

Experiences during the Practicum: Pre-service English Teachers Teaching Very Young Learners in Ecuador

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 27 Feb 2025 Last revised: 9 Jul 2026 Accepted: 16 Jul 2026 Available online: 24 Jul 2026 Keywords: Pre-service teachers Practicum Experience Very young learners Emotions	<i>Practicum programs provide pre-service teachers with the skills and competencies to navigate the teaching experience effectively. The insights gained from three pre-service teachers participating in a practicum program aimed at instructing very young learners within the Ecuadorian context are invaluable for understanding the iterative process that student teachers engage in and informing necessary adjustments to educational programs. This study involved six-semester students enrolled in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages at an Ecuadorian public university, seeking to explore their experiences during the practicum. Data was collected through document analysis, written narrative with a visual component, and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. The findings revealed a cyclical process experienced by the pre-service teachers, beginning with their initial emotions and teaching beliefs and culminating in a sense of fulfillment regarding their experiences, consisting of six specific stages. Special emphasis was placed on psychological factors, such as managing emotions before and during the teaching experience. It also highlights the need to incorporate this emerging issue into teacher development within higher education programs. The study also emphasizes the importance of linking theory and practice as a continuous process to better prepare future English teachers for real-world classroom environments.</i>

INTRODUCTION

Practicum has been highlighted as of paramount importance in teacher education as well as pre-service teachers' readiness before involvement in a real teaching context (Albakri et al., 2017; Starkey & Rawlins, 2012). Involvement in practicum programs has been deemed a mandatory requirement in Ecuadorian higher education. Practicum programs correspond to a close connection between society and the substantive function of teaching, aiming at the integral formation of students who complement theory with practice in the teaching-learning processes and promoting spaces for experiential learning and critical reflection (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2022). This comprehensive approach plays a vital role in the training process, broadening students' academic perspectives and strengthening their capacity to adjust and succeed in diverse educational settings. Practicum programs significantly contribute

to developing teaching competencies in various educational contexts. Giving student teachers real-world classroom experience allows them to solidify their foundational training. It provides a strong base for developing practical and reflective skills for a successful teaching career (Reiban et al., 2024).

In EFL contexts, the study of pre-service teachers on practicum has rapidly received increasing attention from researchers in terms of reflective practice, experiences, challenges, and support (Al-Jaro, 2023; Albakri et al., 2017; Li et al., 2023; Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021; Syamdianita & Cahyono, 2021; Velasco, 2019), preparedness, and self-efficacy (Faez & Valeo, 2012) and conceptions and perceptions (Chaaban et al., 2019; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Kelly, 2018). Although studies related to pre-service teachers have been explored in terms of beliefs (Santos & Luque-Agulló, 2025) or perceptions of stakeholders in the Ecuadorian educational context, in-depth studies elucidating holistic experiences during practicum programs to teach very young learners have not been well-documented. Considering the rapid integration of English in the early years, it is doubtlessly crucial to explore the issues that teaching at this level involves (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador [MinEduc], 2016). Revealing the process and possible challenges that pre-service teachers face when facing real class scenarios can help policymakers adjust EFL teaching programs to better equip student teachers in their initial experiences.

Research has shown that multiple factors affect pre-service teachers' experience in practicum programs. Therefore, this research exploration aims to reveal English language pre-service teachers' experience teaching very young learners in Ecuador's public kindergartens. This group of learners is for whom English is not part of their curriculum in Ecuador, and little has been investigated. The following overarching question was formulated to guide the inquiry:

1. What are the experiences of EFL pre-service teachers in the practicum program?

LITERATURE REVIEW

ELT practicum

Pre-service teacher education practicums bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world teaching experiences (Moscoso et al., 2023; Olsson et al., 2021). They are designed to be experiential and reflective, allowing students to learn by doing and critically analyze their actions. By integrating pre-service teachers into real scenarios, it facilitates the practical application of theoretical knowledge and introduces pedagogical innovations that enrich students' academic experiences (Reiban et al., 2024). However, its inclusion does not guarantee exposure to, or the acquisition of, pedagogical approaches aligned with the curriculum (Serrano et al., 2024). Pre-service teachers require increased support and mentorship to address their students' diverse language needs effectively. This support should help them translate educational theory into practical classroom language instruction, navigate the complexities of curriculum, policy, and context, and foster their ongoing professional growth within authentic teaching environments (Koşar & Bedir, 2019; O'Hara et al., 2020).

To equip pre-service teachers with strong academic foundations and practical teaching experience, a successful Second Language Teacher Education Program should also foster a deeper understanding of the teaching profession within the pre-service teacher. This includes helping them reflect on their teaching identity and on their role as educators (Velasco, 2019), more real-world classroom experiences, and sharing sessions with experienced teachers (Chandran et al., 2022). Additionally, Albakri et al. (2017) found that a thorough school orientation plays a pivotal role in preparing pre-service teachers before they are placed in actual teaching and learning environments. A study by Velasco (2019) on 35 pre-service teachers highlighted the process of reflective identity construction in practicum. The analysis was done on participants' final reports to infer their conceptualizations of the practicum and how these conceptualizations shaped their perception of themselves as prospective English teachers. The most prominent theme from the reflections was the positive general impression of the practicum experience. A later study by García-Noblejas et al. (2023) investigated student-teacher perceptions regarding the benefits of the teacher education practicum. This cross-sectional study included 455 pre-service teachers. The results confirmed that the variable that most shapes students' perceptions is the practicum experience. The study also concludes that further examination is needed to examine the educational benefits of practicum. The teaching practicum may, in some cases, redefine the learning process and place the academic community at the center of a movement toward transformative education.

