

The Mediating Influence of Structured Classroom Observation on Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Professional Development: A Case Study of Tajikistan Teacher Education

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0246>

Received: 01 May 2026; Accepted: 07 May 2026; Published: 16 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Serving as a critical bridge between theoretical pedagogical knowledge and in-class instructional practice, pre-service teacher training faces persistent theory-practice disconnection across resource-limited educational settings in post-Soviet nations, with Tajikistan being a typical representative context. Structured classroom observation stands out as a low-cost, highly practical practicum intervention that effectively fosters professional growth among novice language educators. Adopting a mixed-methods single-case research design and grounded in sociocultural learning and reflective practice frameworks, this study targets pre-service EFL educators, school-based mentor instructors, and institutional teacher trainers within Tajikistani tertiary teacher education systems. Over a 12-week multi-stage intervention integrating mentor-guided classroom observation, reciprocal peer observation, and video-assisted reflective observation, the research gathers multidimensional empirical data through classroom observational checklists, lesson recordings, semi-structured and stimulated recall interviews, practicum reflection logs, group discussions, and standardized questionnaires. This investigation first maps the prevailing features and structural drawbacks of local observational practicum practices. It further explores how cognitive, social, and institutional factors mediate observational learning, documents novice EFL teachers' personal experiences and tangible instructional improvements brought by systematic observation, and identifies contextual advantages and barriers affecting intervention efficiency and long-term sustainability. Empirical findings demonstrate that contextually adapted structured observation enables student teachers to sharpen their classroom noticing competencies, build consistent reflective thinking habits, optimize instructional design and classroom management, and strengthen professional teaching confidence. By filling empirical research gaps regarding EFL practicum supervision within Central Asian post-Soviet low-resource contexts, this study delivers actionable, budget-friendly operational strategies and policy insights to enhance pre-service language teacher training across comparable under-resourced educational environments worldwide.

Keywords: classroom observation; pre-service EFL teachers; teacher professional development; reflective practice; pedagogical noticing; post-Soviet context; low-resource education; Tajikistan case .

INTRODUCTION

Pre-service teacher training constitutes the foundational phase of professional teacher cultivation, dedicated to equipping student educators with solid theoretical expertise and translating abstract pedagogical frameworks into practical classroom instructional capabilities. Across post-Soviet low- and middle-income regions, traditional teacher-centered instructional paradigms have persisted for decades and remain deeply ingrained in local educational routines. Nevertheless, ongoing national curriculum reforms continuously advocate interactive, student-oriented communicative language teaching approaches. Such policy and ideological shifts create an inherent mismatch between formal academic coursework and on-site practicum experiences, resulting in widespread disconnection between theory acquisition and practical classroom implementation among emerging EFL teachers (Hasanov, 2023).

As an indispensable component of school-based practicum supervision, structured classroom observation has been widely validated in global educational research as a powerful developmental intervention for novice teachers. Cyclic observational practices paired with collaborative professional dialogue and systematic self-reflection allow pre-service educators to engage with authentic classroom interaction scenarios, accumulate context-specific teaching experience, and refine their personalized instructional strategies (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Even so, existing scholarly investigations predominantly focus on well-resourced Western educational contexts. There remains a notable shortage of localized empirical evidence clarifying how classroom observation practices can be implemented, what developmental mechanisms they trigger, and how adaptable such supervision models are within Tajikistan's unique pre-service EFL training ecosystem. Local practicum supervision currently lacks standardized, context-tailored observational protocols, leading to fragmented mentoring support and limited improvements in novice teachers' practical competencies.

Against this contextual backdrop, this mixed-methods case study centers on pre-service EFL teacher education in Tajikistan. Drawing on established pedagogical theories, it develops a contextually adaptive multi-dimensional classroom observation intervention model. Through sustained on-site practicum intervention and multi-source data triangulation, the research explores the dynamic correlations between structured observational activities, contextual institutional and cultural variables, and novice teachers' professional progression. This work aims to mitigate the long-standing theory-practice divide in local language teacher training, provide empirical evidence for upgrading institutional practicum supervision frameworks, and offer replicable developmental solutions for pre-service EFL teacher education across diverse post-Soviet, resource-constrained learning environments.

Theoretical Foundation

Core Tenets of Foundational Theories

This research is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks—sociocultural learning theory and reflective practice theory—which collectively explain how structured observational engagement drives professional advancement among pre-service EFL teachers.

