

PRACTICE ARTICLE

Enhancing Communication Competence in International Pre-service Teachers: Insights from a Practice-led Placement Preparation Program

Hannah Soong
Adelaide University, Australia
hannah.soong@adelaide.edu.au
ORCID: 0000-0002-1798-4881

Michael Mu
Adelaide University, Australia
michael.mu@adelaide.edu.au
ORCID: 0000-0002-8786-0956

Xuechen Zhang
Adelaide University, Australia
xuechen.zhang@adelaide.edu.au
ORCID: 0000-0003-1395-413X

Janene Thompson
Adelaide University, Australia
jane.thompson@sa.gov.au
ORCID: 0000-0002-1215-7932

Shaan Gilson
Adelaide University, Australia
shaan.gilson@adelaide.edu.au
ORCID: 0000-0002-3243-1716

Wendy Piltz
Adelaide University, Australia
wendy.piltz@adelaide.edu.au
ORCID: 0000-0002-4537-5282

Shane Leathem

Adelaide University, Australia

shane.leathem@adelaide.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0002-5074-9111

Leanne Larkin

Adelaide University, Australia

leanne.larkin@adelaide.edu.au

ORCID: 0009-0006-6972-0155

Mata Kalyvas

Adelaide University, Australia

mata.kalyvas@adelaide.edu.au

ORCID: 0009-0004-3081-7326

Xin Fang*

Adelaide University, Australia

xin.fang@adelaide.edu.au

ORCID: 0009-0008-8895-1711

*Corresponding author

Ruoxin Wang

Adelaide University, Australia

ruoxin.wang@adelaide.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0003-2796-446X

Abstract

Communication competence in school and classroom contexts is central to teaching success, yet developing it during professional placements can be especially demanding when communication is relational and context-dependent. However, international pre-service teachers often face intensified demands in developing both verbal and non-verbal communication while navigating unfamiliar cultural norms and local school context. This paper reports on the International Student Pre-service Teacher Placement Preparation Program, a practice-led initiative at the University of South Australia designed to support first-year Master of Teaching (Secondary) international pre-service teachers in building communication skills for placements. The Program comprised seven weekly workshops integrating structured presentations, collaborative activities, and peer mentoring. Data were collected through weekly online surveys (289 responses from 81 unique participants) and four post-program focus groups (16 participants). Quantitative findings indicate that consistent workshop participation was associated with higher perceived confidence in classroom communication while qualitative findings highlight improvements in verbal skills (e.g., tone, pace, clarity), non-verbal skills (e.g., gesture, eye contact, posture), and professional relationship-building. Participants emphasised the value of sustained support from peer mentors and teacher educators while highlighting the challenges of classroom

management and cultural adaptation. The study concludes with recommendations for embedding communication skill development throughout professional experience courses and fostering institutional structures that support international students' professional confidence, with potential applicability across other professional disciplines such as nursing, social work, medicine, counselling, and accountancy.

Keywords: international pre-service teachers, professional placement, communication competence, teacher education, peer mentoring, classroom confidence

Introduction

In Australia, as international pre-service teachers increasingly contribute to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs and the future teaching workforce, greater attention has been directed towards how their experiences at professional placements – an integral component of Australian Professional Teacher Standards – are structured and supported. This matters because preparing pre-service teachers, particularly international pre-service teachers, for professional placements has long been a challenge for ITE (Boylan et al., 2025; Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022). On the one hand, existing practicum models do not always adequately recognise or respond to the diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational resources that international pre-service teachers bring with them (Soong et al., 2021). On the other hand, international pre-service teachers frequently experience difficulties in building relationships with students, mentor teachers, and other stakeholders during their professional placements (Tangen & Campbell, 2017). This highlights a need for institutional support structures to ensure equitable and enabling placement experiences for international pre-service teachers.

In this paper, "international pre-service teachers" refers to students with international visa status who are enrolled in the Bachelor or Master of Teaching program studying onshore in Australia. Many have completed prior education outside Australia and must navigate professional placement requirements in unfamiliar institutional and classroom context. These students often need to interpret Australian classroom expectations, professional standards and implicit norms during placement. Importantly, international pre-service teachers are not a homogeneous group; their diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds shape how they engage in these contexts.

This paper reports on a project designed to support international pre-service teachers during their professional placements with a particular focus on developing their communication competence in classroom and school settings. Communication competence is understood as the ability to adapt messages to the interaction and the classroom/school context with feedback serving as an indicator of (un)successful adaptation (Bakić-Tomić et al., 2015). This focus is informed by research demonstrating that teachers with strong verbal and non-verbal communication skills, alongside relational qualities, are often perceived as highly effective – characterised as engaging, friendly, attentive, and memorable (Webster, 2010).

While teacher education programs address communication through activities such as presentations and group discussions, these opportunities do not fully reflect the relational and contextual demands of classroom and school settings. During placements, pre-service

teachers are required to communicate in dynamic, often high-stakes situations—building rapport with students, managing students' behavioural needs (Du Plessis & Razmjooe, 2026), interpreting mentor feedback (Gray et al., 2017), and engaging with colleagues – where meaning is context-dependent and relationships are central. For many pre-service teachers, developing this form of situated professional communication is challenging and largely acquired through practice (Du Plessis & Razmjooe, 2026).