English language teaching in Ecuador

In Ecuador, English as a foreign language education begins in the second grade and has been part of the curriculum since 2016 (MinEduc, 2016). However, South America has had more children involved in English learning since the twentieth century (Johnstone, 2019). In the Ecuadorian context, English is currently being introduced in private kindergartens, which suggests that a practicum program in this area could represent a missing piece in the broader puzzle of English language teaching. EFL teachers often draw on their knowledge and experience in early childhood education and child development and incorporate them into their EFL instruction (Reynolds et al., 2021). However, lowering the age at which children start learning English has led to a shortage of qualified teachers. As a result, teachers who are used to teaching older students are often assigned to younger learners, bringing their established teaching beliefs and practices with them and influencing the instruction of the younger group (Puchta, 2019). This is no different in Ecuador, where many future teachers who previously taught older students in high school are now enrolled in programs to teach young learners.

Teaching very young learners

Concerning very young learners' characteristics, preschool-aged children naturally exhibit curiosity and enthusiasm for exploring their surroundings and acquiring new experiences (Uysal & Yavuz, 2015); these characteristics influence foreign language learning behavior and achievements (Waddington, 2023). Various theories describe how learning takes place during early childhood. Gelman (2009) and Piaget (1970) emphasized that young learners construct knowledge by interacting with their environment. Similarly, Johnstone (2019) highlighted that young learners excel in developing analytical, cognitive, metalinguistic, and sociocultural skills

and attaining native-like phonological features. Therefore, as Koyuncu et al. (2023) noted, early education allows teachers to engage students through interactive play-based and hands-on activities in children's language learning, as concrete materials aid comprehension and engagement. As well as involving implicit and explicit processes (Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). Younger children rely on implicit learning, memorizing chunks of language and gradually producing them over time, while explicit learning tends to emerge later. Although their progress might seem slower initially, consistent exposure to rich input and meaningful interaction ultimately leads to success (Galeas et al., 2025). Teachers' accents and the limited amount of L2 input shape what can realistically be expected. Effective teaching practices involve engaging, meaning-focused, and playful activities within a supportive environment (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023). Teachers incorporate activities such as physical movements (e.g., walking, running, dancing) and fine motor tasks (e.g., drawing, coloring, cutting) to keep students engaged and motivated. Age plays a crucial role in language acquisition, with early exposure being essential for achieving native-like pronunciation. While cognitive maturity offers older learners a short-term advantage, younger learners benefit more in the long run (Uysal & Yavuz, 2015).

Therefore, the main goal of English as a foreign language teachers should be to foster the child's overall development by addressing their personal, social, emotional, linguistic, cognitive, physical, and creative growth, along with enhancing their literacy and numeracy skills (Prošić-Santovac & Savić, 2021). In 2023, a systematic review informed that key conditions to implement pre-primary EFL programs include positive stakeholder attitudes, age-appropriate curricula integrating language and developmental domains, teachers proficient in early childhood education and care, FL methodology, L1, and the target language, child-friendly classrooms with engaging materials and structured FL activities, parental support and involvement in children's FL learning, and programs that value and build on children's prior knowledge and achievements (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023) unfortunately, many crucial factors are missing in the Ecuadorian context as it is not part of the curriculum (MinEduc, 2016).

Studies highlight the importance of hands-on, engaging activities and the role of implicit learning in young children's language acquisition. However, teacher-centered methodologies and structural constraints often limit opportunities for children to exercise agency and actively participate in their learning. Enhancing pedagogical training and incorporating play-based, interactive approaches can better support preschoolers' language development (Waddington, 2023).

METHODS

Research design

The purpose of this study was to explore the emotional, pedagogical, and professional process of pre-service teachers' experience during their practicum program to teach very young learners. This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach. A case study can thoroughly identify the intricacy and uniqueness of the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018), as it describes the experience of EFL pre-service teachers during the practicum program.

Context

This research was conducted in a practicum program designed and executed by an Ecuadorian public University. The program was designed in four stages to introduce English in public kindergartens in Quevedo, Ecuador's Coastal region. It is currently in the second stage, when all the data has been gathered. The second stage encompassed a Project-based learning approach. In this context, student teachers assumed active roles in several pedagogical tasks, including diagnosing children's prior knowledge, adapting the content for an eight-week program, implementing lessons through project-based activities, and monitoring progress and assessment. Each lesson plan was collaboratively designed by the team assigned to a class, under the guidance of a university tutor, but was primarily adapted by the participants based on their familiarity with the children and classroom characteristics. This process—of planning, adapting, and implementing lessons—served as a central source of their professional experiences, as it required them to make pedagogical decisions, negotiate ideas within their teams, and respond to real classroom challenges. Moreover, before the intervention, all student teachers received instruction in project-based learning and in their specific duties and responsibilities during the practicum, which shaped how they perceived and enacted their roles. These experiences, situated within the practicum carried out in a public kindergarten in Los Ríos province, Ecuador, provided the basis for the reflections and insights analyzed in this study.

Participants

The study participants were three pre-service teachers enrolled in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages career at an Ecuadorian public university. All of them were working as a team (co-teaching) with the same class. The purposive sampling method was chosen to select the participants involved in this study, which helps researchers understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of this study is not to generalize to a larger population, but to gain in-depth insights into their experiences during the practicum. A small group allows the researcher to explore each participant's perspective comprehensively, uncovering meanings, challenges, and reflections that might be overlooked in larger samples.