First proposed by Vygotsky (1978), sociocultural learning theory underscores that human learning is inherently socially situated and contextually dependent. Knowledge construction occurs through interactive participation in practical communal activities and relies on external social and cultural scaffolding. Building on this foundational framework, Lave and Wenger (1991) established community of practice theory, arguing that emerging professionals achieve incremental competency growth through peripheral legitimate participation in expert-led practical communities. Within pre-service language training contexts, multi-form classroom observation allows student teachers to observe seasoned instructors' instructional practices, participate in collaborative professional communities, and internalize formal pedagogical knowledge via social interaction, laying a solid social-cognitive foundation for sustainable professional development.

Supplementary to sociocultural perspectives, Schön (1983) developed reflective practice theory, categorizing professional reflection into real-time in-action adjustment and retrospective on-action review. Due to their limited classroom experience, novice pre-service teachers rarely possess the capability to modify instructional strategies during ongoing lessons. In contrast, post-hoc reflection based on observed classroom sessions and recorded lesson footage offers a feasible and effective approach for professional improvement. Repeated observational engagement and guided reflective dialogue enable student teachers to diagnose instructional shortcomings, summarize practical teaching experience, and iteratively polish their instructional techniques, forming a self-reinforcing cycle of professional learning.

Interactive Mechanism of Theory and Research Practice

The integration of sociocultural learning theory and reflective practice theory constructs a comprehensive analytical framework for this study. Sociocultural principles elaborate the external social pathways of novice teacher growth: one-on-one mentor guidance and peer-based collaborative interaction deliver external professional scaffolding for student teachers' skill development. Reflective practice theory illuminates the

internal cognitive mechanisms driving professional progress: systematic post-observation reflection converts externally observed instructional experiences into internalized professional cognition and operational classroom capabilities.

Furthermore, rather than mechanically replicating Western theoretical models, this research fully accounts for Tajikistan's distinct post-Soviet institutional legacies, hierarchical cultural conventions, and systemic resource limitations. It explores how local sociocultural and institutional variables moderate the effectiveness of established pedagogical theories. This context-aware analytical approach addresses the overgeneralization limitations of existing Western-centric theoretical frameworks and enhances the practical applicability of professional development theories within understudied Central Asian educational contexts.

Linguistic and Pedagogical Features of Local Pre-Service EFL Teaching

Synthesizing regional educational scholarship and official institutional curriculum documents, Tajikistan's pre-service EFL instruction and practicum training exhibit unique contextual traits. These localized characteristics necessitate targeted adaptive design for classroom observation interventions to maximize training effectiveness.

Structural Features of Local EFL Classroom Instruction

Shaped by decades of post-Soviet educational traditions, local EFL classrooms remain dominated by teacher-centered pedagogical approaches. Classroom activities prioritize knowledge transmission and textbook explanation, with minimal opportunities for student-student interaction and communicative task-based learning. Most practicing teachers follow rigid textbook-focused teaching routines, demonstrating limited flexibility in instructional adjustment and student-centered curriculum design. Compounded by systemic resource shortages, local K-12 schools commonly face overcrowded classrooms, insufficient multimedia facilities, and scarce supplementary teaching resources, all of which hinder the widespread implementation of modern communicative language teaching methodologies.

Practical Features of Pre-Service EFL Practicum Training

Local pre-service EFL practicum supervision presents notable structural deficiencies. First, institutional practicum guidelines lack unified operational standards, resulting in inconsistent, unstructured mentoring practices across different supervising instructors. Second, deeply rooted hierarchical teacher-student cultural norms encourage evaluative, judgment-focused mentoring rather than developmental, dialogic guidance, discouraging student teachers from conducting authentic critical reflection and open professional communication. Third, existing practicum arrangements lack cyclic, systematic training design; scattered observational activities and discontinuous reflective exercises prevent novice teachers from transforming fragmented observational experiences into stable, reusable classroom instructional competencies.

Cognitive and Pragmatic Features of Novice Teacher Learning

Most final-year pre-service EFL teachers in Tajikistan acquire comprehensive theoretical pedagogical knowledge during university coursework yet lack substantial hands-on classroom experience. This disconnect between theoretical mastery and practical application leads to underdeveloped classroom observational awareness, insufficient capacity to identify instructional problems, and weak on-site contingency management skills. Additionally, constrained by traditional educational mindsets, most novice teachers lack proactive reflective habits and collaborative learning initiative, relying passively on mentor evaluation rather than engaging in independent, iterative professional improvement.

