Classroom Management Challenges and Adaptive Strategies of EFL Student Teachers during Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

Classroom management is a critical component of effective teaching, particularly for English Education student teachers who must navigate the intersection of pedagogical theory and practice in culturally and religiously influenced settings. However, student teachers often face significant challenges, such as student disengagement, language barriers, and undermined authority, which are exacerbated in unique institutional contexts like madrasah or pesantren. This study explored the classroom management difficulties encountered by 10 student teachers from UIN Palangka Raya during their practicum in *Kementerian Agama*-affiliated schools, as well as the strategies they employed to address these challenges. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and teaching practicum reports, followed by thematic analysis. Findings revealed that student teachers struggled with low motivation for English learning, passive participation, and cultural-linguistic preferences, compounded by institutional policies that diminished their authority. To mitigate these issues, they adopted strategies such as differentiated instruction, behavioral management techniques, engagement boosters (e.g., gamification), and relationship-building. However, the effectiveness of these strategies was often limited by large class sizes and short practicum durations. The study underscores the need for teacher education programs to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy, extended practicums, and structured mentorship to better prepare student teachers for the complexities of classroom management in diverse educational settings. These findings highlight the importance of context-specific training to enhance both teacher preparedness and student learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Classroom Management, EFL Student Teachers, Adaptive Strategies, Teacher Education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

Classroom management is a critical component of effective teaching, particularly for student teachers who must bridge the gap between theory and practice during their practicum. In English language classrooms, this challenge is compounded by the need to create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable practicing a foreign language while navigating disruptions, disengagement, and cultural dynamics (Insani et al. 2024; Soleimani and Razmjoo 2019) highlights that pre-service teachers globally struggle with these issues, but the problem is especially pronounced in unique institutional settings like Indonesia's Islamic universities, where religious values intersect with modern pedagogy (Darling-Hammond 2006, 2017; Habibi et al. 2018; Rizkiya 2020). Effective classroom management in these contexts requires adaptability, yet many teacher training programs lack tailored guidance, leaving student teachers unprepared for the realities of culturally and religiously influenced classrooms (Landrum and Kauffman 2015; Mudra 2018). For instance, studies reveal that pre-service teachers often face difficulties such as managing disruptive behavior, motivating students, and balancing authority with rapport - challenges exacerbated in environments where traditional and contemporary teaching methods coexist (Maharani and Fithriani 2023; Merç and Subaşı 2015).

Despite extensive studies on classroom management, a significant gap remains in understanding the specific challenges faced by English Education student teachers in Islamic higher education. Existing research predominantly examines general or international contexts, overlooking the nuanced demands of institutions where traditional and contemporary teaching methods coexist (Insani et al. 2024; Rustandi et al. 2025). For example, while strategies like gamification and seating arrangements are well-documented (Kusuma, Cicik, and Budiman 2025a), their effectiveness in classrooms shaped by Islamic principles remains unexplored. This gap is critical because student teachers in these settings must balance religious expectations with pedagogical innovation - a challenge that, if unaddressed, may hinder their professional development and classroom effectiveness (Habibi et al. 2018; Pakpahan 2023). Without targeted research, teacher training programs risk providing inadequate preparation for these unique environments, as evidenced by studies showing that pre-service teachers often struggle with classroom management due to internal factors like self-efficacy and external factors like resource limitations (Megawati and Astutik 2018; Rahmawati and Wirza 2022).

Unlike prior studies, which often generalize findings across broad contexts (Kuncahyo et al. 2023; Li, Xie, and Zeng 2023), this research examines how English Education student teachers adapt classroom management strategies to meet the dual demands of language instruction and Islamic educational principles. It also explores whether established techniques, such as group work or visual aids, remain effective in this setting (Kusuma et al. 2025a; Rustandi et al. 2025). By investigating these underexamined dimensions, the study offers novel insights into how pre-service teachers navigate the complexities of culturally and religiously responsive classroom management - a perspective absent in most existing literature (Habibi et al. 2018; Nurul et al. 2024). For instance, prior research on international practicums highlights cultural barriers but neglects the interplay of religious values in local contexts (Kuncahyo et al. 2023), while studies on self-efficacy overlook its role in Islamic classroom settings (Megawati and Astutik 2018).