The sampling selection was based on the following criteria to ensure diverse experiences and perspectives: a) pre-service students with previous experience teaching adolescents in public education; b) no previous experience teaching children; c) voluntary participation; d) Ecuadorian; e) B2 level of English proficiency. For the discussion of the findings, pseudonyms will be used as follows:

Romina, Carlos, and María are all 21 years old. They all studied in public high schools. Romina and Carlos have taken English classes abroad; however, all of them hold a B2 level of English. The pre-service teachers were in the sixth semester of their EFL career, and it was their first real teaching experience, teaching very young learners.

Data collection and instruments

A multi-method design was used in this study, following Creswell (2015). Four methods were chosen to better address this study's research question: document analysis to examine pedagogical decisions and interventions, written narratives, and interviews to gain insights into their emotions, roles, and challenges, and finally, visual narratives to reinforce patterns identified in the previous instruments. Two experts in teaching English as a foreign language validated the written narrative and the interview below. After that, they were piloted with another pre-service teacher who participated in the program. Each instrument provides rich data to triangulate information.

Document analysis

Although document analysis has been used as a stand-alone method in research, in this study, it serves mostly as a relevant complement to better answer the research question (Bowen, 2009). Lesson plans and journals of activities were collected at the end of the practicum. The elaboration of lesson plans was part of the practicum program. The lesson plans responded to a communicative approach, incorporating the discussion topic, communicative aim, three stages (activities or procedures), class organization, time, and material. It also included a section for anticipated problems and solutions. The participants had eight weeks of practical teaching practicum, so eight lesson plans were developed that provide rich information about pedagogical decisions.

Similarly, after each day of practice, the participants were requested to write down the activities developed in each session. This document is called the "Journal of Activities," and it is part of the practicum documentation requested by the university. From this kind of journal, relevant information regarding strategies not mentioned in the lesson plan, as part of the nature of the class, can be examined, as well as challenges.

Written narrative

Written narrative (WN) allows researchers to gain a thorough understanding of individuals' experiences, as narrative inquiry seeks to explore these experiences from the perspective of those directly involved (Barkhuizen, 2014), thereby enhancing the reliability of the data. After completing the practicum, the pre-service teachers were instructed to write a post-reflective narrative essay. This document reflects their pre-service experience during the practicum, highlighting their initial thoughts on teaching very young learners and how their perceptions changed over time.

Visual narratives

Learners' drawings allow participants to externalize their histories and identities, providing rich multimodal data for analysis (Kalaja et al., 2008). Therefore, participants illustrated their most prominent experience, challenge, or achievement before, during, or after the practicum (Later situated according to additional data results)

Interview

A semi-structured interview allowed researchers to explore what each pre-service teacher experienced during the practicum and how they approached particular issues (Mears, 2012). Additionally, an in-depth interview aligns with case study research and is a flexible data collection tool (Cohen et al., 2018). The interview was conducted individually and in the participants' mother tongue. It took 30 to 40 minutes and involved ten open-ended questions with topics related to challenges, support, and reflection.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved four sources of data: practicum documents, written narratives, interview transcripts, and visual narratives. The practicum documents included eight lesson plans and three activity journals collected at the end of the practicum period. Written narratives ($n = 3$) and individual interview transcripts were also included in the analysis. Each dataset was prepared according to its nature before analysis. Textual data, including activity journals, written narratives, and interview transcripts, were organized and analyzed through thematic coding procedures following Corbin and Strauss's (2015) guidelines.

The coding process followed three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, relevant segments of data were identified and assigned initial codes. In the axial coding stage, codes were compared and grouped according to similarities to establish relationships among categories and identify emerging patterns. During selective coding, categories were refined and integrated to develop broader themes related to the research questions. ATLAS.ti software was used to organize the textual data, manage codes, and support the systematic analysis process. Memos and network views within ATLAS.ti were used to refine categories, document analytical decisions, and support the development of themes. Some data were originally collected in English, while others, particularly the interviews, were collected in Spanish. After the analysis stage, the interview data were translated into English. Artificial intelligence was initially used as a translation support tool, and the translation was subsequently reviewed by a professional translator to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' voices.

Visual narratives were analyzed separately through visual content analysis and were used to reinforce and triangulate findings from the other data sources. Similarly, lesson plans were mainly used to examine pedagogical strategies throughout the program and to complement the interpretation of participants' experiences in the program.

Finally, because the researcher served as both the researcher and the program director, potential bias during data analysis, particularly during coding and interpretation, was acknowledged. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague who was not involved in the program. This process allowed preliminary codes and themes to be discussed, challenged, and refined, contributing to a more transparent interpretation of the findings.

RESULTS

The results will present the six stages that emerge from the cyclical process obtained from the data, namely: initial stage (emotions and teaching beliefs), Challenge stage (teaching realities), adaptive stage (responsive teaching practices), teacher-student connection (rapport and culture), growth stage (professional and personal development), and reward stage (fulfilment and impact).

Overall reflection

After the analysis, a theoretical model emerges from the data, suggesting a transformative process of the pre-service teachers' experience during the practicum program. Figure 1 exemplifies this cyclical process.

