



Preparing Future Elementary English Educators: Insights from Pre-Service Teachers on Microteaching and Practicum

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ABSTRACT

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Pre-service teachers majoring in English education are often regarded as well-suited candidates for teaching English in elementary schools. This study explores how these pre-service teachers at a university of education are being prepared, with an emphasis on their perspectives regarding the development of English teaching competence. Written interviews were conducted with four pre-service teachers to explore their experiences with microteaching in the university curriculum, participation in and observation of English lessons during teaching practicums, and reflections on English teaching issues in the elementary teacher selection examination. The data, analyzed using Spradley's (1980) qualitative analysis method, were categorized into three main themes and sub-themes. The findings reveal that pre-service teachers majoring in English education experience some anxiety regarding their English proficiency but demonstrate moderate confidence in conducting English lessons in elementary schools. Participants expressed generally positive perceptions of their microteaching experiences within university courses and felt slightly better prepared to teach English than their non-English majoring peers. However, they reported limited practical teaching opportunities during teaching practicums, which span 2 to 4 weeks annually over three years, with almost no chances to observe or practice English lessons directly with students. These findings underscore a significant gap in practical teaching experience, even among pre-service teachers specializing in English education. The study calls for universities of education and practicum schools to address this issue by providing more extensive opportunities for microteaching and direct classroom practice, ensuring better preparation for future elementary English educators.

KEYWORDS

elementary English education, elementary teacher selection examination, microteaching, teaching practicum, pre-service teachers

1. Introduction

To explore how elementary English teachers are being prepared, it is important to examine the concentration programs and the English education departments offered at universities of education. Graduates of universities of education receive their diplomas in the major of ‘elementary education’, but in reality, they are affiliated with departments similar to specialized tracks, known as ‘concentrations’, during the four years of study. The English education concentration was established in the early 1990s to cultivate elementary English education specialists. This program equips pre-service teachers with competencies in English linguistics, grammar, literature, and pedagogy, preparing them for the specific demands of teaching English in elementary schools. For instance, at A university of education, students pursuing any concentration must complete 18 out of 143 total credit hours within their chosen field, indicating a significant depth of study. Therefore, pre-service teachers in the English concentration¹ are often expected to be better prepared for teaching English than those with other specializations. To develop English teaching competencies, most English education courses include microteaching sessions. These involve pre-service teachers designing lesson plans and delivering short demonstrations to peers (Yi and Y. Kim 2011, Yim 2019). However, such simulations lack the authentic dynamics of real classrooms, highlighting the critical need for practicum experiences involving elementary students.

Despite the importance of practical experience, data from the researcher’s three classes taught in the second semester of 2023 show that only 9 out of 90 pre-service teachers had the opportunity to observe English lessons during a three-week practicum. Compared to a 2011 study by K. S. Jung and H. Choi (2011), which found that 75% of pre-service teachers observed English lessons during their practicum, this represents a significant decline, raising concerns about the adequacy of English teaching practice in today’s training programs. S.-H. Park (2022) suggests that one reason for the lack of observation opportunities is the reluctance of English specialist teachers to open their classes to pre-service teachers. Factors include administrative policies that do not connect practicum evaluations to observations and teachers’ discomfort with being observed during English lessons. Such limitations are particularly problematic, as practical experience during practicums is essential for pre-service teachers preparing for the elementary school teacher selection examination. The first stage of the examination features scenario-based questions that assess theoretical aspects of English education through teachers’ interactions with students and their instructional delivery. This hands-on experience not only deepens their understanding of classroom dynamics but also enhances their ability to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world teaching contexts. (S.-H. Park 2023). Furthermore, the second stage involves English microteaching as a separate component, testing candidates’ ability to conduct English lessons effectively.

Given that microteaching sessions at universities of education cannot fully replicate real classroom dynamics, the opportunity to observe and conduct English lessons during practicums becomes even more essential. However, the current scarcity of such opportunities limits pre-service teachers’ readiness for the examination and their future roles as English instructors. This study investigates the current state of English education in elementary schools, focusing on the roles of pre-service teachers, their training in English instruction, and the practical challenges they encounter during teaching practicums.

¹ From this point forward, the term ‘concentration’ will be used interchangeably with ‘major’ in the context of universities of education, depending on the situation.