The objectives of this study are twofold: to identify the classroom management difficulties specific to English Education student teachers at the Islamic State University of Palangka Raya and to analyze the strategies they employ to address them. The research focuses on 10 student teachers from the 2024/2025 cohort, with particular attention to behavior management, student engagement, and adaptability in a religious-cultural context

(Insani et al. 2024; Maharani and Fithriani 2023). Findings will provide actionable recommendations for teacher educators and policymakers, helping refine practicum programs to better prepare future teachers for similar environments (Permatasari and Mulyono 2019; Riyanti 2020). By narrowing its scope to this institution, the study contributes to Indonesia's broader educational goals, particularly in regions where classroom dynamics are deeply shaped by cultural and religious values (Rahmadan et al. 2023). For example, the study aligns with calls for context-specific teacher training to address challenges like language barriers and resource constraints (Fani Prastikawati et al. 2022; Mudra 2018), while also advocating for reflective practices to enhance classroom management skills (Riyanti 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classroom management is a critical aspect of effective teaching, particularly for pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers or student teachers who must navigate the complexities of language instruction while maintaining an orderly and engaging learning environment. Research highlights that pre-service teachers globally encounter significant challenges in classroom management, which are often exacerbated in unique institutional settings such as Indonesia's Islamic universities (Habibi et al. 2018; Mudra 2018). These challenges include managing disruptive behavior, motivating students, and balancing authority with rapport, all of which are compounded by cultural and religious dynamics (Afdalia, Mirza, and Widiastuty 2023; Maharani and Fithriani 2023). For instance, studies reveal that pre-service teachers often struggle with internal factors like self-efficacy and external factors such as resource limitations (Megawati and Astutik 2018; Rahmawati and Wirza 2022). The intersection of these factors creates a complex landscape for classroom management, particularly in environments where traditional and contemporary teaching methods coexist (Insani et al. 2024; Rustandi et al. 2025).

The challenges faced by pre-service EFL teachers can be categorized into internal and external factors. Internal factors include classroom management skills, teacher proficiency, and self-efficacy (Pakpahan 2023; Rahmadan et al. 2023). For example, Pakpahan (2023) found that pre-service teachers often lack confidence in their ability to manage classrooms effectively, which impacts their overall performance during practicum. External factors, on the other hand, encompass student motivation, lack of facilities, and cultural barriers (Kuncahyo et al. 2023; Kusuma et al. 2025a). In cross-cultural contexts, such as teaching practicums in Thailand, Indonesian pre-service teachers face additional hurdles like language differences and unfamiliarity with local curricula (Kuncahyo et al. 2023). These findings underscore the need for targeted training programs that address both internal and external challenges to better prepare pre-service teachers for diverse classroom environments.

Despite these challenges, pre-service teachers employ various strategies to manage their classrooms effectively. Studies highlight the use of digital and printed media, ice-breaking activities, and group work to engage students and maintain order (Kusuma et al. 2025a; Rustandi et al. 2025). Additionally, reflective practices and transformative learning have been identified as crucial tools for enhancing classroom management skills (Maharani and Fithriani 2023; Riyanti 2020). For instance, Riyanti (2020) emphasizes the role of reflection in helping pre-service teachers scrutinize their teaching practices and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, building strong teacher-student relationships and adapting instructional strategies to meet students' needs are key to overcoming classroom management challenges (Insani et al. 2024; Maylitha et al. 2023). These strategies are particularly relevant in culturally and religiously influenced settings, where traditional methods may need to be

adapted to contemporary pedagogical approaches (Darling-Hammond 2017; Habibi et al. 2018).

