

When Plans Fall Short: Responses of Pre-Service Junior High School Teachers to Unsuccessful Student Engagement Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement plays a crucial role in supporting learning outcomes, yet maintaining it remains a persistent challenge for pre-service teachers. This study explores how pre-service English teachers at junior high schools in Indonesia respond when their student engagement strategies fail during teaching practicums. Using Schön's (1983) reflective practice framework, this research focuses on two dimensions of reflection: reflection-in-action (on-the-spot adjustments during teaching) and reflection-on-action (post-teaching evaluation). Employing a narrative inquiry design, data were collected from semi-structured interviews with five pre-service teachers and analyzed through thematic narrative analysis. The findings reveal that failure in engagement strategies triggered various emotional reactions such as frustration, disappointment, and self-doubt. However, through reflection, participants transformed these emotions into learning opportunities by adapting instructional methods, modifying classroom activities, and developing resilience. Reflection-in-action helped them respond flexibly during lessons, while reflection-on-action guided them to evaluate and improve their future teaching practices. The study highlights that failure can serve as a meaningful site of professional growth, fostering adaptive, reflective, and resilient teacher identities. These findings suggest the need for teacher education programs to integrate guided reflection and peer feedback into practicum experiences to support novice teachers' capacity for reflective learning and adaptive engagement.

Keywords: pre-service teachers; student engagement; adaptive strategies; narrative inquiry; junior high school; teaching practicum

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the issue of student engagement has drawn increasing global attention because of its strong association with academic achievement, persistence, and overall educational outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2019). Sustaining students' motivation, focus, and participation has become even more challenging in contemporary learning contexts shaped by digital transformation and post-pandemic transitions (Almahasees et al., 2021). Furthermore, factors such as low self-confidence, lack of assertiveness, heightened anxiety, and diminished motivation often hinder students' active participation in classroom discussions (Setiawan et al., 2021). These conditions can adversely affect the quality of classroom learning, underscoring the pivotal role of teachers in maintaining engagement (Salsabila, 2024). Prior research has shown that motivational teaching behaviors such as providing emotional support and cultivating a sense of relatedness can substantially foster student engagement (Boonstra et al., 2021). Likewise, classroom learning environments and students' learning habits are found to be closely related to academic engagement, particularly among junior high school learners (Bulado et al., 2025).

Despite these insights, promoting and maintaining engagement remains a persistent challenge not only for professional educators but even more so for pre-service teachers. Nababan and Amalia (2021) reported that many pre-service teachers face difficulties in delivering lessons effectively and motivating students during teaching practicums, making engagement an especially demanding task. To overcome these obstacles, pre-service teachers have implemented diverse strategies. Salsabila (2024) identified several approaches commonly employed by EFL pre-service teachers to enhance balancing structure with learner autonomy through cooperative learning, integrating digital media,

and posing evaluative questions. In addition, Widya et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of student feedback as a reflective instrument for refining teaching practices. Fajaria (2024) further found that practicum experiences can strengthen classroom management abilities, although gaps remain in the area of engagement strategies. Similarly, Azizjah (2024) noted that pre-service teachers frequently struggle to design lessons that promote higher-order thinking skills due to the diversity of learners in their classrooms.

A growing body of research has examined pre-service teachers' instructional experiences and strategies from multiple perspectives. Lestari (2025) demonstrated that the flipped classroom model can increase learners' motivation and engagement, although limited pedagogical expertise often constrains its successful implementation. Nurfitriani (2024) identified recurring issues involving lesson planning, classroom management, and student motivation throughout practicum programs. Likewise, Oktafiyani et al. (2021) observed that pre-service teachers often encounter challenges in preparing concise lesson plans, particularly in organizing instructional steps and assessments. Acosta and Granada (2020) stressed the significance of contextually relevant lesson design for promoting student engagement, while Arsalan (2023) confirmed a positive correlation between the use of active learning strategies, engagement, and academic performance among high school students in West Java. Furthermore, Wekerle and Kollar (2022) compared novice and experienced teachers' lesson plans, revealing that experienced educators were more likely to incorporate technology to facilitate higher-order learning activities.