2. Literature Review

In universities dedicated to training elementary school teachers, a primary objective is to cultivate teaching competence across various subjects. This educational framework involves dividing each subject into concentrations, allowing students to deepen their subject-specific expertise. Within the English education concentration, key components such as teaching practicums and microteaching play essential roles in developing teaching competence (Ahn 2015, H. J. Kim 2009, S. Lee 2017). For instance, at A University of education, pre-service elementary teachers engage in seven weeks of teaching practicums over three years, providing them with diverse teaching experiences across subjects. English teaching competence is rigorously assessed through multiple evaluations, particularly in the elementary teacher selection examination (S.-H. Park 2023). The selection examination comprises two rounds: the first focuses on theoretical concepts and potential issues encountered during English lessons, while the second evaluates candidates separately through microteaching and an English interview. This theoretical background section aims to investigate the various aspects related to English teaching competence, specifically emphasizing microteaching, teaching practicums, and the English components of the elementary teacher selection examination. Microteaching is recognized as a critical educational strategy designed to enhance the practical teaching skills necessary for delivering effective English lessons.

Microteaching is pivotal in the teacher education curricula of both universities training primary school teachers and colleges preparing secondary school teachers. Pre-service teachers in primary education programs gain essential teaching competencies by conducting microteaching sessions across all subjects in the elementary school curriculum. These condensed and structured teaching experiences facilitate the acquisition of practical teaching skills. For example, S.-R. Lee (2020) examined the microteaching sessions of pre-service teachers enrolled in a social studies education methodology course, which was organized into three phases: pre-teaching, mid-teaching, and post-teaching. His study identified four processes—journal writing, lesson planning, microteaching, and reflection—and revealed that reflective practices at each stage significantly enhanced the pre-service teachers' lesson design competencies.

In English education, microteaching holds particular significance. Unlike other subjects typically taught in Korean, English microteaching sessions are generally conducted in English. This presents unique challenges, especially in South Korea, where daily opportunities for English usage are limited. Consequently, language anxiety can arise during English microteaching (S.-H. Park and Hwang 2012, Y. Park 2019). Gregersen and Horwitz (2004) highlighted the importance of teacher encouragement in supporting students to continue speaking despite making mistakes. Regular opportunities for English microteaching can alleviate sensitivity to errors, build confidence, and foster a positive mindset. Y. Park (2019) investigated anxiety levels among 61 non-native pre-service elementary teachers regarding English education, identifying four types of anxiety: teaching competence, coping skills, English proficiency, and evaluation anxiety. The study found that female teachers exhibited higher anxiety regarding teaching competence than their male counterparts, with those possessing moderate English proficiency reporting the highest anxiety levels—a trend frequently observed during English microteaching (H. J. Kim 2009, Y. Park 2023). Similar to their Chilean peers, Korean pre-service teachers require consistent practice and encouragement to bolster their self-confidence.

Since Allen and his team first developed microteaching in 1967, reflective practice has remained a fundamental component (Allen 1967). Reflective practice fosters self-awareness among pre-service teachers as they transition into novice educators. In the context of microteaching, reflective practice can be integrated through lesson planning, observation, peer and instructor evaluations, and video analysis. The academic community has increasingly recognized microteaching for its invaluable role in teacher training (Amobi 2005, Zhang and Cheng 2011). In

South Korea, microteaching within English teacher education often incorporates elements of self-reflection and peer feedback (Ahn 2015, S. Lee 2017, 2018, Yim 2019). These reflective activities are typically woven into the evaluation processes of English-related courses in universities of education. Implementing a reflective approach in microteaching has proven to be an effective self-assessment method, with research affirming its positive impact (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2011, Farrell 1999). Furthermore, peer assessment in foreign language learning fosters autonomous learning (Cendani and Purnamaningwulan 2023), and feedback from both peers and instructors serves as a crucial learning resource. Larasaty et al. (2022) demonstrated that peer feedback significantly enhances critical thinking skills in their case study involving 15 undergraduate English education majors in Indonesia.

Teaching practicums are another vital component of the educational program for pre-service elementary teachers, providing them with valuable experiences across various classroom settings and insights into educational administration. Practicum experiences allow pre-service teachers to apply their newly acquired knowledge and teaching skills in real classroom environments (Macy et al. 2009). As much of teacher education occurs in non-classroom settings, it is imperative to bridge this gap. While practicums and field experiences are essential for effective teacher preparation, a disconnect often exists between university-based training and classroom realities. Microteaching serves as a significant pedagogical tool that addresses this gap in teacher education (Ostrosky et al. 2013). Developed by Allen and his team at Stanford University in 1963, microteaching was initially aimed at providing in-service teachers with brief (5-20 minutes) training sessions focusing on specific teaching techniques (Allen 1967). The approach was subsequently expanded to include pre-service teachers in 1965, with diverse teaching opportunities offered to 140 pre-service teachers and 42 student participants (Allen 1966). Despite the significance of microteaching, research on practicums in elementary English education in South Korea remains limited. Existing studies predominantly focus on the impacts of practicums (K. Chang and S. Lee 2012), pre-service teachers' perceptions of English instruction during practicums (J. Kim 2008), and the overall status and perceptions of practicums (K. S. Jung and H. Choi 2011).