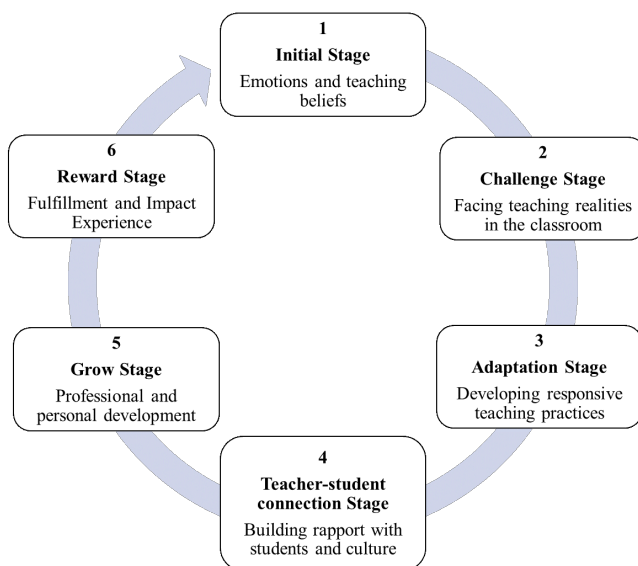


Figure 1 Stages of pre-service teachers' transformation in Early Education experience

Emotions and teaching beliefs

The cyclical process begins with an initial stage in which pre-service teachers experience negative perceptions or fears about teaching young learners, mainly due to a lack of experience or assumptions about how difficult it is to manage children in this age group. Most of this information was reported from interviews and narratives. For instance, Romina expressed a lack of confidence due to her null experience in a classroom with young learners: *"I had always believed that working with children was not for me, but where did the idea come from? Because I had never had a similar experience. Maybe it was for living together with my four-year-old cousin, who sometimes could be a little bit exhausting"* (Romina, WN). Similarly, Carlos experienced mixed emotions and uncertainty when he stated, *"When I found out that I was going to do my internship as an English teacher in a kindergarten, I was excited, scared, and nervous all at the same time"* (Carlos, WN). In his interview, he reflected

further, *“One thing is to plan according to what one thinks, but to face a quite different reality”* (Carlos, interview). María’s preconceptions and uncertainty were not so different from those of her peers. She confessed, *“I felt it was too difficult and wasn’t cut out for it. ...I found their tantrums and demands exhausting. So, when I knew that I would be involved with preschoolers, I was worried because I didn’t know what I was going to face”* (María, WN).

This uncertainty was also tied to the novelty of teaching young children in their local context. Carlos acknowledged, *“I knew that this time would be something different – I had never worked directly with young children before, and I knew it would be a completely new experience. My expectations were high, but I was also aware that teaching children, especially in a foreign language, in the social and cultural context of our city could be quite a challenge”* (Carlos, WN). The team’s overthinking was exemplified in the way they approached planning their initial lessons: *“I think our problem in general is that we were like very perfectionists, we wanted to find the best, and we spent a lot of time in the meeting looking for ideas on Pinterest, little things like that...”* (María, Interview). This initial stage was closely related to beliefs shaped by societal and personal experiences, leading them to make judgments with trepidation and experience negative emotions such as fear, uncertainty, worry, and nervousness. Yet, despite this difficult beginning, their reflections showed progress; as María concluded in her journal at the end of the program, *I am pleased to see how much they have learned, even surpassing my own expectations.* (María, Journal of activities).

Facing teaching realities in the classroom

The second stage mainly focused on classroom management issues such as controlling students’ behavior, short attention span, and refusal to participate in class. Romina expressed that managing students’ behavior was challenging; she said, *“Controlling the children’s behaviors was really challenging and often I made me feel frustrated and disorientated. My big fear was that my tutor arrived and find a total chaos in the classroom.”* (Interview). María’s also expressed that *“we had to deal with the disruptive behavior of some students who preferred to play instead of join the activities”* (María, WN). And Carlos also agreed with them and expressed, *“They were full of energy, often hitting each other, playing games, shouting, or losing focus completely. This left me overwhelmed”* (Carlos, WN). To deal with these challenges, participants implement different strategies such as circle times or rewards. *“The activity, ‘The Magic Circle,’ is conducted daily. Together with my team, we decided that the “Study” time would be carried out in this way in every class to create a more comfortable environment for the students.”* (Carlos, Journal of activities). The participants mentioned *“Sometimes we use that strategy of giving them stickers or fake money (María, Interview) or to introduce teaching through the game with Legos, which was a daily routine before starting the class”.* (Romina, WN)

Pre-service teachers must also deal with their emotions and their classroom learners. All participants experience an overload of negative emotions when dealing with classroom management and children’s demands, but little was reported what they did to respond to these challenges. Romina acknowledged feeling disoriented when the classroom noise signaled a loss of control and hesitated to ask for help from her tutor or someone else.

She said, “...there were some very gray days... but one is kind of blinded in the world, one is disoriented.” (Romina, Interview). Carlos found the children’s emotional attachment disorienting and did not know how to respond to those needs: “Another challenge was the emotional attachment the children had. Some would cry if they didn’t get the attention they wanted. At first, I was frustrated because I wasn’t sure how to respond to these emotional needs while still trying to teach” (Carlos, WN). María also witnesses children’s emotions. He found out that one of the students was reluctant to participate in class. She reported, “I tried to include him in the activity, he refused, making gestures of fear and mistrust” (María, WN). Only, Romina reported how she kept calm before attempting to instruct the children (Romina, interview).

