

Enhancing Pedagogical Profession and Personal Improvement for Vietnamese Student Teachers through Reality-experienced Internship Program in Thailand

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Abstract The article analyses the significance of a reality-experienced program taking place in Thailand for Vietnamese student teachers. The reality-experienced program enables students to explore the cultural features and education systems of the two countries, where the students' pedagogical competency enhancement and personal ability improvement are the objectives of this research. The research is carried out based on the naturalistic paradigm and application of the qualitative method on six students of natural sciences discipline in the School of Education of Can Tho University. There were many activities that the internship program provided for the participants, such as visiting famous historical monuments and demonstrations of the school; meetings to exchange cultures between two countries; working together to design lesson plans and conduct microteaching; discovering Thai culture; especially implementing practicum in the lower and upper secondary schools. Therefore, the data collected include photos, personal journals, and reports of those students. The data of the research are analyzed by using the constant comparative method. The results show that all of these students have learned valuable lessons from those cultural features and education systems when using English to communicate, working in groups, developing pedagogical competency and improving personal abilities. Moreover, the experience learned from overcoming the challenges should be the ground for a better program in the future.

Keywords Reality-experienced Program, Pedagogical Competency, Personal Improvement

1. Introduction

To meet the requirements of globalization, since the '50s and '60s of the twentieth century, many countries in the world have tended to associate with each other for collaboration and development. In education and training, facilitating students' approach to different cultural features and educational systems of the countries in the region and the world is extremely essential to students who are majoring in education. Although this practice has not been popular in Vietnam and ASEAN countries as well, since a very long time ago, there have been various conceptions affirming that teachers and students nowadays need sufficient knowledge and skills to work with different people and cultural features at any countries [1]. However, there are a limited number of teachers who are aware of these practical circumstances and have preparations for them. This is conformable to the previous research [2]. Therefore, being able to prepare students for the opportunities to approach to different cultural features and educational systems of the countries in the region, organizing for the participation of students into reality-experienced internship programs among the countries is essential. In addition, the participation in those programs would offer students great values such as helpful lessons and experience about teaching [3]–[5], noticeable improvement of the second language fluency [1], [3], [6]; and knowledge of different cultural values [3], [7]. Besides, living and teaching in another culture offer them a valuable chance to improve themselves and develop their careers [1], [8], [9]. Several of other studies have figured out that there is a direct interrelation between participation in reality-experienced internship programs and the choice for their final career routine [10].

In the world, reality-experienced internship programs for the future professional development of students officially existed in 1972 among universities in the south of the United States. Then, those programs were carried out in different countries. Experience learned from reality covered a wide range of fields: art, education, healthcare, community, commerce, technology and many others [11]. These programs have been implemented and developed for nearly 40 years in nearly 16 countries, and half of which are nonnative in English [11]. In the ASEAN region, reality-experienced internship programs for teaching practicum were conducted in Thailand 5 years ago, with the majority of international students from The United States [1]. In 2016, reality-the experienced internship program for teaching practicum in natural science between Thailand and Vietnam was the first cooperation of the two countries in ASEAN regions, particularly between Science and Educational Center (SEC) of Srinakharinwirot University (SWU), Thailand and School of Education (SOE) of Can Tho University (CTU). This was the first program to execute Document 771 of CTU about granting scholarships to students for short-term study abroad [12], about training teachers in the society majoring in natural sciences of CTU. Moreover, in the context that Vietnam has been an active member of ASEAN Community since 1995, the reality-experienced internship programs for teaching practicum in order to experience the cultural feature, educational systems of natural science majors are extremely important to an aspiring teacher. In this article, the research orientation was chosen for Education Science in terms of the impacts of cultural exchanges and realistic experience on teaching practicum to clarify how different cultural features affect the personal ability improvement and professional development of educational students. Therefore, the objectives of this reality-experienced internship program are for sharing experience, exchanging, discovering and learning the cultural features and education system of Thailand, in addition, creating good opportunities for educational students to use the foreign language to enhance their skills for teaching, communication and group discussion in a cultural environment of a different educational system from Vietnam's.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

Qualitative research in psychology has been applied to collect and analyse the data. This research is based on the model of phenomenological analysis paradigm [13]. Six students employed in the research inquire into all situations that happen naturally without incitation, compulsion, and accreditation, but with the openness to whatever emerges-lack of predetermined constraint on outcomes [15]. Constant comparative method [16] is applied

constantly to analyze and cast a more profound light on the experience that the participants have achieved after the eleven-day internship trip in Thailand.