The elementary teacher selection examination is a national test conducted annually to recruit educators across early childhood, elementary, secondary, and special education levels. This testing system is relatively rare on a global scale, with limited research conducted both domestically and internationally. Studies on South Korea's elementary teacher selection examinations can be categorized into three main areas: system structure (M. Kim 2019, Shin 2020), subject-specific question analysis (Kang 2019, J. Park 2019), and candidates' study motivations and preparation experiences (J. Choi and H. Cho 2017, D. R. Kim 2021). W.-K. Lee (2017) analyzed the validity of questions in the first round of the examination, while S.-H. Park (2023) explored the evaluation system, implementation process, and question-related issues in the second round, proposing potential improvements.

This literature review has examined the essential components necessary for developing teaching competence in pre-service elementary teachers through the lenses of microteaching, teaching practicums, and elementary teacher selection examinations. While these components are individually addressed within universities of education, there appears to be a lack of close interconnection among them. Therefore, this study aims to provide an integrated analysis of these elements based on the experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers, particularly focusing on the mediating factor of English teaching competence. The research seeks to identify key issues and propose improvements to ensure that pre-service teachers are adequately prepared to meet the demands of elementary English education. To achieve these objectives, the study will address the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do pre-service teachers evaluate their English teaching competence and confidence in their professional expertise?
- RQ2: To what extent do pre-service teachers have opportunities to observe and receive guidance on English instruction during their practicums?

RQ3: How do pre-service teachers perceive the relevance of their training and practicum experiences to the elementary teacher selection examination, particularly concerning English teaching microteaching?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study involved four fourth-year pre-service teachers from the English Education Department at A University of Education. The purpose and method were initially communicated to the entire fourth-year cohort through the department representative, resulting in seven students expressing interest in participating. Written interview questionnaires were distributed to these seven students, but only four responded. The low response rate was attributed to the challenging circumstances, as students had recently completed the first round of the teacher selection examination and were preparing for the second round. Given these constraints, no additional recruitment efforts were made. Despite the small sample size, it was expected that the respondents' in-depth interviews would yield valuable qualitative insights.

The participants generally rated their proficiency level as moderate to upper-moderate and reported a good level of classroom English proficiency, suitable for elementary students. Regarding their confidence in English, the participants used relative expressions, noting that their confidence was lower compared to peers who were highly proficient. However, despite varying levels of English proficiency, they felt confident in their ability to teach English at the elementary level, thanks to the knowledge they had acquired over their four years at the university. Among them, one participant expressed high confidence, one showed somewhat low confidence, and the other two rated their confidence as average. A more detailed profile of the four participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Code	A	B	C	D
Pseudonym	Suji	Youngseo	Jihye	Bombi
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female
Age	22	23	22	22
Major	English Education	English Education	English Education	English Education
Classroom English proficiency	No difficulty	Average	Average	Average
Confidence in teaching English at the elementary level	High	Average	Average	Slightly low

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data used in this study were collected through written interviews conducted via SNS, which included a basic questionnaire about the participants' background and interview questions. The respondents had already completed the first round of the elementary teacher selection examination and were in a situation where in-person interviews were difficult, but they willingly agreed to participate in the written interview. This process was carried out considering the growing use of written interviews in many studies, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Hawkins (2018) suggested that this method could become a significant means of data collection, well-suited to the era of new technologies.

The basic questionnaire included the information presented in Table 1 above, and the interview followed a semi-structured interview format, where all participants were asked the same questions (see Appendix). For some responses, follow-up questions, clarifications, and additional responses were conducted. The written interview questions were organized into broad themes such as English education expertise, teaching practicum, the elementary teacher selection examination, university curriculum, and examination preparation programs. These broad themes were further subdivided into sub-questions to elicit responses relevant to the purpose of the study. In addition to the written interviews, the documents included announcements related to the implementation of the teacher selection examination from the Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education and examination questions released by the Curriculum and Evaluation Institute. These materials played a triangulation role in contributing to the direction, analysis, and interpretation of the study (Carter et al. 2014).

Data analysis was conducted based on the written interview data. The analysis followed the progressive steps proposed by Spradley (1980), including domain analysis, focused observation, classification analysis, and theme discovery. First, the content spread across different domains was read multiple times, focusing on understanding the respondents' intentions and perceptions in order to capture their characteristics. Key concepts, expressions, and terms that repeatedly appeared were categorized. The major concepts and themes collected were then grouped by theme, and sub-themes were reorganized to reveal the various perspectives of the respondents. Afterward, examples were provided according to the theme-based list, using other materials such as the teacher selection examination data to enhance the quality of the analysis and discussion. In the process of organizing and analyzing the data, feedback was sought to verify whether the analysis aligned with the respondents' original intentions, which helped improve the relevance and reliability of the discussion.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Perception of English Ability and English Education