Language communication is another issue that emerged among children at an early age. Participants found teaching a foreign language problematic due to learners’ L1 limitation in Speaking. “One of the main challenges I see in teaching a second language is that the children weren’t even fully familiar with their first language yet. Many had speech difficulties, and it was hard to understand them, even in their native language.” (Carlos, Interview). This implies that Carlos sees L1 skills domains as of utmost importance to learn a second language. Maria articulates the same idea; she expressed her worries as learners could not speak Spanish. “They didn’t even master Spanish, that was quite difficult because there were children who didn’t even speak fully, they only said “mom,” “pa,” or something like that, they tried to babble, so if they didn’t speak Spanish, it was almost like—I would say, right?—it’s going to be impossible to teach them English.” (María, Interview). Also, Romina mentioned as a challenge in the classroom: “the pronunciation or speech, because some children did not speak.” (Romina, Interview). They dealt these issues by using their first language, supporting the new language with flashcards, games, and movement (Journal of activities).

Developing responsive teaching practices

This stage portrays how, over time, participants could adjust their methods to create an engaging, interactive learning environment tailored to young learners and their needs. Carlos mentioned the challenge encountered at the beginning of lesson planning: Maria said, “In the beginning, planning the lessons was a challenge; thinking of new activities, games, and didactic materials was so complicated, but with time it became easier and even enjoyable” (WN).

The following table shows the different pedagogical strategies reported in the lesson plans.

Table 1
Activities implemented for teaching very young learners

Type of activity	Frequency
Hands-on activities	10
Collaborative activities	7
Play-based learning activities	16
Social and emotional learning	1
Task based-learning activities	0

Type of activity	Frequency
Pedagogical strategies	0
Music	28
Outdoor activities	4
Storytelling	1
TPR activities (Total Physical Response)	11
Visual resources	15
Projects	3
Role-play	3
Tactile/Kinesthetic resources	7

Table 1 reports the frequency of use of each of the pedagogical strategies employed by the pre-service teachers in their lesson plans (lesson plans were elaborated as a team). After counting the times they appear in the documents, music was the most predominant (28 times), just followed by play-based learning activities (16 times), visual resources (16 times), and TPR activities (11 times). This report is clearly supported by Carlos, who mentioned using storytelling, puppets, and songs to make lessons more enjoyable. *“I realized that young children learn best when they are having fun, so for my part, I started to incorporate more games, songs, and storytelling into the lesson plan I created. I used puppets, games, songs, and also visual aids to make the lessons more interactive and hold their attention for longer periods”* (Carlos, WN). In week 2, Romina reported in her journal of activities: Today’s class was a complete success. I noticed that children learn very well when the content is embedded in games. (Journal of activities). The implementation of these resources resulted in a remarkable improvement in knowledge retention and a significant increase in the children’s motivation. (María, Journal of activities).

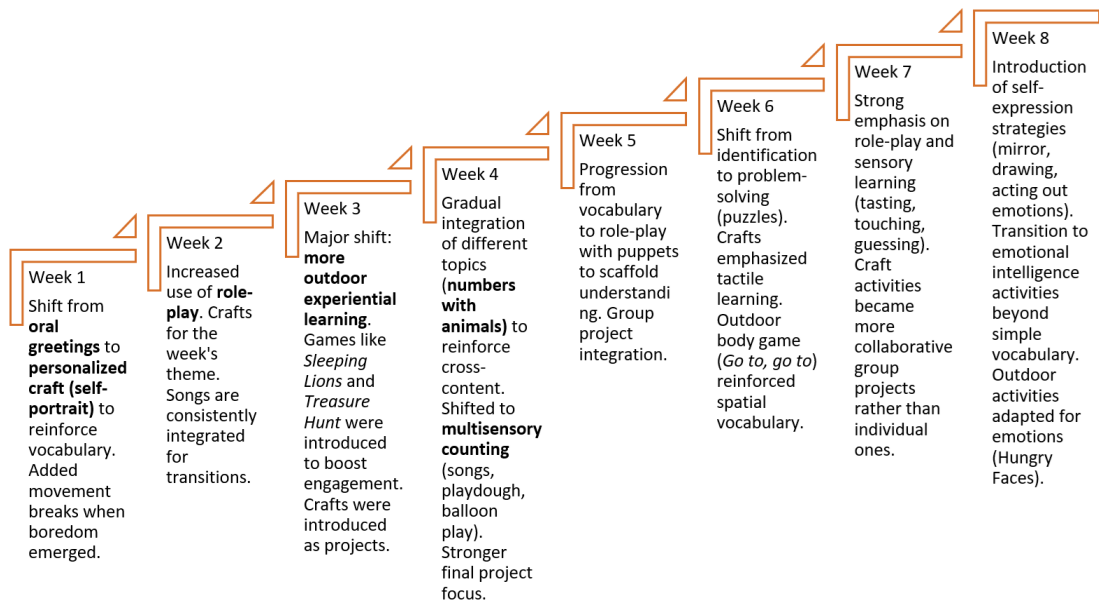


Figure 2 Week-by-Week changes in lesson plans (Units 1–8)

Source: Lesson plans and journal of activities

Figure 2 suggests a gradual implementation of more challenging activities. For instance, projects were introduced in week 3 and problem-solving activities in week 6. Activities like this were reported to not only increase vocabulary but also enhance their capacity to observe and describe, like the one explained by Carlos in his journal of activities. They also carried out art projects, such as creating nature collages, in which they used newly learned vocabulary to describe their work. This activity fostered a love for nature and expanded their ability to observe and describe in English, integrating language learning with exploration of the natural world. (Journal of activities). Moreover, the integration of more sophisticated activities is evidence of what Marial recalled "...likewise, with the kids we tried everything; if one strategy didn't work, we looked for another." (WN). The student teachers acknowledged the need for change in their lesson plans and what activities to integrate. Romina asserted "...We had to have these two sides, some movement activities, kinesthetic, and some activities that they could concentrate on their own...", "...we always tried like to make crafts out of cardboard for the children..." (Interview). The information reported by the participants demonstrated a shift from traditional approaches to flexible, play-based, and developmentally appropriate strategies.