While existing research provides valuable insights into classroom management challenges and strategies, significant gaps remain, particularly in the context of Islamic higher education. Most studies focus on general or international settings, overlooking the unique demands of institutions where religious values intersect with modern pedagogy (Insani et al. 2024; Rustandi et al. 2025). For example, the effectiveness of established techniques like gamification and visual aids in Islamic classrooms remains unexplored (Kusuma, Cicik, and Budiman 2025b). Additionally, the role of self-efficacy in religiously influenced settings has not been adequately addressed (Megawati and Astutik 2018). This study aims to fill these gaps by examining the specific challenges and strategies of English Education student teachers at the Islamic State University of Palangka Raya, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of classroom management in culturally and religiously responsive contexts.

METHOD

This qualitative case study examined the classroom management experiences of 10 student teachers (7 female, 3 male) from UIN Palangka Raya during their 2024-2025 practicum in *Kementerian Agama*-affiliated *madrasah* and *pesantren*. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (20-35 minutes each) and analysis of their teaching practicum report. Interviews followed a structured protocol exploring three key areas: challenges in Islamic school settings, adaptive strategies, and institutional support systems (Murdiyanto, 2020).

The study employed manual thematic analysis, beginning with open coding of transcripts and documents to identify initial patterns. These were refined through multiple iterations into broader themes, with particular attention to religious-cultural aspects of classroom dynamics. Purposive sampling ensured participants represented diverse teaching contexts (urban/rural, MTs/MA levels) and academic backgrounds. Methodological rigor was maintained through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data sources. Ethical protocols included institutional approvals, informed consent, and use of pseudonyms (ST1-ST10).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Classroom Management Challenges Faced by Student Teachers

The findings from the narratives of the 10 student teachers (ST1 to ST10) highlighted significant and recurring challenges in classroom management, particularly concerning student engagement and motivation. These challenges are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the students' attitudes, institutional priorities, and environmental factors. Below is an extended explanation of these findings:

1. Lack of Interest in English

Several teachers (ST1, ST3, ST8, ST10) observed that students showed little interest in English, often participating passively or becoming distracted during lessons. Common issues included the use of regional languages instead of English and off-task behaviors like playing with peers. These challenges hindered active engagement and made it difficult to sustain students' focus on learning the language.

Additionally, ST8 highlighted a unique barrier in an Islamic school setting, explaining: "S*tudents and parents prioritize religious studies over English. They see English as secondary, so motivation is low. If given a choice, students would focus entirely on*

Quranic lessons instead." This prioritization further diminished students' motivation to learn English, as they perceived it as less important compared to their core religious curriculum. The lack of enthusiasm and competing academic priorities created significant obstacles in fostering a productive English learning environment.

2. Passive Participation and Distractions

Teachers ST1 and ST3 consistently observed significant challenges with student engagement during English lessons, particularly noting widespread passive participation and frequent distractions. ST1 reported that students often appeared disengaged, with many either staring blankly or engaging in off-task behaviors instead of participating in lessons. "*Even when I ask direct questions, I mostly get silence or half-hearted responses,*" ST1 noted. "*Students seem to view English class as something to endure rather than engage with.*"

ST3 provided deeper insight into the distraction problem, explaining, "*The classroom environment itself works against focus. Students sit in tight groups, so any small distraction spreads quickly - one pair starts chatting, then suddenly half the class is off-task.*" This observation was particularly evident during individual or quiet work periods when students would default to socializing or playing with materials rather than completing assignments. Both teachers emphasized how these behaviors created a cyclical problem: disengagement led to poor comprehension, which in turn made students even less willing to participate actively. The cumulative effect was a classroom dynamic where maintaining consistent focus and meaningful participation required constant, exhausting intervention from the teacher.