4.1.1 Confidence in general English and classroom English abilities, and anxiety about English education

The level of confidence or anxiety regarding English proficiency and teaching ability among pre-service elementary school teachers has been a topic of ongoing research, highlighting its importance in the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings (Goo and Y. Kim 2022, H. J. Kim 2009). Although the participants in this study were majoring in English education, they reported only moderate confidence in both their English speaking abilities and their ability to teach English. Three participants indicated a “moderate” level of anxiety about using English as a foreign language. While this is somewhat higher than among non-English education majors, it still reflects a relatively low level of confidence considering their specialization in English education (S.-H. Park 2023). Notably, one participant, Sooji, expressed anxiety about making mistakes when speaking English, stating that the fear of errors heightened her anxiety. Although making mistakes is a natural part of language use, her focus on this as a source of anxiety mirrors findings from many studies, which point out that the fear of making mistakes is one of the most common causes of anxiety when speaking (Haidara 2016). In the context of South Korea, where daily use of English is rare, this fear is particularly prominent.

A common feature in the participants' English learning experiences is that, after first encountering spoken English in elementary school, they have mostly continued with traditional methods focused on memorizing vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar, with little opportunity for interactive communication in English.

This emphasis on written exercises and correct answers has contributed to their anxiety about communicating in English. Even in university, the focus remained on studying for entrance examinations rather than practicing conversation. In English conversation classes, participants concentrated on learning key expressions or gaining pedagogical knowledge about teaching English, rather than engaging in extensive conversational practice. Y. Kim and H. Kim (2017) reported that pre-service middle school teachers' anxiety about English learning and teaching was negatively correlated with their experiences in English-speaking countries. In particular, their teaching experience had the strongest correlation with this anxiety. Participants in this study also expressed that, without overcoming their own anxiety about English, they would experience even greater anxiety in teaching English. Here are examples reflecting the participants' English learning experiences:

“In middle and high school, my English studies were focused on the college entrance examination, and when I entered university, I studied English mainly through private education materials and books on English phrasal verbs.” (Youngseo, male)

“I took English communication courses to learn conversational expressions and also studied pedagogy in English education courses to build up my knowledge of teaching.” (Jihye, female)

Regarding classroom English use, the pre-service teachers demonstrated a more positive outlook. They had more opportunities to practice classroom English due to specialized courses.

“In my specialized courses, I focused on classroom English. I studied and practiced common classroom phrases repeatedly, trying to adapt them in various ways.” (Sooji, female)

“In my English major courses, I frequently practiced TEE (Teaching English in English) lesson plans and worked on finding classroom English expressions that students could easily understand, repeating them to internalize them.” (Jihye, female)

These responses appeared to be influenced by the participants' status as English education majors, which provided them with numerous opportunities to rehearse and internalize classroom English through repeated practice in lesson planning.

4.1.2 English education major and expertise

The perception of English education as a major and its associated expertise was generally positive. The participants felt that being an English education major allowed them more exposure to English, which helped reduce their anxiety about the language and provided more opportunities for practical teaching experience compared to non-English education majors.

“By choosing an advanced major in English education, I had more opportunities to engage with English throughout the four years, which helped reduce my anxiety about the language. Seeing my peers who were better at English motivated me, and I had many opportunities to practice teaching English, which I think helped me gain confidence through direct experience.” (Jihye, female)

In particular, Sooji demonstrated a strong positive attitude toward being an English education major and expressed a desire to deepen her expertise in English education. She stated, “Since I majored in English education, I want to further research and improve my teaching. I want to help students who, like me, were initially anxious about English to develop interest and confidence in learning it.”

“Since I chose English education as my major and am interested in the field, I want to research it further and become a better teacher. I want to try various activities for teaching English, helping students who don’t like or feel the need for English to learn with interest and confidence.” (Sooji, female)

She also expressed a strong desire to develop her professional expertise in English education. She believed that, compared to the average pre-service teacher, she had a bit more expertise and hoped to participate in related training or research after becoming a teacher to confidently teach English. It would be worth considering the development of programs aimed at identifying pre-service teachers with strong English proficiency and a proactive commitment to future English education, nurturing them as specialists in elementary English education.

4.1.3 Perception of types of teachers for teaching elementary English

When asked who they thought should be responsible for teaching English in elementary schools, the participants showed a flexible attitude as follows.

