in the literature, where beginning teachers were often found to be emotionally vulnerable during their early career stages (Beltman et al., 2011). Furthermore, while several pre-service teachers expressed concerns about the transition into the teaching role and being accepted by other professional community members in the qualitative data, the quantitative data demonstrated a moderate level of challenge in this aspect.

Taken together, while the pertinent literature is replete with the discussion of the challenging nature of early teaching experience, the participants in this study tend to downplay it by overestimating their current level of competence, as indicated by the quantitative data. This finding was partly anticipated, as novice teachers were shown to overestimate their actual level of competence in previous publications (Norton, 2019).

Moreover, this finding finds repercussions in the study of Lőrincz and Greba (2022), according to whom novice language teachers with 1-5 years of teaching experience perceived the level of challenge to be lower compared to their more experienced counterparts (e.g., 10-

15 years). This suggests that pre-service teachers may not yet fully grasp the intricacies involved in language teaching and require a longer period of time to develop the nuanced insider knowledge that expert teachers possess. According to Tsui (2009), expert teachers demonstrate sensitivity and possess extensive knowledge across various aspects of language teaching, enabling them to discern potentially challenging areas. Therefore, it can be inferred that pre-service teachers are yet to deepen their professional knowledge and gain more experience to form an adequate assessment of their actual competence in teaching.

Overall, the summative findings of this study's quantitative and qualitative parts underscore the high-value pre-service teachers place on their school practicum experience. They acknowledge the challenges encountered during the practicum, yet they demonstrate resilience and stamina by not feeling overwhelmed by these difficulties. Moreover, a majority of the participants reported benefiting from these challenges, treating them as opportunities for growth and learning.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on the challenges encountered by EFL pre-service teachers during their school practicum experience in Ukraine by combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. The study's qualitative findings reveal that pre-service teachers' perceptions of challenges are encapsulated within five intersecting themes, such as "learners," "instruction," "teacher identity," "facilities," and "initiation into teaching," which were described as particularly concerning.

However, the quantitative follow-up of these outcomes revealed that the challenges identified by the participants were mainly perceived as moderate. Despite the detailed discussions in the narratives of the issues related to learner discipline, rapport, or organizing instruction, the questionnaire responses indicated that these challenges were rated as slightly to moderately challenging. A similar pattern was observed in the "facilities" theme about online student teaching or teaching in life-threatening circumstances. Although these challenges were described as very challenging in the narratives, they were rated moderate in the questionnaire. Interestingly, while the participants expressed concerns about their current level of competence in the narratives, they reported a high level of confidence in the questionnaire.

In summary, this study underscores the significance of practical preparation in shaping EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of challenges. It is crucial for teacher education programs to furnish prospective teachers with ample opportunities to engage in classroom settings, leading them to more objective self-appraisal and an understanding of the challenges they may face. It is worth noting that most participants appreciated their initial teaching experience and felt adequately prepared for the teaching responsibilities. However, despite this positive experience, the pre-service teachers still remain hesitant about their decision to pursue a teaching career. This calls for caution and further exploration, as the reasons behind their low teaching motivation seem to extend beyond the scope of teacher education programs in this country.

The study is not exempt from limitations stemming from the sample's size and its confinement to a specific sociocultural context. However, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a triangulation process lends credibility to the findings of this investigation. To further advance this research, future studies could explore and compare

the challenges experienced by different groups of pre-service teachers with varying lengths and quality of practical preparation.

Note on Ethical Issues

The authors confirm that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules of Ukraine (Date of Confirmation: 01/09/2023).

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