Building rapport with students and their culture

This stage emphasizes how creating a positive classroom environment and emotional bonds enhances student engagement and teacher satisfaction, forming the foundation of meaningful teaching. Pre-service teachers developed emotional connections with young learners and recognized the importance of building a supportive and safe classroom environment to form the foundations of meaningful teaching.

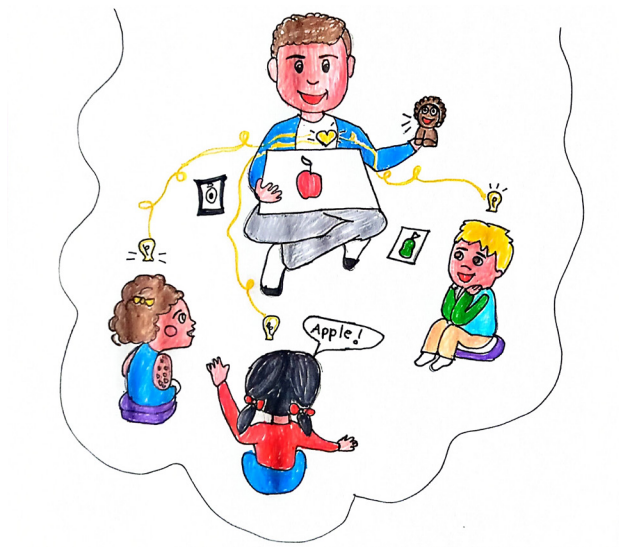


Figure 3 Carlos portrays teaching as an act of love and connection

Note: Image permissions granted

As observed in the picture, the teacher explains a class with students sitting in a circle (the activity they decided to implement from the third week and the team call “the magic circle”). The children seem curious, engaged, and enjoying the class. It shows that students and the teacher are equal members of a community. It facilitates eye contact between *all* students, not just between the student and the teacher. This makes it easier for students to engage in whole-group activity, thus boosting participation and reducing the fear of a “performance” for the teacher. The picture also reflects the teacher’s confidence, getting a close connection with the students, using different materials such as puppets and visuals to maintain interest. Carlos asserted, *“Teaching is not just about words. It is about creating a place where children learn with joy and curiosity”* (Carlos, VN). Carlos reiterated his experience: *“Part of my role was to create a comforting and supportive environment for them”* (Carlos, WN).

Also, Romina exemplifies the rapport created with the young learners. *“so the children arrived happy, and when we arrived, they hugged us, they said to us, yes, good morning, hello”* (Romina, Interview). She emphasized the relevance of being a true motivator and providing positive feedback to students. Romina related, *“My style has always been about motivating, this positive reinforcement for students, because I feel it always works very well, right? And not being that strict, mean teacher, but rather firm, while also making sure the student can trust and has that attitude of participating in class.”* (Romina, Interview).

María provided a clear example of personalized support. *“The boy I accompanied was considered to be a naughty and somewhat violent child. However, I noticed that he was also very collaborative, so I took advantage of that to manage his attitude. When he got into mischief, I asked him to help me carry a chair or save the toy in the box, and surprisingly, he stopped his mischief to do what I asked him to do. From that, it was much easier for me to incorporate him into class. He also helped me manage his classmates, as he let me know when someone was misbehaving or needed my help. Although he was difficult to deal with at times, I must admit that he is one of the kids I remember the most, and I hope his future teachers can see his potential”* (María, WN). This narration portrays the importance of recognizing unique strengths, avoiding generalizations, and providing positive reinforcement and redirections, as well as how building trust and support allows learners to succeed. All participants learned the importance of nurturing trust, fostering collaboration, and building a classroom culture that values each child’s unique personality.

Professional and personal development awareness

After overcoming challenges, participants went on a journey of self-discovery and shifted their mindsets about teaching young learners. Deep reflection on challenges and successes helped some refine their teaching philosophy, gain confidence, and discover passions for early education. Romina and María share similar feelings and thoughts after the experience, shifting from initial fears to a growing mindset and passion for teaching young learners, valuing authenticity over perfection. Romina wrote, *“Looking back, I realize that my initial fear was transformed in passion, and I discovered that working with children is not just possible, but also that it is one of the most enriching experiences”* (Romina, WN). María stated in her journal, *“This project has not only had a significant impact on the students’ overall development, but*

it has also enriched our training as future teachers, providing tools and approaches that will be essential in our professional careers (Final insights in Journal of activities).

Carlos also wrote something similar in describing his change in initial beliefs about teaching young learners: *"It made me realize that I was truly making a difference in their learning path. Knowing that I was contributing to the early development of these young learners filled me with a deep sense of satisfaction. I felt like I was not just teaching a subject, but that I was also shaping young little minds and helping to form their educational foundation"* (Carlos, WN).