2.2. Research Sampling

Six educational students from several majors of Physics Education, Chemistry Education, Biology Education and Primary Education were chosen to participate in the reality-experienced internship program in Science and Education Center and two schools in the countryside region to the southeast from Bangkok, Thailand, namely ChongKoom Wittaya School (primary and junior high school) and Mathayom Pracharathan Nayao School (junior and senior high school) of Thailand.

2.3. Data Collection

In this research, the researcher played the role of an observer. In this observing position, the researcher worked with students to design lesson plans, observe students practice teaching in the group and the class. We collected the data from pictures, students' daily diaries, group minutes, and our notes from realistic observation on six Vietnamese students of Physics Education, Chemistry Education, Biology Education and Primary Education participating into the program.

2.4. Data Analyzation

Data analysis process took place in three phases, including developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), building a "story" that connects the categories (selective coding), and then discussing for theory formulation [17]. Concretization of the data analysis process by the constant comparative method [16], [18] was carried out to describe and formulate a theory. This process was implemented according to the following steps (a) preparing or identifying a phenomenon; (b) segmenting; (c) coding; (d) comparing and categorizing; (e) thematizing and seeking for patterns and relationships.

2.5. Research Result and Discussions

From data analyses, the results of the research were classified into four categories of lessons learned which are presented in turn.

2.5.1. Experiences of Differences Regarding the Culture and the Educational System

Through reports about cultural features and educational systems of the two countries, students have a more profound and comprehensive insight into the country and the people of Thailand. The introduction section about the educational system and educational models on the first day in the program schedule and opportunities for realistic observation at classrooms in other environments has

facilitated the participating students to build up a stable foundation for designing more appropriate lesson plans for each particular group of students. In addition, this understanding amongst the students has ensured good interactions between the teacher and students when they actually teach in the future. Therefore, understanding about the cultural features, traditions and customs, and the educational system helps students have effective teaching periods in reality because cultural features have strong impacts on the acknowledgement and acquirement of scientific knowledge of students as being proved in the previous researches [7], [19], [20].

Students have found out the similarities and differences amongst the basic structures of the educational systems of the two countries, and how to classify the grade levels, class distribution, and roles of the teacher in teaching. Instead of using one classroom for all subjects as in Vietnam, the students here are supposed to move to various classrooms (for science, literature, foreign languages, computing, and arts) to study other subjects, even though they are the primary pupils. Moreover, Thai teachers did not have to prepare the lesson plans before class. Lesson plan design was undertaken by The Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (IPST) of Thailand. These activities, in addition, helped students to avoid confusion, but gain more confidence to participate in real classes. These would be the steady conditions for the participating students to design lesson plans to be appropriate to the situations and particular group of students, ensuring the effective interactions between the teacher and students/pupils during the class.

When visiting pagodas, temples, palaces, and museums of historical relics of Thailand, the Vietnamese students said that these were the most interesting, comprehensive, and attractive lessons about cultures and history thanks to the professionalism of Thai tourism, through logical and scientific arrangements of the program for visiting and learning about the cultural features. Besides recalling the stories about history, cultures, specialties in the traditions, customs, ceremony, cuisine, beliefs, architect, music, puppet art and means of media, application of modern technologies helped the audience to be interested and find it easy to remember these types of information. The reflections of students have been ascertained for this matter:

“I didn’t like history, but I changed my mind after approaching the introduction method about the cultures of Thai people (Student 2). Not only did we listen to the presentations of the female docent in each room, we also completely stepped into the miniature country of Thailand in the long-standing history, with scrupulous reappearance of models, real objects, video-wall, live audio, 3D display, and all were translated into English for the audience to understand” (Student 1).