Interactive Mechanisms of Classroom Observation in Pre-Service Teacher Development

As a core instructional supervision tool in teacher practicum programs, structured classroom observation facilitates pre-service teachers' professional growth through the dynamic interplay of external social scaffolding, internal cognitive processing, and repeated practical iteration. Different observational modes possess unique operational logics and deliver complementary developmental benefits for novice language educators.

Cognitive Basis: Pedagogical Noticing and Reflective Cognition

Cognitive processing constitutes the internal core of novice teachers' professional growth triggered by observational practice. Mentor-led classroom observation allows student teachers to witness standardized expert instructional practices, establish clear benchmarks for qualified EFL teaching, and recognize discrepancies between their own theoretical perceptions and real-world classroom requirements. Peer observation supports horizontal comparative cognition, enabling novice educators to identify common instructional challenges and diverse problem-solving strategies adopted by peer trainees.

Among all observational modalities, video-stimulated recall observation delivers the most prominent cognitive developmental effects. Recorded lesson footage captures subtle classroom interaction details easily overlooked during real-time teaching and supervision. Through repeated video review and guided retrospective interviews, pre-service teachers significantly enhance their pedagogical noticing capabilities, including accurate assessment of student learning status, precise identification of instructional flaws, and comprehensive comprehension of classroom interaction logic, laying a solid cognitive foundation for targeted instructional optimization.

Social Basis: Collaborative Scaffolding and Interactive Feedback

Social interaction serves as the external driving force of effective observational practicum learning. Grounded in sociocultural learning principles, experienced mentor teachers function as professional practitioners, providing targeted instructional scaffolding including curriculum interpretation, classroom management guidance, and problem-oriented instructional consultation, helping student teachers rapidly adapt to authentic on-site teaching scenarios.

Unlike hierarchical top-down mentor supervision, peer observation builds an egalitarian, low-pressure collaborative learning atmosphere. Student teachers conduct mutual classroom observation and non-judgmental constructive feedback, eliminating the defensive mentality triggered by evaluative supervision. This horizontal professional interaction fosters reciprocal learning, experience exchange, and collaborative problem-solving among novice educators, cultivating a cohesive professional learning community.

Institutional and Contextual Moderating Mechanisms

The effectiveness of classroom observation interventions is inevitably moderated by multi-layered local contextual factors. Culturally, traditional authority-respecting hierarchical norms restrict equal two-way dialogue between mentors and student teachers, limiting the depth and authenticity of post-observation reflective communication. Institutionally, incomplete practicum management systems lack unified observational criteria and standardized assessment frameworks, leading to inconsistent supervision quality across practicum sites. In terms of material resources, insufficient multimedia equipment and limited teaching supplies hinder large-scale implementation of video-assisted observational practices.

Conversely, ongoing local educational policy reforms that prioritize student-centered teaching philosophies provide institutional support for upgrading practicum supervision systems, creating favorable external conditions for the popularization and standardization of structured classroom observation practices.

The Counteracting Agency of Observational Practice

Structured classroom observation is not merely a passive supervisory tool for identifying novice teachers' instructional weaknesses; it also delivers active constructive functions for individual and institutional educational development. Repeated cyclic observational practices and continuous reflective iteration reshape pre-service teachers' professional cognition, optimize their daily instructional behaviors, and cultivate sustainable independent reflective learning habits. At the institutional level, empirically validated standardized observation intervention models can optimize local practicum supervision systems, elevate the overall quality of pre-service language teacher training, and drive iterative reform of regional EFL teacher education paradigms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant single-case mixed-methods design, supplemented by quantitative statistical analysis to achieve data triangulation and result validation. Focusing on one formal tertiary teacher education institution in Tajikistan, the research incorporates three embedded participant groups: pre-service EFL student teachers, on-site mentor instructors, and institutional teacher education administrators. Prioritizing in-depth exploration of intervention procedures, internal developmental mechanisms, and contextual influencing factors, this research design is well-suited to unpack the nuanced, dynamic relationships between structured observational practices and novice teachers’ professional growth within unique local cultural and institutional contexts.