“I think there should be a dedicated English teacher, or we could hire conversation specialists or native English speakers and operate the system flexibly.” (Youngseo, male)

“It would be better for a teacher who has a good understanding of English education, such as a native English speaker or a dedicated English teacher, to teach English because teaching a second language requires more expertise.” (Bombi, female)

“I think it’s good for any teacher who wants to teach English to do so, but it should be flexible based on the school’s circumstances. Since English is a formal subject in elementary school and is also taught in universities, I think it would be difficult for a conversation teacher who hasn’t graduated from a university of education to teach.” (Sooji, female)

They felt that either homeroom teachers or English specialist teachers could take on this role, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. There was a slight preference for having a dedicated English teacher, but they emphasized that the decision should depend on the specific circumstances of the school. Some respondents even suggested that native English speakers or specialized conversation teachers could be employed flexibly depending on the situation. While these opinions may largely stem from their assumptions, given their limited familiarity with the realities of elementary schools, they also likely reflect insights gained through the teaching practicum experiences they had each year. Thus, their perspectives can be considered meaningful to some extent.

4.2 Experiences Related to English Lessons During Teaching Practicum

4.2.1 Observation of English lessons by teachers

For pre-service elementary school teachers, the teaching practicum plays an absolutely crucial role in gaining practical school experience and developing instructional abilities through various subject lessons and classroom observations. Specifically, in the context of English education, as highlighted by K. S. Jung and H. Choi (2011), guidance and advice from English teachers are significant in the development of pre-service teachers' English education skills. Among the participants in this study, Sooji observed once, Youngseo and Jihye each observed twice, while Bombi had no observation opportunities.

The responses regarding the quality of the lessons they observed indicated that these sessions were not particularly helpful. Sooji described her observation as "mostly just helping students who seemed to need help," which was a slightly more active approach. In most cases, the observations were limited to watching how the lessons unfolded, with no additional activities, such as feedback or discussions after the lesson, that could help develop teaching skills. Jihye shared that her observations didn't help much, explaining the following:

"I was most curious about how key expressions and activities were taught in actual lessons, but the observed lesson only involved students finishing their workbook exercises in a game format, which didn't really address my curiosity." (Jihye, female)

None of the participants observed lessons involving native-speaking assistant teachers, which were common during the early years of English introduction in elementary schools. Sooji, however, had the chance to observe a native speaker's lesson during her second year at a university-affiliated elementary school.

"There was no native speaker teacher at my practicum school, but I did observe one in the second year at a university-affiliated school. In that case, the native speaker taught the lesson alone in English, with the local teacher playing more of a supporting role. Since the students at that school had a higher level of English, it was easier for them to engage with the native teacher's feedback and improve their speaking." (Sooji, female)

This lesson was led entirely by the native teacher, with the local teacher playing a more supporting role. She believed this was due to the high level of English proficiency among the students at the university-affiliated elementary school. If she had observed a more typical co-teaching scenario with both native and local teachers, she felt she could have learned more from the experience (Hong and J.-r. Kim 2020, Y. E. Lee 2019). Apart from teaching practicums, developing a program within the university curriculum that involves conducting English lessons alongside native English-speaking instructors could be an effective way to help pre-service teachers build greater confidence in teaching English.

4.2.2 Experience of conducting English lessons

As pointed out by Ahn (2015), interactions with supervising teachers and active, hands-on guidance during the practicum are crucial for a meaningful learning experience. During their fourth-year practicum, only one out of the four pre-service teachers had the chance to conduct an English lesson, and even then, only once. Some expressed regret about not having had the opportunity to conduct English lessons, while others explained that it was due to the specific circumstances at the schools they were placed in. It is often very challenging for pre-service teachers to get opportunities to conduct lessons directly, especially if they don't experience teaching English during their practicum. Interestingly, even the one teacher who conducted a lesson was surprised by the fact that English

was rarely used in actual elementary English lessons, which was quite different from the requirement of teaching in English during university mock lessons or examinations.

“I tried to conduct the English lesson in TEE (Teaching English in English), but my supervising teacher recommended that I teach in the native language because conducting the lesson in English would make it difficult for the students to follow.” (Jihye, female)

When attempting to conduct the lesson in English, the supervising English teacher discouraged the use of English and recommended conducting the lesson in the native language, citing students’ difficulty in understanding English as the reason. In such cases, one might question whether it would have been a more effective instructional approach for the supervising teacher to encourage pre-service teachers to attempt conducting parts of the lesson in English, even if it required adjusting the proportion of English usage during the class.

4.2.3 Observing peer pre-service teachers’ lessons

For pre-service teachers at universities of education, observing the lessons conducted by peers during the practicum provides a unique opportunity for mutual feedback and growth, as noted by Jung (2015). This experience is particularly significant for English lessons, as many pre-service teachers feel a greater burden when teaching a foreign language compared to subjects taught in their native language. Half of the participants observed their peers’ English lessons, while the other two did not have the opportunity. A common reflection among those who observed their peers’ lessons was realizing that even with the same topic, the approach to the lesson could vary greatly depending on the teacher’s style. The lesson plans, which were expected to follow the general guidelines from teaching materials, were often approached creatively by their peers. Bombi reflected on how she preferred a more dynamic, enjoyable teaching style compared to the relatively static approach of her peers.