Besides, according to Lee [3], observing a class, school and communicating with the local people (Thai students)

will create opportunities for Vietnamese students to understand more about the different cultural values, learn to respect the life and cultural features of the country where they visit and study. These opinions of students prove that learning about the cultural features and educational system of the country has improved their communication skills with the teachers and the board of rector, to build up a close relationship in regular communication and a stable partnership in the future. All six students understanding about the culture, traditions and customs, educational system helps Vietnamese students to perform effective teaching periods since culture affects the students greatly in terms of acknowledgement and acquirement of scientific knowledge.

2.5.2. Experiences of Communication and Group Work

Working with participants from different cultural features, qualification, working environments and using the second language in communication created opportunities for Vietnamese students to innovate, think and find ways to bridge the gaps in actual situations. Besides, every student’s writing skill has been improved significantly, mostly thanks to their journal writing habit during the trip from the departure till the return. One example is as follows.

“In addition to writing journals in English, daily communication with Thai friends helped me to improve my English writing skill (Student 3) or learn more vocabulary and use sentence structures appropriately so that the listener could understand easily” (Student 4).

Besides, it was the working environment with two different cultural features of the program that created opportunities for students to innovate and find solutions to close the gaps of understanding as much as possible, through the following student’s journal:

“Before participating into the program, I did not have many opportunities to communicate in English, because I was often afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation and hesitated to communicate with foreigners as I thought they would not understand what I said. When I was living and working at Nayao High School in more than 11 days, I had to use English in all activities, both in daily communication and teaching. I chose simple words with single meanings and spoke loudly and slowly so that everyone could understand. We even used body language, dictionary, and writing to explain what we said, as long as all people understood and worked the most effectively. I found this activity interesting because I discovered for myself the most effective methods to communicate, I felt more confident to use English, and I learned new ways for communication” (Student 1).

By working in groups, students had opportunities to construct their knowledge, train communication skills, and share experience of teaching methods; for examples, they learned how to listen, reflect, give comments, express and explain their ideas through the stages of lesson plan design,

practice of teaching, discussion and lesson plan revision:

“Spending 10 days working together with the people (Vietnamese students, Thai students, and supervising teachers of Chongkoom School), discussing, proposing and listening to ideas, and reflecting to other members has developed and improved my group work skills. Besides, actual visiting of real classes and contacting with the pupils in the classes supported me to design the most appropriate lesson plan for all pupils; I also learned how to express my ideas to other members as well as how to accept the reflection from other people positively, to create the connection between all members so that the job could be fulfilled better” (Student 6).

The above results have proved that listening, speaking and writing skills of students have improved significantly; in addition, they also discovered new ways for communication and expressing ideas, such as the application of modern technologies to help the audiences and the listeners to understand more thoroughly, as being proved in the previous researches [1], [4], [6]. Another student shared his interesting experience to overcome the difficulties and constraints in communication after the visiting trip:

“The majority of Thai students have a lower pitch of accent, while the Vietnamese students have a high accent. Moreover, although Thai students had more experience, their English competency was still limited; therefore, Vietnamese students had difficulty communicating. However, thanks to this difficulty, Vietnamese students seemed to be so creative to express their ideas using body language, writing on paper, using iPads, and having consideration to choose the most common and comprehensive vocabulary” (Student 1).

2.5.3. Pedagogical Competency Development

Class visiting and observation are essential for the teachers before they do their own teaching, to discover and learn about teaching and learning methods, the roles of a teacher, teaching skills, school facilities, and condition of the local pupils. The first experience lesson, which was acknowledged by and interesting to the students the most, was the teaching principle of the Thai people: “Teach less, learn more”, as though the following comments: “Like in Vietnam, the time for each class period is 45 minutes, however, the amount of knowledge taught to the pupils is much less than in an actual class period (Student 3). Teaching strategy is based on the 5E model (Engage, Explore, Explain, Extend (or Elaborate), and Evaluate), the activities are arranged for the pupils, and the information is presented on the board in the form of mapping. Whereas in Vietnam, the teaching process often includes 05 steps (reviewing the previous lesson, introducing new lessons, lecturing, consolidating the lesson, and making recommendations), and the knowledge is summarized in columns and rows on the board. Moreover, Thai teachers do not have to design the lesson plan before class. Lesson

plan design is undertaken by the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (IPST) of Thailand” (Student 5).