1. Language and Cultural Preferences

Teachers ST1, ST2, and ST8 identified significant challenges stemming from students' strong preference for using regional languages or Indonesian during English classes. ST1 observed, "*The moment I turn my back, the classroom erupts in [regional language]. Students seem to have a mental block against using English outside of direct exercises.*" This reliance on familiar languages created a substantial barrier to English immersion, as students defaulted to their comfort zones for both social interactions and academic responses.

ST2 provided further insight into this dynamic, noting, "*Even when students know the English words, they'll first whisper the answer in Indonesian to their friend before saying it in English. There's a cultural hesitation about making mistakes in English that doesn't exist with our native languages.*" ST8 added that this language preference extended beyond the classroom: "*During group work, I hear students quickly switching from forced English back to fluent Indonesian or Javanese the second they think I'm not listening. Their relief is palpable when they can express themselves naturally.*"

This persistent retreat to familiar languages significantly hindered English proficiency development in multiple ways. First, it reduced meaningful practice opportunities, as students spent minimal time actually thinking or communicating in English. Second, it reinforced the perception of English as an academic chore rather than a practical communication tool. Third, it created a classroom culture where avoiding English became the norm rather than the exception. Teachers reported that even simple instructions often needed repetition in local languages, and students would frequently ask permission to respond in Indonesian rather than attempt English.

2. School Policies and Teacher Authority

ST2 and ST5 highlighted significant challenges regarding student perceptions of student teachers' authority, which directly impacted classroom management and learning effectiveness. As ST2 explained, "*Students test boundaries more with new or temporary teachers. They see them as 'practice teachers' rather than real authority figures, which leads to constant discipline issues.*" This perception was particularly evident in how students would ignore instructions, talk over the teacher, or challenge classroom rules that they typically followed with more experienced educators.

ST5 expanded on this issue, noting that the problem was systemic: "*The school culture doesn't reinforce our authority as student teachers. Students know we're temporary, so they don't invest in building respect. Even small directives become power struggles.*" Without institutional support or clear policies to establish student teachers' roles, students frequently treated them as peers rather than educators. This dynamic created a disruptive classroom environment where maintaining discipline required disproportionate effort, leaving less time and energy for meaningful instruction. The resulting lack of engagement and structure further undermined learning outcomes, as students missed critical opportunities to develop skills under consistent guidance.

The findings reveal that EFL student teachers face multifaceted classroom management challenges, particularly in student engagement and motivation, which align with existing theoretical frameworks. Pakpahan (2023) and Sarah (2022) emphasize the interplay of internal (e.g., teacher proficiency) and external factors (e.g., institutional policies, student attitudes) in shaping these difficulties. For instance, the lack of interest in English and passive participation (ST1, ST3, ST8) reflect Sarah's (2022) findings on motivational barriers in inclusive classrooms, where contextual factors like competing academic priorities (e.g., religious studies) diminish engagement. Similarly, the preference for regional languages (ST1, ST2, ST8) echoes Rahmadan et al.'s (2023) observation of cultural-linguistic barriers in young learner settings, highlighting how students' comfort with native languages impedes English immersion. Cognitive and somatic anxiety have been recognized as obstacles to productive language skills, potentially influencing classroom dynamics as well (Afdalia et al. 2023). These challenges underscore the need for pedagogical strategies that bridge cultural and motivational gaps, such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, cited in (Landrum and Kauffman 2015) and differentiated instruction (Scott 2017).

The recurring theme of undermined teacher authority (ST2, ST5) further aligns with Merç and Subaşı's (2015) research on student teachers' struggles with classroom management during practicums. Their study identifies pupil behavior and lack of institutional support as key stressors, mirroring the participants' experiences. Darling-Hammond's (2006) call for integrated teacher education programs is particularly relevant here; the findings suggest that pre-service training should include robust mentorship and explicit strategies for establishing authority in diverse classroom contexts. Additionally, Rahmawati and Wirza's (2022) emphasis on self-efficacy resonates with these challenges. The effectiveness of game-based learning (GBL) in enhancing vocabulary mastery has also been noted, indicating its possible use in wider classroom management efforts to tackle issues related to motivation and student engagement (Hidayah, Sabarun, and Widiastuty 2023; Soraya, Sabarun, and Sugianto 2022).