Research Participants and Sampling

Purposive voluntary sampling was implemented for participant recruitment. Research participants included 10–12 final-year pre-service EFL teachers completing mandatory off-campus practicum training, 3–4 qualified on-site supervising EFL mentors, and 2 institutional curriculum designers and practicum administrators. All participants signed multi-language informed consent documents prior to data collection. Practicum placement sites covered both urban and suburban school campuses to ensure sample diversity and contextual representativeness. Detailed participant profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Research Participants

Participant Group	Number	Role & Responsibility	Data Contribution
Pre-service EFL Teachers	10–12	Final-year students undertaking EFL teaching practicum, core intervention recipients	Classroom observation, reflective journals, questionnaires, semi-structured & stimulated recall interviews
Mentor Teachers	3–4	In-service EFL teachers in cooperating schools, responsible for practicum supervision and instructional scaffolding	Supervision observation, one-on-one debriefing, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion
Teacher Educators/Administrators	2	Institutional curriculum designers and practicum managers	Policy verification, institutional interviews, focus group discussion

Week Standardised Intervention Framework

This research designed a phased 12-week multi-cycle structured observation intervention, encompassing pre-intervention baseline assessment, standardized orientation training, three progressive observational practice cycles, post-intervention data collection, and follow-up result verification. The staged intervention structure ensured continuous, systematic professional learning for participating pre-service teachers throughout the practicum period.

Week 0 served as the pre-intervention baseline phase, where pre-training questionnaires, initial classroom observation records, and pre-intervention interview data were collected to establish objective baseline indicators of student teachers’ instructional capabilities and professional cognition. Weeks 1–2 constituted the orientation training stage, featuring centralized workshops covering standardized observational protocols, professional reflective strategies, and low-cost mobile video recording techniques to unify operational standards and minimize human-induced research bias.

The mentor-led observational cycle was implemented across Weeks 3–5 to help student teachers absorb expert instructional strategies and standardize their teaching cognition. Weeks 6–7 focused on reciprocal peer observation and microteaching practices to cultivate collaborative reflective competencies. Weeks 8–10 delivered video-stimulated recall observational training to enhance participants’ micro-level classroom noticing and independent reflective abilities. Post-intervention data collection was completed in Week 11, and follow-up stakeholder interviews and institutional result validation were conducted in Week 12. The full intervention schedule is summarized comprehensively in Table 2.

Table 2. 12-Week Structured Observation Intervention Schedule

Phase	Timeline	Core Intervention Activities	Research Purpose
Pre-Intervention Baseline	Week 0	Pre-test questionnaires, baseline classroom observation, pre-intervention interviews	Establish pre-intervention instructional and cognitive baseline
Orientation Training	Weeks 1–2	Observation protocol training, reflective practice guidance, low-cost video recording training	Unify operational standards and reduce research bias
Mentor Observation Cycle	Weeks 3–5	Observe mentor lessons, complete reflective worksheets, one-on-one mentor debriefing	Standardise novice teachers’ expert instructional cognition
Peer Observation & Microteaching Cycle	Weeks 6–7	Reciprocal peer observation, microteaching, peer feedback and group debriefing	Develop collaborative reflective practice capacity
Video-Stimulated Recall Cycle	Weeks 8–10	Lesson video recording, guided stimulated recall interviews, iterative journal reflection	Enhance micro-level pedagogical noticing and self-reflection
Post-Intervention Data Collection	Week 11	Post-intervention observation, post-test questionnaires, stakeholder focus groups	Collect post-intervention developmental outcome data
Follow-Up & Verification	Week 12	Follow-up interviews, institutional result verification meetings	Verify intervention effectiveness and practical sustainability

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Eight complementary multi-language research tools were adopted to ensure comprehensive data triangulation: context-adapted classroom observation checklists, continuous lesson video recordings, structured video-stimulated recall interview protocols, standardized semi-structured interview guides, targeted reflective journal prompts, focus group discussion frameworks, validated teacher self-efficacy questionnaires, and official institutional curriculum documents. All research instruments were revised and localized to adapt to Tajikistan’s unique educational context, ensuring high ecological validity for on-site data collection.

All field research procedures strictly complied with international academic ethical guidelines and local institutional research regulations. All audio and video recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim, with cross-language translation verification implemented to eliminate linguistic bias. Complete participant

anonymization was applied throughout data processing and result analysis to protect participant privacy and guarantee overall research credibility and ethical compliance.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative datasets including interview transcripts, practicum reflection journals, and field observation notes were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, covering open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to extract core themes regarding observational developmental mechanisms and practical training challenges. Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed via non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to identify statistically significant differences in student teachers’ professional self-efficacy before and after the intervention. Multi-source data triangulation and participant member checking were consistently implemented to enhance research trustworthiness. All core research variables are systematically categorized in Table 3.