Based on reports and journals of students, we have found the second valuable lesson, which is admitted by most of the students, is lesson plan preparation. If the lesson plan preparation was not good, and if the local teachers did not understand the intention of the participating students, it would be difficult for the participating students to be accepted to teach in an actual class at local schools; because the teaching was not only about to impart the knowledge, but also to develop the teachers’ English competency, and create opportunities for the local pupils to contact with the foreigners. The biggest constraint for the Vietnamese students was that most of the local teachers specializing in natural sciences could not use English. Therefore, the process for lesson plan preparation was considered a discovery in the reality-experienced internship program which brought about success for the students, as stated in their following comments:

“By working together and discussing to construct the practical lesson plan, we have drawn a possible implementation process, which is as follows. The ideas are initially explored in Vietnamese, then translated into English, and subsequently communicated to the Thai students; after that, the lesson plan is used in the group for commenting and revising, and then it is translated into the Thai language for the local teachers. Next, bilingual teaching equipment will be prepared; and finally, the final lesson plan will be implemented in an actual class. If we (I, Thai students, and the local teachers) did not understand each other and come to an agreement in the lesson plan, we would never be able to have an effective teaching period (Student 5). Besides, I realized by communicating that the teaching methods of the local teachers were mainly playing games and doing experiments. Moreover, they focused on practical applications; when the lessons were related to reality, it would be natural for learning at real places as ponds, fields, farms, garages, mushroom farms, and barbershops because the pupils would have a chance for practical experience at those places” (Student 2).

Besides, on referring to photographs, journals and reports of students, we found that the teaching methods and strategies must be effective to make the periods more impressive, interesting and preferable to the lesson. This is the third experience lesson of the students related to their professional development. We would like to quote the following student comment:

“I did not use too much lecturing method in the lesson but kept raising the questions for the purposes of instructing and requesting students to observe. Besides, I learned how to present the information on the board as in the form of mapping, instead of the traditional way which is to divide the board into columns. I found this mapping method extremely great because it could help to generalize the knowledge of the whole lesson and emphasize the key

points so that it would be easier for the pupils to memorize” (Student 1).

2.5.4. Personal Ability Improvement

Besides experience about pedagogical competency mentioned above, we realized that there were many lessons learned concerning improvements in terms of students’ personal abilities through the internship program. The lessons for the Vietnamese students about teaching, communication, working in groups, using foreign languages to communicate were the evidence for the personal ability improvement of each student. Some of the students’ opinions are shown as follows.

“Through practice sections for teaching mathematics and physics in English for the Thai pupils in the first time, and observing the classes of the local teachers and other members helped me to realize my abilities and well as the weaknesses to overcome” (Student 6, Student 3, Student 2).

Besides, through the journals and reports of the students, we discovered that they had realized their personal ability improvement. Hence their opinions are as follows.

“The international exchange program has provided opportunities for Vietnamese students to experience, discover the new and progressive things from other countries in the world; through the program, students had a wider and further vision, to apply what they have learned to build up the country, develop their competency, and create a good and stable foundation for their future career (Student 1). It was the very environment which offered opportunities for me to practice my thinking skills and creativity, and stimulated my teamwork skills to be carried out effectively (Student 3). I realized that besides the essential skills like working with a professional plan and working in groups, the skill to get adapted to changeable working conditions was also important for each individual (Student 5). The most important thing was that I was able to realize and evaluate my abilities. As a result, I understood the importance of international working competency, that I must not only live for myself, but share, cooperate, and acquire the good things from other people to progress” (Student 4).

“The final importance that I have realized after more than 100 days living and working in the neighboring country is that I myself have to try harder to meet the requirement for the quality of the human resource, in the condition that the trends for interrelation and globalization are occurring in the region and the world” (Student 2).

2.5.5. Opportunity and Challenge

Based on students’ diaries and reports, we have found that most students believe that participating in this program is an opportunity and also a challenge for them due to many subjective or objective factors.