Strategies Used by Student Teachers to Overcome Classroom Management Challenges

The student teachers (ST1–ST10) employed a variety of adaptive, motivational, and disciplinary strategies to address classroom management challenges during their practicum. These strategies were shaped by their students' needs, institutional constraints, and their own emerging pedagogical approaches. Below is an expanded analysis of their methods, categorized into key themes:

1. Differentiated Instruction: Meeting Diverse Learning Needs

The student teachers implemented targeted instructional strategies to accommodate varying student abilities. ST1, ST6, and ST9 offered tiered support, providing simplified explanations and repeated instructions for struggling learners while challenging advanced students with creative extension tasks. Peer learning emerged as an effective approach, with ST4 noting: "*When students explained concepts to each other, it strengthened their own*

understanding while helping their classmates." This collaborative method not only reinforced learning but also built classroom community.

While these techniques showed promise, their effectiveness was often constrained by practical challenges. Large class sizes made individualized attention difficult, and some reluctant learners required additional motivation to participate in peer activities. As ST9's experience demonstrates, differentiated instruction works best when combined with relationship-building and adaptive classroom management to address both academic and social learning needs.

2. Behavioral Management Techniques: Establishing Structure and Discipline

The student teachers employed strategic approaches to maintain classroom order and encourage positive behavior. For motivation, ST1 and ST3 implemented reward systems, using points and public praise to reinforce good conduct, with ST1 noting: "*Recognizing students' efforts in front of the class made others want to participate too*." These positive reinforcement techniques helped create a more engaged learning environment. However, when disruptions occurred, teachers used subtle yet firm corrective measures - ST5 relied on non-verbal cues like intentional silence, while ST3 enforced consistent consequences for repeated misbehavior.

While these methods proved effective in short-term classroom control, their sustainability faced challenges. The point systems required ongoing maintenance, and some students tested boundaries with novice teachers. As ST3 observed, maintaining discipline was easier when clear expectations were established early and paired with relationship-building efforts. These findings suggest that behavioral management works best when combining consistent structure with positive teacher-student connections.

1. Engagement Boosters: Revitalizing Classroom Participation

The student teachers creatively enhanced student involvement through interactive learning strategies. ST2 and ST3 leveraged gamification, using platforms like Kahoot and role-playing activities to make lessons dynamic. As ST3 explained, "*When we turned grammar practice into a game, even reluctant learners joined in - the competition sparked their energy*." Similarly, ST4 incorporated physical games like spelling races to re-engage disinterested students. To bridge classroom content with real-life relevance, ST3 connected lessons to pop culture and social media, showing students the practical value of English.

While these methods successfully boosted short-term participation, their limitations became apparent. ST4 and ST5's use of tangible rewards (snacks, early dismissal) sometimes resulted in superficial engagement, as students focused more on incentives than learning. ST4 noted, "*The snacks worked immediately, but I wondered if they were really learning or just behaving for treats*." These findings highlight the importance of balancing fun with substance - engagement strategies prove most effective when they foster genuine interest while maintaining academic rigor.

2. Relationship Building: Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

The student teachers prioritized meaningful connections to foster student confidence and participation. ST1 and ST4 provided personalized attention through one-on-one check-ins, with ST4 noting: "*When I took time to talk privately with shy students, they gradually started volunteering answers in class." ST3's "no judgment" policy helped normalize mistakes, making language practice less intimidating*". Additionally, ST1 demonstrated cultural sensitivity by balancing students' comfort with regional languages while encouraging English use - an approach that built trust while maintaining learning goals.

These strategies proved particularly effective for engaging reluctant learners, as the individualized support helped overcome anxiety and resistance. However, building these relationships required significant time and effort, which was challenging within the constraints of a short practicum. As ST1 reflected, "*The students only began opening up in*

our final weeks – I wish we'd had more time." The findings underscore that authentic teacher-student relationships serve as a foundation for engagement, though they need sustained nurturing to yield full benefits.