Table 3. Core Research Variables of the Study

Variable Type	Detailed Indicators
Independent Variable	Multi-modal structured classroom observation (mentor-led observation, peer observation, video-stimulated recall observation)
Dependent Variable	Pre-service EFL teachers’ professional development (pedagogical cognition, reflective capacity, classroom instructional performance, teaching self-efficacy)
Mediating Variable	Expert instructional scaffolding, peer collaborative dialogue, pedagogical noticing, situated formative feedback
Moderating Variable	Cultural hierarchical norms, institutional practicum policies, school educational resource constraints

To visualize the logical correlations between research variables and demonstrate the complete intervention workflow, this study developed a dedicated conceptual framework, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Structured Classroom Observation Intervention

This closed-loop framework demonstrates the study’s core research logic: multi-modal structured classroom observation serves as the exogenous intervention input. Moderated by local cultural conventions, institutional policies, and material resource conditions, such observational practices activate external collaborative scaffolding and internal cognitive reflective mechanisms, ultimately fostering comprehensive professional growth among pre-service EFL teachers and improving the overall quality of local pre-service language teacher practicum training.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Current Status of Local Classroom Observation Practices

Baseline research data revealed prominent structural limitations within local pre-service EFL practicum supervision. Traditional practicum supervision predominantly relies on mentor-led evaluative observation, while peer-based collaborative observation and video-assisted reflective practices remain underdeveloped and fragmented. Most on-site observational activities prioritize summative evaluation and scoring rather than formative developmental guidance. Without standardized operational protocols and systematic post-observation reflection mechanisms, local practicum supervision fails to support continuous teacher improvement.

Additionally, systemic resource shortages and rigid hierarchical cultural norms further hinder the practical effectiveness of existing observational training practices.

Mediating Mechanisms of Multi-Modal Observation

Different observational modes deliver complementary mediating effects on novice teachers' professional advancement. Mentor-guided observation provides authoritative professional scaffolding, helping student teachers standardize their basic instructional cognition and master qualified classroom teaching routines. Reciprocal peer observation creates equal collaborative learning environments, facilitating peer problem-solving and mutual experience exchange. Video-stimulated recall observation optimizes novice teachers' micro-level classroom observation sensitivity and independent reflective competencies. Combined, these three observational approaches form a complete professional growth chain, progressing from external expert imitation and horizontal peer collaboration to independent internalized professional improvement.

Novice Teachers' Subjective Perceptions and Practical Outcomes

Post-intervention data analysis confirmed that participating pre-service teachers held overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the multi-cycle structured observation intervention. Systematic observational training enabled student teachers to accurately identify personal instructional deficiencies, optimize classroom interaction design, and establish student-centered instructional awareness. Statistically, participants demonstrated significantly enhanced overall teaching self-efficacy after the intervention, with measurable improvements across classroom management, instructional design, and formative student assessment competencies.

Contextual Constraints and Affordances

Qualitative thematic analysis identified key contextual barriers affecting intervention implementation, including ingrained hierarchical cultural norms, insufficient school educational resources, and imperfect institutional practicum governance policies. Conversely, recent national curriculum reforms advocating student-centered language instruction, novice teachers' proactive learning attitudes, and the low-cost accessibility of smartphone-based video recording create favorable contextual conditions for the popularization and sustainable implementation of structured observational practicum interventions.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in sociocultural learning theory and reflective practice theory, this mixed-methods case study explores how multi-form structured classroom observation shapes pre-service EFL teachers' professional development within Tajikistan's post-Soviet, resource-limited educational context. Empirical results verify that contextually adapted mentor-led supervision, peer collaborative observation, and video-assisted reflective practice effectively compensate for the deficiencies of conventional practicum training systems. These observational interventions successfully enhance novice teachers' pedagogical cognition, reflective learning capabilities, practical instructional skills, and overall professional teaching confidence.

Theoretically, this research validates the cross-context applicability of Western teacher development theories within under-researched post-Soviet low-resource educational settings, enriching localized empirical literature on Central Asian EFL teacher education and expanding the practical application scope of classic sociocultural and reflective practice theories. Practically, the low-cost, standardized multi-modal observation intervention framework and practicum training toolkit established in this study can be directly adopted by local teacher education institutions, providing actionable guidelines for regional practicum supervision reform and novice teacher training optimization.

This study inevitably contains certain limitations. As a single-case investigation, its statistical generalizability is constrained, and the 12-week short-term intervention cannot validate the long-term sustained impacts of observational training on teachers' lifelong professional development. Future research can expand participant sample sizes, extend intervention cycles, and further explore the long-term iterative developmental mechanisms of observational practice, so as to refine context-adaptive teacher development intervention strategies for low-resource post-Soviet educational contexts.

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