Romina was aware of the importance of professional development before confronting different educational contexts. Romina expressed, *"Yes, there are things that I believe I could have done differently. For example, the fact of consulting about how to teach classes, I mean, yes, I did, but I only watched some videos. I didn't read as much as I did when the children started misbehaving, and we couldn't consult. That wasn't the time, I feel like we did that out of necessity."* (Romina, Interview). This implies that Romina understands that self-preparation is key to dealing with challenges in the classroom.

Fulfilment and impact experience

The final stage brings a profound sense of achievement as participants witness learners' progress and feel pride and joy in contributing to students' early educational foundation.



Figure 4 Romina and a child on the last day exemplify a bond

Note: Image permissions granted

Figure 4 appears to be a simple expression of gratitude, likely conveyed at the end of a significant shared experience. The phrase *"Our last day together..."* (Romina, VN) suggests a bittersweet tone, hinting at a parting of ways or the conclusion of a remarkable period in time. In her essay, Romina also referred to the experience, *"Finally, the day of saying goodbye arrived. It was emotive to see them for the last time, but my heart was also filled of joy. I knew that I left a legacy of loving learning, curiosity, and above all of being respectful, kind, and honest. That is why I was calm and proud of myself"* (Romina, WN). This denotes a mix of sadness at leaving behind their lived experiences and a sense of joy and accomplishment.

Romina also exposed in her journal. This experience has allowed me to develop essential teaching skills and has provided me with a deeper understanding of how to connect with students and adapt methodologies to their individual needs. (Final insights in Journal of activities)

Carlos also expressed his important role in education. *“This emotional connection reinforced my desire to be an educator. The joy and pride I felt every time I saw their progress showed me how meaningful this career could be. I realized that teaching is not just about passing on knowledge, but also about guiding children through their first steps in learning, giving them the tools and confidence they need to succeed”* (Carlos, WN). María related, *“I was very proud to see how our efforts were paying off. It is comforting to know that this project had a significant impact on their lives and that our teachings will be part of their development”* (María, WN). The positive student outcomes reinforce the transformative journey, solidifying the teachers’ commitment to their profession, their role in changing society, and the English learning experiences of very young learners.



Figure 5 María exemplifies the experience process

Figure 5 shows a transition from fear to confidence through practical experience, emotional connection, and reflection. The first picture portrays a teacher hesitant about her ability to connect with children in comparison with her colleague. The second picture shows a more confident María, being more positive and in turn getting approached by the students, and finally, in the last picture, we can observe María in developing her different roles as a teacher (VN). María wrote, *“The beginning was difficult, but the experiences we shared, from playing*

to learning, became treasured memories that I will keep forever. It was a journey of personal and professional growth that gave me a deep sense of joy” (María, WN). Her visual narrative yields a clear example of the cyclical process that emerged from the data, emphasizing the significant personal and professional growth experienced by the participants. The visual and the narrative also correlate with what she stated in her journal. The classroom management strategies I have learned during this time have not only broadened my knowledge but have also made a significant contribution to my overall development as a future teacher. These experiences have left a deep mark on me, shaping my professional and personal identity in ways I never imagined (Final insights in Journal of activities), and the interview, “I had very good experiences. Also, it’s not that I was shy—as time went by, I started to feel more confident, both with the children and even with my classmates...” (Interview).

Across cases, all three pre-service teachers experienced a similar emotional trajectory—from initial fear and uncertainty to growing confidence and fulfillment—as they navigated teaching young learners for the first time. While they shared common struggles related to classroom management, communication barriers, and self-doubt, each developed distinct coping strategies: Romina emphasized calmness and positive reinforcement, Carlos relied on creativity and emotional connection, and María found success through adaptability and individualized support. Collectively, their reflections reveal a shared process of professional growth marked by resilience, reflection, and an evolving understanding of what it means to teach and connect with very young learners.

DISCUSSION

The key goal of this study was to explore student teachers’ experiences during practicum. Six main themes emerged from the written narrative, document analysis, and interview: emotions and teaching beliefs, teaching realities in the classroom, developing responsive teaching practices, building rapport with students, professional and personal development, and fulfillment and impact experience.

Pre-service teachers entering their practicum program are significantly influenced by their emotions and pre-existing teaching beliefs (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Santos et al., 2025). These initial experiences are often characterized by anxieties and misconceptions stemming from potentially personal or academic experiences. A study by Koşar and Bedir (2019) also reported similar findings, as pre-service teachers doubted whether they could teach real students due to prior experience in microteaching where their “learners” were their peers. However, a different study conducted in Macau by Reynolds et al. (2021) found that pre-service pre-primary EFL teachers’ beliefs encompassed aspects such as the nature of children, classroom practices, and teaching approaches. These findings contrast with those from Ecuadorian pre-service teachers, who did not receive explicit instruction on how to teach pre-primary learners. Reynolds et al. (2021) also emphasized that teachers’ beliefs can significantly shape and influence the effectiveness of classroom practices, which may help explain some of the challenges observed in the subsequent stage of the current study.

The challenges described in the second stage align with those of Chandran et al. (2022), who stated that novice teachers began their teaching careers with challenges that they were not well-prepared to handle. In this stage, teachers still believed that children would be focused on class activities or that the planned activities were enough to satisfy their energy demands. Children, however, often prefer playing over participating in activities, which can trigger strong emotions such as feeling overwhelmed, anxious, fearful, or chaotic. Notwithstanding, in line with Barcelos and Aragão (2018), as participants experienced negative emotions fostered opportunities for transforming practices and helped develop different relationships with students later. Therefore, providing teachers with a space to receive support and share the challenging emotions that arise from interactional issues, limited time, and insufficient materials can foster their professional growth, as suggested by Pappa et al. (2017). These findings emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence training in teacher education.