3.   Collaboration with Mentors

The student teachers actively leveraged mentor expertise to navigate classroom challenges. For discipline management, ST1 and ST5 depended on supervising teachers' authority, with ST5 explaining: "*When my silent treatment failed, my mentor's intervention immediately quieted the class-their presence commanded respect.*" This collaboration helped maintain order while novice teachers developed their classroom management skills. Additionally, ST3 and ST5 sought pedagogical advice, adopting mentor-suggested techniques like visual aids to clarify complex concepts.

While mentor support proved invaluable, some teachers noted limitations in autonomy development. ST3 reflected, "*I wanted to solve problems myself, but sometimes needed quick fixes from experienced teachers.*" The findings reveal that mentor collaboration serves as both a safety net and learning opportunity, though striking the right balance between guidance and independent practice remains crucial for professional growth. Institutional structures that formalize this support while encouraging teacher agency could optimize its benefits.

The strategies employed by student teachers to address classroom management challenges reflect a blend of pedagogical innovation and mentorship reliance, aligning with key theoretical perspectives. The use of differentiated instruction (ST1, ST6, ST9) resonates with Landrum and Kauffman's (2015) ecological approach, which emphasizes adapting teaching methods to diverse learner needs within specific classroom contexts. However, as noted by ST9, large class sizes and motivational barriers limited the efficacy of these strategies, underscoring Sarah's (2022) argument that inclusive education requires systemic support (e.g., smaller ratios, tailored resources) alongside teacher adaptability. Similarly, behavioral management techniques (ST1, ST3, ST5), such as reward systems and non-verbal cues, align with Scott's (2017) evidence-based practices for reinforcing positive behavior. Yet, the sustainability challenges - such as ST3's observation that consistency and early relationship-building were critical - mirror Merç and Subaşı's (2015) finding that student teachers often struggle to balance discipline with rapport (Sarah 2022).

Engagement boosters like gamification (ST2, ST3) and relationship-building (ST1, ST4) highlight the role of student-centered pedagogies, as advocated by Darling-Hammond (2006). These strategies echo Rahmawati and Wirza's (2022) emphasis on self-efficacy: when student teachers fostered trust (e.g., through "no judgment" policies), students participated more willingly. However, the reliance on extrinsic rewards (ST4, ST5) risked superficial compliance, a caveat noted in Landrum and Kauffman's (2015) critique of behavioralism without intrinsic motivation. Mentor collaboration (ST1, ST3, ST5) emerged as a double-edged sword: while it provided immediate solutions (e.g., authority reinforcement), it sometimes hindered autonomy, reflecting Darling-Hammond's (2017) call for structured yet empowering mentorship in teacher education.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight critical areas for improvement in EFL teacher preparation programs. EFL student teachers need targeted training in culturally responsive pedagogy and differentiated instruction to address motivational and linguistic barriers. Programs should incorporate extended practicums with smaller class sizes to allow deeper relationship-building and practical application of classroom management strategies. Mentorship models must balance guidance with autonomy, while institutional policies should reinforce student

teachers' authority through clear role definitions. These systemic changes would better equip teachers to navigate both internal challenges like self-efficacy and external barriers such as resource limitations and cultural dynamics in diverse educational settings.

This study reveals the complex interplay of factors affecting classroom management in EFL contexts. While student teachers demonstrate adaptability through engagement strategies and mentor collaboration, persistent challenges remain in sustaining student motivation and establishing authority. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive teacher education reforms that combine pedagogical training with practical classroom experience. By strengthening curriculum design, mentorship structures, and institutional support, programs can transform these management challenges into valuable learning opportunities. Such improvements would ultimately enhance both teacher preparedness and student learning outcomes in diverse EFL classrooms.

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