When my students developed lesson plans with Thai graduate students and teachers through communication and group discussion, we found that it was a big challenge for

Vietnamese undergraduate students, especially when they had to teach Thai students in reality. However, this challenge was the ideal opportunity for them to learn and exchange experience in the most practical and creative way. Although everything was new and strange to them, from the teaching object (Students), culture, environment to teaching methods, they could be able to get adapted to new situations and realize their ability in a new environment at the end of the program. Besides, the ability to use foreign languages fluently (English) was also an advantage and a key factor helping them open the door to communicate easily, efficiently and comfortably in the international environment. The following thoughts of some students which have expressed what we mentioned above.

“After this internship program, besides several insights into the specialized knowledge, I realized that the ability to use English correctly was an extremely important factor, which created favorable opportunities for students to communicate and work effortlessly. Therefore, this program has helped me recognize the challenges of teaching international students with language barriers, as well as how to learn and develop teaching techniques in reality, which is consistent with current global trends in education (Student 5 and 6). However, most students are not aware of the importance of learning foreign languages, rigid thinking, and they are not open-minded to international exchange” (Student 4, Student 5 and Student 6).

In addition, whether the students could recognize the available abilities, interpersonal skills, behaviors by themselves is one of the opportunities and challenges which need to be considered when they participated in this program. Some of the following thoughts of students have already demonstrated what we have mentioned.

“Firstly, having good knowledge and foreign languages will not bring effective teaching results, whereas handling unexpected situations cleverly during the teaching process and creating novelty for the contents of the lessons that make students more interested in acquiring knowledge were also challenges in this program (Student 6). Secondly, because my ability to express was not good and the English level of Thai students was limited, I met a lot of difficulties at the beginning. However, the Thai students were very enthusiastic. Understanding each other and finding each other's viewpoints to work in harmony were also the challenges which should not be ignored (Student 2). Thirdly, I was quite quiet and I also found it a challenge to participate in this program, because there were unplanned and programmed lessons, forcing the teachers to be flexible and reactive for doing their role well in class. How to impart knowledge and inspire students to participate in the lesson in a positive and relaxed manner was not really easy for an intern teacher as me”.

2.5.6. Suggestions of Students Participating in the Program

Based on the students’ reports of the trip, we considered the program very successful because it met the initial goals

and the participants had learned a lot of lessons and experience from the program. However, there are some suggestions from students to make the program more and more complete. Specifically, we have categorized them into two types of recommendations.

2.5.7. On the Vietnamese Side

“The university in Vietnam, namely Can Tho University, should be more concerned to make a long-term plan for the program to be implemented in the coming years” (Student 6).

“Through the trip, I have also found that English is an effective tool and the key to open the door of international integration. Therefore, I hope Can Tho University and School of Education will take practical measures to help non-English majored students improve their English fluency so that they can access and apply the advanced knowledge in the world” (Student 1).

2.5.8. On the Thai Side

“First of all, the organizers should assign the appropriate subjects to students' major at the beginning. After that, the classes will be as lively and as good as possible” (Student 2 and Student 1).

“Secondly, Thai and Vietnamese students with the same majors should work in small groups together. This is convenient for specialized exchanges, especially terminology” (Student 2 and Student 6).

“Thirdly, there should be a time allocation so that lecturer or representative from the delegation of Vietnam and Thailand can attend each class of students. Thereby, the exchange of education between the two countries will be better and students will learn more” (Student 2, Student 3).

“The program should have a specific teaching plan to ensure that the subjects are suited to student's (intern teacher) major and they have more time to prepare for the lesson” (Student 4 and Student 5).

3. Conclusions

Understanding about cultural features, educational systems of the countries in the world and in the region through reality experience in the ASEAN community is extremely necessary for personal ability improvement of teacher education training in the future. Based on the results found in this research, especially the lessons learned by the students, we realized that the reality-experienced internship program has had a strong impact on the development of awareness and profession of the participants in terms of cultural features and educational systems, English competency enhancement, professional development, and personal ability improvement. Therefore, we recommend that, in the coming time, the higher education institutions need to facilitate more programs for students to experience practically in the home country and

overseas, to contribute to widening their knowledge, practice life skills, professional skills, and social skills in the time of integration nowadays. Nevertheless, the research has a limitation that the data collected were majorly from the group of the Vietnamese students, but not from all other participants such as the Thai students, the local teachers and pupils at the schools in Thailand. Therefore, we recommend that later researchers ought to consider collecting both the qualitative and quantitative data from all the participants of the program.

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