“I realized that there are many ways to structure the same lesson. I personally prefer dynamic, fun lessons that may be a bit chaotic but feel more effective and engaging for the students.” (Bombi, female)

As noted by K. Lee and S.-H. Park (2019), it is common for pre-service teachers to write observation records and engage in feedback sessions with the lesson conductor after observing a peer’s lesson. However, in this case, the participants didn’t use any formal observation tools or record their observations, and there were no formal discussion sessions after the observations. Despite this lack of structure, the pre-service teachers gained some insights into English education phenomena and their motivations for future teaching. Sooji, for instance, focused her observations on the students’ understanding and progress.

“I observed that my peer adjusted the amount of English used based on the students’ understanding. It made me realize that in an actual classroom, the level of English proficiency among students varies a lot. I also became more interested in using various teaching tools and programs in my own lessons.” (Sooji, female)

She noted that the amount of English used in her peer’s lesson varied according to the students’ proficiency level, with the teacher often providing explanations in both English and Korean. Sooji came to understand the reality of varying student levels in a class, which helped her grasp the differences between theory and practice.

Additionally, she became interested in incorporating different teaching tools and programs when she eventually teaches English.

4.2.4 Need for opportunities to observe and conduct English lessons

Pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of observing and conducting English lessons during their practicum, particularly because English, as a foreign language, requires specific teaching methods. However, they felt that such opportunities were limited, with some schools not offering the chance to observe or teach English lessons at all. Youngseo emphasized that English lessons are critical since, unlike other subjects taught in the native language, they involve both the content and the language of instruction, requiring teachers to be well-equipped in both areas. Sooji highlighted the importance of observing English lessons to connect theory with practice, especially given the wide range of students' proficiency levels.

“English lessons are particularly important because students' levels of proficiency can vary greatly, and observing lessons would help us understand the differences between theory and actual teaching practice.”
(Sooji, female)

Despite recognizing the need for these opportunities, many pre-service teachers expressed frustration over the limited chances to observe or conduct English lessons during their practicum. Bombi suggested that having English professors visit practicum schools to provide feedback on pre-service teachers' lessons could be highly beneficial in improving their teaching abilities.

“It would be great if English professors could visit the practicum schools and provide feedback on the students' English lessons. This would help improve our skills and confidence in teaching English.”
(Bombi, female)

This highlights the need for a more structured approach to English teaching practicums during teacher training, enabling pre-service teachers to gain both the observational and hands-on experiences necessary for effective teaching.

4.3 Microteaching in University Curriculum and Elementary Teacher Selection Examination

4.3.1 Satisfaction with university English education courses related to the English microteaching

The English microteaching conducted as part of the teacher selection examination is an area of high interest to faculty members in teacher training universities of education, who are attentive to its effectiveness and the satisfaction of the students (H. J. Kim 2022). When asked whether the courses or programs provided by their respective universities in preparation for the English microteaching were helpful, the pre-service teachers generally gave positive responses. Sooji said, “In the case of English majors, there is enough coverage, so we can practice the English microteaching in advance and prepare well, which gives us an advantage over students from other majors.” She expressed satisfaction with the current approach.

However, Youngseo offered a somewhat different perspective, suggesting that the microteaching included in general English courses, such as “English Education Theory,” should not necessarily be part of the curriculum. He

argued that the English microteaching component in the second round of the teacher selection examination does not carry much weight and has little impact on the overall outcome. Furthermore, he suggested that additional consultation after the first round would suffice, making it unnecessary to include this component in the general English courses. He commented:

“Students feel more pressure from the English subject in the first round examination, so I think it would be better to focus more on English education theory and curriculum in the ‘English education theory’ class. The English microteaching should be covered in the 4th-year ‘English teaching practice’ class.”
(Youngseo, Male)

In contrast, another pre-service teacher commented that the inclusion of a separate English microteaching in elementary school was sufficient to reflect the unique characteristics and importance of the subject. However, since they are not selecting English teachers specifically, there may be no need to overemphasize and expand the English curriculum, expressing satisfaction with the current university preparations.