Furthermore, participants noted that many children struggled with essential communication in their first language, with some having difficulty speaking intelligibly. This lack of L1 proficiency raised concerns about the feasibility of teaching English, as some children were barely verbal in their native tongue. The challenge extended to pronunciation and general communication difficulties, highlighting the close connection between L1 and English acquisition. Nikolov and Djigunović (2023) exposed that the challenges of very young learners' limited L1 development in foreign language learning include their reliance on implicit processes, slow progress, restricted input quality, limited expressive capacity, and insufficient teacher proficiency in both languages.

These experiences underscore the need for pre-service teachers to be prepared to address diverse language backgrounds. For Ecuadorian pre-service teachers, more focused training on real-world classrooms is needed, so they can be prepared not only to teach but also to deal with emotional crises from classroom management challenges and student demands.

The third theme that emerged and was reported by the student teachers is developing responsive teaching practices. This theme reflects the pedagogical reasoning of the pre-service teachers and their actions to match students' needs and cognitive and emotional development. The initial rigid lesson plans were replaced with more flexible and engaging activities. Participants recognized the need for kinesthetic activities and hands-on projects, moving away from purely passive tasks. They incorporated games, songs, and storytelling, often using puppets and visual aids, to create a more dynamic and interactive learning environment. This shift reflected a growing understanding of child development, focusing on play-based learning and activities tailored to children's needs and interests. The use of games to foster trust and the conscious effort to incorporate English within classroom interactions demonstrate a developing pedagogical approach. The transition from extensive lesson plans with numerous activities to more focused, developmentally appropriate activities indicates a refinement of planning skills. Overall, it moved towards student-centered, play-based learning, highlighting the importance of flexibility and creative adaptation in early childhood education. The findings reflected a shift in their practices to focus on what worked in the context (Albakri et al., 2017) and an evolution in participants' teaching approaches as they adapted to the realities of teaching young learners.

The theme of creating a positive classroom environment and strong emotional bonds with young learners emerged as crucial for fostering engagement and teacher satisfaction. Participants recognized the importance of building supportive and safe spaces for meaningful teaching. The observation of engaged and curious children in a classroom setting and a teacher's confident connection using varied materials illustrates the power of creating a joyful learning environment. Participants emphasized the importance of creating a comforting atmosphere and building rapport with students, noting the positive impact of student enthusiasm. The value of positive reinforcement and motivation, rather than strictness, was highlighted as a key element in encouraging student participation. One participant's experience with a child labeled as "naughty" demonstrated the effectiveness of personalized support, recognizing individual strengths, and providing positive redirection, ultimately leading to improved behavior and classroom integration. These experiences underscore the importance of nurturing trust, fostering collaboration, and valuing each child's unique personality to create a positive and effective learning environment.

Professional and personal development constitutes the fifth sequential emerging theme during the analysis. After experiencing a sense of failure at the beginning of the intervention, overcoming challenges led to a transformative shift in participants' beliefs on teaching young learners. This journey of self-discovery fostered increased confidence and a refined teaching philosophy, emphasizing authenticity over perfection and a more responsive approach to instruction. Overall, the experience appears to have catalyzed significant personal and professional growth, instilling a deeper understanding of the value of early childhood education and a commitment to ongoing development as educators. Crucially, the experience highlighted the importance of proactive preparation and continuous professional development.

Finally, the fulfillment and impact of the experience underline the last stage of their practicum experience. Participants gained a strong sense of purpose and acknowledged their significant impact on shaping young minds and laying the foundation for future English learning. They felt fulfilled by their contributions and commitment to their profession, their role in positively influencing society, and the early English learning experiences of very young learners. This final stage pictures a new landscape of emotions because students excelled in their learning journey through their influence (Trang & Tran, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

This research focuses on illustrating Ecuadorian English pre-service teaching during a practicum program teaching very young learners. The findings revealed that the practicum in the Ecuadorian context of teaching very young learners follows a six-stage cyclical process. The insights are a need to revise teacher education programs to fit within contexts such as early education, with special attention to student teachers' teaching beliefs and emotional intelligence, which might play a crucial role before and during the experience of teaching very young learners, and go beyond preliminary experiences such as practicum. Much has been documented about how what we do in life is also determined by emotional intelligence

(Goleman, 2005) and the inherent connection between emotions and beliefs (Barcelos & Aragão, 2018; Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018).

School orientation is essential for adequately preparing pre-service teachers before they enter authentic teaching and learning environments. The institution should revise the program structure to include school orientation, teacher assistantship, and internships. This adjustment would enable trainees to develop crucial interpersonal skills and gain contextual familiarity, ensuring they are well-prepared for their practicum. Coping mechanisms and a robust connection between theory and practice are essential during the academic program, particularly before educators begin teaching very young learners. These interventions and support systems can cultivate a stronger sense of self-efficacy, ultimately influencing the development of their early teaching identities.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on only three pre-service teachers. Gaining insights from diverse participants across various practicum programs focused on teaching very young learners could significantly enhance understanding. Furthermore, the absence of classroom observation may omit more relevant data that could triangulate with information provided by participants. This limitation highlights the potential for future research to explore practicum programs at different educational levels, enabling comparisons with the cyclical experiences that the student teachers in this study experienced.

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