Although these studies have investigated diverse pedagogical strategies, technologies, and instructional challenges, little attention has been given to what occurs when engagement strategies do not succeed. Much of the existing literature emphasizes successful practices, teaching challenges, or identity formation, yet few studies explore pre-service teachers' responses to failure. This constitutes an important gap in teacher education, as teachers' reactions to failure can profoundly influence their reflective capacity, resilience, and professional development. To address this gap, the present study employs Schön's (1983) reflective practice framework, which differentiates between reflection-in-action (on-the-spot decision-making during teaching) and reflection-on-action (retrospective analysis after teaching). This perspective allows for an in-depth exploration of how junior high school pre-service teachers perceive, respond to, and learn from failed engagement attempts. Consequently, the study aims to investigate pre-service teachers' responses to failed engagement strategies during teaching practicums specifically examining their emotional reactions, reflective processes, and adaptive adjustments to contribute to the development of resilient, reflective, and adaptive teacher education practices.

METHODS

This study applied a narrative inquiry design, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in depth. Narrative inquiry allows participants to share stories that reveal not only their teaching practices but also their emotions, reflections, and identity development (Clandinin, 2016). By employing this design, the study aimed to capture how pre-service junior high school teachers responded when their student engagement strategies did not work as expected. Five pre-service English teachers Irza, Riko, Lia, Gaida, and Osi who had completed their two-month teaching practicum at junior high schools in Indonesia, participated in this study. They had experienced both successful and unsuccessful student engagement strategies. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that their experiences were relevant to the research focus. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms (Irza, Riko, Lia, Gaida, and Osi) are used throughout the paper.

Data Sources and Instruments

The main source of data was semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on Schön's (1983) reflective practice framework, which emphasizes two dimensions of

reflection: reflection-in-action (teachers' spontaneous responses during teaching) and reflection-on-action (teachers' evaluations after teaching).

The guiding interview questions included:

1. Have you ever experienced a teaching strategy that did not work as planned? Please describe the situation.
2. What did you feel at the moment when the strategy failed?
3. What actions did you take during the lesson to deal with the situation?
4. After the lesson ended, how did you evaluate the failed strategy?
5. What changes or improvements did you make for the next lesson?
6. How did this experience affect your view of yourself as a pre-service teacher?

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted individually, lasting between 10–15 minutes, either face-to-face or via online platforms depending on school conditions. Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Participants were encouraged to tell their experiences in narrative form, with follow-up questions provided to clarify or deepen their responses.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), guided by Schön's (1983) reflective practice framework. First, interview transcripts were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the participants' stories. Next, codes were developed to capture instances of reflection-in-action (teachers' spontaneous responses during teaching) and reflection-on-action (teachers' post-teaching evaluations). These codes were then grouped into broader themes such as failed strategies, emotional reactions, reflective practices, and adaptive actions. Finally, the narratives were interpreted in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing the interpretations with participants for confirmation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses them in relation to Schön's (1983) reflective practice framework and relevant literature. The analysis focuses on how pre-service English teachers experienced and responded to failed student engagement strategies during their teaching practicum, highlighting their emotional reactions, reflective processes, and adaptive actions.

Responding to Failed Teaching Strategies

All five pre-service teachers experienced moments when their planned teaching strategies did not work as expected. Irza reported that the group discussion method was ineffective because students could not grasp the lesson content, while Riko and Lia found that, despite preparing PowerPoint slides and visual materials, students became distracted and inattentive. Similarly, Gaida and Osi faced unpredictable class conditions that disrupted their study plans, such as low student motivation and off-task behaviors.

These accounts illustrate Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action, which emphasizes teachers' ability to think and adapt while teaching. The failure to engage students prompted the participants to recognize the gap between pedagogical plans and real classroom dynamics. This aligns with Fajaria (2024), who found that pre-service teachers often struggle to maintain engagement because of their limited classroom experience and situational awareness. Rather than a sign of incompetence, these moments represent an authentic entry point for reflective growth and adaptive teaching.