4.3.2 English microteaching as a subject of the teacher selection examination

The English microteaching component in the second round of the teacher selection examination is perceived as a necessary but burdensome task for pre-service teachers. According to S.-H Park (2023), while it does not carry significant weight in the overall examination score, the pressure of teaching in a foreign language is considerable. When asked whether they believe English microteaching should remain part of the examination, all four respondents answered positively. Despite acknowledging that teaching English entirely in English is not always realistic in elementary school settings, they recognized its importance. Youngseo, however, had a more skeptical view, noting that conducting an English lesson entirely in English is rare in real classrooms. He questioned the relevance of this component but ultimately accepted its necessity due to the unpredictability of future teaching environments:

“I sometimes wonder if English microteaching has significance as part of the second round examination since it feels like it is rarely implemented in real educational settings. But I think it is necessary because we cannot know which school a teacher will be assigned to or what role they will play.” (Youngseo, male)

Sooji offered a more balanced perspective, acknowledging both the challenges and the value of English microteaching. She emphasized its importance in developing essential teaching skills, even if it may not always reflect classroom realities:

“I do think the English microteaching in the second round of the elementary school teacher selection examination is necessary. Of course, it’s difficult to conduct an entire lesson in English in the classroom from start to finish, but if there’s a class that is highly motivated to learn English, I think it’s necessary. Also, the ability to teach in English is considered a basic qualification.” (Sooji, female)

Bombi responded to this issue from the perspective of expertise. She stated, “In the context of EFL in South Korea, where teaching English as a second language is uncommon, more expertise is required to teach English.

Therefore, English microteaching is necessary for assessing a teacher's basic competence and verifying their minimum ability to teach English." Jihye also noted, "When I went to the school field as a trainee, I hardly had opportunities to use English. The percentage of students who couldn't understand the lesson when I taught in English (TEE) was higher. However, the ability to teach in English is essential for elementary school teachers."

4.3.3 Preparation for the English microteaching for the teacher selection examination

Pre-service teachers reported that, before the first round examination, they generally do not put much extra effort into preparing for the English microteaching beyond participating in the microteaching sessions offered in the general English education curriculum. Serious preparation begins only after the first-round examination results are announced, with some pre-service teachers stating they start preparing for the second-round examination at that point. During this phase, unlike the microteaching conducted during English courses, they prepare more intensively, often combining English interviews with their microteaching practice. They form study groups of 3-4 people and meet about three times a week to practice with past examination questions and mock exercises, building confidence and quick thinking. Sooji described the preparation process as follows:

"We practice the English microteaching and the English interview in a study group. We practice speaking confidently in front of others and answering questions quickly. Especially for the English microteaching, I feel the need to memorize sentences so that I can come up with them immediately." (Sooji, Female)

Thus, once the pre-service teachers pass the second round examination and all the hurdles, those majoring in English education are expected to have the highest likelihood of teaching English in elementary schools. When asked about their thoughts on learning English as elementary students, as trainees during their teaching practice, and as future elementary teachers responsible for teaching English, one pre-service teacher responded with a typical yet representative reply, "At first, I think I'll be a little nervous, but as I gain more experience in real situations, I think I will improve gradually." Another pre-service teacher noted that when they were elementary students, there were more opportunities to learn from native speakers, but now, as they will be teaching in schools, it seems unlikely they will have as many chances to work with native teachers. Therefore, Sooji's comment carries significant implications for the education of future elementary school English teachers, including English class observations, teaching practice during practicums, and the inclusion of English microteaching in the curriculum and the teacher selection examination.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of fourth-year pre-service teachers majoring in English education at a university of education, who are likely to be key actors in elementary school English education. The study specifically examined their views on three areas: English microteaching, teaching practicum, and the teacher selection examination. The key issues identified, along with their implications and suggestions, are as follows.

Despite being English education majors, the pre-service teachers did not exhibit high confidence in their English proficiency or in teaching English. With few exceptions, they generally displayed moderate confidence, and were not free from anxiety about using English. Even though they belong to a generation that has learned English since elementary school, they still felt trapped by the prevalent learning methods associated with the university entrance

examination, which is a persistent issue in English education in South Korea. They felt significant pressure regarding the accuracy of their English and their vocabulary (H. J. Kim 2019a). However, they generally had a positive attitude towards conducting English lessons using classroom English for elementary students. They were more experienced and confident in English microteaching than non-English education majors, and they showed a positive attitude towards the possibility and intention of teaching English in the future, which is encouraging (S.-H. Park 2023). One pre-service teacher showed promising potential to become a professional who can make significant contributions to elementary English education by developing a strong passion and high confidence in English education, which could be nurtured into a valuable resource for quality English education (Hyeon and Ko 2021).

Regarding teaching practicum experiences, pre-service teachers reported limited opportunities to observe English lessons conducted by current teachers or their peers. This was due to teachers' reluctance to open their English lessons for observation. As highlighted by H. J. Kim (2009, 2019b), this is problematic as it deprives pre-service teachers of valuable learning opportunities through observing and implementing English lessons. Although there were rare cases where supervising teachers intentionally conducted English lessons for pre-service teachers to observe, it remains difficult to expect teachers to voluntarily open their lessons unless there is administrative support for the inclusion of English subject teachers in teaching practicum (D. Kim and Ahn 2018). The reluctance of English teachers to open their lessons for observation means that pre-service teachers miss out on opportunities to receive feedback through observing peers' lessons, which is a problem. This raises a serious issue about how pre-service teachers can develop practical English teaching skills if they do not have such valuable practice opportunities. Moreover, with the introduction of AI-based digital textbooks for elementary English education starting from the 2025 school year, it is even more critical for authentic, field-based English lesson practices involving elementary students to be conducted more effectively (J.-B. Cho and C. K. Jung 2024, J. H. Lee 2023).

The elementary teacher selection examination is based on content that pre-service teachers should learn and experience during their four-year education program. However, the actual experience provided to them was insufficient. The first examination typically includes questions on English education theory and practice based on elementary school classroom situations, which provide valuable context for teacher-student interactions. Thus, pre-service teachers need real classroom experience in conducting English lessons. The second examination involves an English microteaching component, designed with students in mind (S.-H. Park 2023). For pre-service teachers aiming to pass these examinations and qualify as elementary school teachers, the link between the teaching practicum and microteaching is crucial. However, as discussed earlier, the limited opportunities to observe actual teachers' English lessons make the examination's context and requirements seem too "theoretical." To strengthen pre-service teachers' competencies, there is a need for pre-service teachers to observe English lessons taught by teachers or peers, actively conduct lessons themselves, and engage in post-lesson discussions to improve their teaching abilities. In order to facilitate flexible and effective sharing of teaching practicum in elementary English education, adjustments to the curriculum at universities of education, along with active collaboration from the Ministry of Education and local education offices, are necessary.

In conclusion, this study highlights critical issues concerning the preparedness of fourth-year pre-service teachers majoring in English education for elementary school teaching. Despite their specialized training, these pre-service teachers exhibited moderate confidence in their English proficiency and teaching abilities, largely due to the constraints of traditional learning methods and limited practical experiences. The lack of opportunities to observe effective English lessons, compounded by supervising teachers' reluctance to allow classroom observations, hampers their ability to develop essential teaching skills. Therefore, it is imperative for educational institutions, alongside the Ministry of Education and local education offices, to implement reforms that enhance

observational learning and hands-on teaching experiences. By doing so, they can cultivate a new generation of confident, competent English educators who are well-equipped to address the evolving demands of elementary English education.

As shown in this study, meaningful insights and suggestions were derived from interviews with four pre-service teachers majoring in English education. However, there were some limitations in terms of the sample size and data collection methods. While the four pre-service teachers selected for this study are somewhat representative in terms of gender, the sample size and regional representation were limited. Additionally, although the written interview method allowed participants to respond with ample time and emotional stability, the data collected might not have been as rich as what could have been obtained through face-to-face interviews. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study are hoped to contribute, even if modestly, to creating a better educational environment for future elementary English teachers to grow into excellent educators.

Future research may focus on practical strategies to enhance teaching competence within English education training programs at universities. It would be beneficial to investigate the challenges that teachers encounter when trying to open their English lessons to practicum students and to explore potential solutions to these issues. Additionally, the research could aim to develop approaches that encourage practicum students to actively engage in teaching, fostering an environment where they can freely exchange critiques and receive feedback from both their peers and supervising teachers. By doing so, they can gain richer, more authentic experiences in elementary English education, ultimately supporting their development into well-prepared and effective English teachers.

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Appendix

Overview of the basic survey and written interview questions

I. Basic background survey

Gender (Male/Female), Age, Major
English proficiency, Classroom English usage ability
English confidence, English anxiety, Interest in English education
Experience in English microteaching
Perception of belonging to an advanced English program
Willingness to take on English teaching duties as an elementary school teacher

II. Written interview questions

1. Professionalism in English education

What is the ideal type of an English teacher at the elementary school level?
How do you perceive your professionalism as a future English teacher?
Do you want to become an expert in English education as a teacher?
What are your thoughts on teaching practicum and English microteaching?
What are your thoughts when imagining yourself as an elementary English school teacher?

2. Teaching practicum

What are your opinions of your senior year teaching practicum you participated?
How many times and in what ways did you observe the English teacher's lessons?
Have you observed a native English-speaking teacher's lesson? What was your impression?
How many times did you carry out English lessons during the practicum?
What were your impressions of observing English lessons during the practicum? (teacher, peers)
Did you use any specific observation tools when observing English lessons?
Was there any discussion or evaluation of the lessons after observations? What was the format?
What are the three most important areas you learned about English education?
What are your thoughts on the current system of teaching practicum in your university?

3. Elementary teacher selection examination

What are your current emotional state regarding your examination preparation after completing the first round of the examination?

What role and significance do the English microteaching and interview in the second round of the examination have for you?

Do you think the English microteaching and interview should be required subjects in the second round of the examination?

How do you prepare for the English microteaching and interview for the second round of the examination?

4. University courses and programs

Is there a need for additional courses related to the English microteaching or English interview for the teacher selection examination at your university?

Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Elementary