Emotional Reactions and Reflective Awareness

Initial emotional responses such as disappointment, confusion, and self-doubt were common among participants. Irza and Riko admitted feeling discouraged after their strategies failed despite careful planning. However, as they reflected, these emotions evolved into learning opportunities. Gaida described moving from self-blame to constructive evaluation, focusing on “how to make the next lesson better.” This emotional shift marks the development of reflective awareness a process in which emotions become catalysts for professional learning.

This finding supports Fredricks et al. (2019), who argue that emotional engagement shapes teachers’ ability to re-engage students. Similarly, Lestari (2025) found that pre-service teachers who confront failure with a reflective attitude tend to build stronger resilience and self-efficacy. In this study, emotional regulation played a crucial role in transforming frustration into motivation to refine pedagogical skills.

Reflection-in-Action: Adaptive Classroom Strategies

During the lessons, all participants demonstrated spontaneous adjustments to address disengagement. Irza shifted from group work to interactive questioning; Riko and Lia incorporated short games and Q&A to refocus attention; Gaida moved her discussion outside the classroom to reduce distractions; and Osi offered brief relaxation moments before restarting the lesson. These improvisations reflect reflection-in-action teachers’ capacity to make on-the-spot pedagogical decisions (Schön, 1983).

This adaptability resonates with Salsabila (2024), who found that active learning strategies and real-time adjustments foster student participation. The participants’ responses indicate early signs of pedagogical adaptability, a key competency for novice teachers. It also echoes the finding of Arsalan (2023) that active and flexible teaching approaches strongly correlate with improved classroom engagement.

Reflection-on-Action: Learning from Failure

After the lessons, participants critically analyzed what went wrong and how to improve. Riko and Lia realized that media tools alone could not sustain engagement without active student involvement. Irza evaluated the mismatch between the discussion method and students’ learning readiness. Gaida systematically noted unaccomplished learning points, while Osi sought feedback from peers and students to inform her next teaching plan.

This post-teaching evaluation represents Schön’s (1983) reflection-on-action, where teachers revisit past experiences to reconstruct their professional understanding. Widya et al. (2020) also emphasized that student feedback plays a vital role in developing reflective teaching. Likewise, Acosta and Granada (2020) argued that lesson planning aligned with learners’ contexts enhances teacher responsiveness. In this study, reflection-on-action helped participants turn failure into a foundation for growth.

Building Adaptive and Flexible Teacher Identity

Across narratives, participants consistently highlighted the importance of flexibility, creativity, and empathy toward students’ needs. Irza and Gaida emphasized that each learner has unique learning styles, demanding adaptive instructional designs. Meanwhile, Riko, Lia, and Osi redefined their roles as facilitators and motivators rather than mere transmitters of knowledge. This shift demonstrates the emergence of a reflective and adaptive teacher identity.

Such transformation mirrors the findings of Wekerle and Kollar (2022), who observed that teachers capable of contextual adaptation and reflective practice tend to integrate technology and active learning more effectively. The participants’ ability to evaluate, adapt, and replan their teaching strategies signifies early professional maturity and resilience qualities essential for sustaining student engagement in real classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how pre-service English teachers responded to teaching strategies that failed to engage students during their practicum at junior high schools. The findings revealed that failure served not as an endpoint but as a meaningful site of reflection and professional growth. When confronted with unsuccessful strategies, the participants engaged in both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983), allowing them to recognize their emotional reactions, adjust their methods, and develop adaptive teaching identities. These reflective processes strengthened their awareness of student diversity, classroom dynamics, and the importance of flexibility in instructional planning. Unlike previous studies that mainly focused on effective engagement strategies or successful classroom practices, this research highlights how failure-based reflection can be a valuable catalyst for teacher learning. The study thus contributes a new perspective to teacher education by positioning failure as an integral part of reflective pedagogy. Pedagogically, teacher education programs should create spaces where pre-service teachers can openly discuss and analyze teaching failures without stigma. Guided reflection, peer feedback, and mentorship should be embedded into practicum experiences to foster adaptive thinking and emotional resilience. Future research may further explore how reflective interventions and digital journaling could support novice teachers' capacity to learn from classroom challenges and sustain their professional growth.

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