For international pre-service teachers, these demands may be further intensified, as placement communication is simultaneously linguistic, cultural, and professionally evaluated (Nallaya, 2016). Even when students meet English language entry requirements, they may need additional support to develop communication competence and navigate culturally embedded norms that can misalign with prior educational experiences (Nallaya, 2016). At the same time, placements also require pre-service teachers to apply theory within unfamiliar curricula and teaching approaches, which can widen the theory–practice gap without sufficient mentoring and support (Nallaya, 2016).

Accordingly, this project proceeds from the premise that communication competence in classroom and school contexts is central to the teaching success of international pre-service teachers during professional placements. In response, a group of teacher educators at the then University of South Australia (now Adelaide University) developed the International Student Pre-service Teachers Placement Preparation Program as a targeted, practice-based space for participants to rehearse and reflect on placement-specific communication demands and translate their existing strengths into more confident, context-responsive practice. While the Program focuses on communication competence, it also supports participants in navigating culturally embedded norms and professional expectations as these intersect with communication in placement contexts.

The International Pre-service Teachers Placement Preparation Program

The International Pre-service Teachers Placement Preparation Program (hereafter the 'Program') consisted of a series of weekly one-hour workshops tailored to first-year postgraduate international pre-service teachers studying onshore in Australia. Participation in the Program was voluntary as it operated as a support initiative rather than a credit-bearing course requirement. Over a seven-week period, participating students met regularly to build connections with one another while developing communication competence in classroom and school settings.

Workshops were led by a core group of teacher educators and supported by nine second-year international pre-service teachers who acted as peer mentors, drawing on their placement experience to provide practical guidance and reassurance. Each workshop was organised into small groups of about five first-year international pre-service teachers, facilitated by either a teacher educator or a peer mentor, to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Verbal feedback from peers, peer mentors, and teacher educators was provided immediately after each activity. Each workshop targets certain verbal skills (e.g., pace, rhythm, tone, pronunciation, and articulation) or non-verbal skills (e.g., gesture, eye contact, and overall presence) and begins by inviting each participant to deliver a short presentation (approximately five minutes) on a personally meaningful topic – such as

motivations for studying teaching, family experiences, and leisure activities. While Weeks 1 and 7 also served to set up and conclude the Program, respectively, Weeks 2-6 focused more intensively on developing communication skills.

Upon completion of each workshop, two PhD student research assistants invited the first-year student participants to complete a five-minute online survey. As part of the study methodology, the survey generated longitudinal quantitative data tracking participants' perceived confidence in classroom communication over the course of the Program. Following the completion of the Program and participants' first placement practice in school, four focus group interviews were conducted with a total number of 16 volunteers drawn from the Program participants. The focus groups generated qualitative data, providing preliminary evidence on the contribution of the Program to placement readiness.

Positionality statement

The authors were involved in the design and delivery of the Program, as well as members involved primarily in data analysis and reporting. As such, the study is presented from an insider perspective as teacher educators/researchers. This positioning enabled close access to the Program context and participants' experiences; however, it may also introduce interpretive bias. To mitigate this, data collection was conducted using an identical weekly survey administered after each session while focus group discussions were facilitated using a semi-structured protocol. In reporting qualitative excerpts, pseudonyms are used and identifying details were removed. The authors also approached analysis collaboratively, revisiting interpretations against the raw data and the aims of the study.

Phase 1: Online Survey

The initial quantitative phase was administered through an online survey. Because not every participant attended all weekly workshops or completed the survey each week, a total of 289 responses were collected from 81 unique international pre-service teacher participants. All of them were aged above 18, studying fulltime onshore at the then University of South Australia (now Adelaide University). The survey collected information regarding students' demographics and their perceived confidence in classroom communication.

Demographic information includes gender (66.7% female) and previous educational background. Before their entry into the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program, participants had obtained a teacher education degree (11.1%), a teaching or education-related degree but not a teacher education degree (10.1%), or a degree/program beyond education (78.8%). Less than one-third of the participants had no educational experience in Australia (31.7%). Among those with existing educational experience in Australia, their study period varied: less than one year (30.7%), between one and two years (10.1%), between two and three years (10.1%), and over three years (17.3%).

To measure perceived confidence in classroom communication, we developed a 15-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Each item asks participants to indicate their perceived confidence in communication competence in a hypothetical classroom context (see Table 1). The scale demonstrates high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha value higher than .90 consistently across seven weeks.

Table 1: The 15-item-7-Point Likert Scale for Confidence in Classroom Communication

Item	Item description
1	I am comfortable with the volume and projection of my voice (e.g., loud enough to be heard by everyone, given group size and proximity).
2	I am comfortable with my pitch and tone (e.g., able to use variation to engage, add interest, or emphasise key points).
3	I am comfortable with my speed and rhythm (e.g., slow enough to be clear but not so slow as to be tedious; able to vary speed/rhythm for emphasis).
4	I am comfortable with pronunciation and articulation (e.g., able to use clear and concise articulation and pronunciation).
5	I am comfortable with my grammar and language use (e.g., accurate, avoiding slang, selecting language appropriate to context).
6	I am comfortable using pauses for effect, attention, or emphasis.
7	I am able to avoid overusing particular words (e.g., “good,” “ok,” “alright,” “um”).
8	I am able to use inclusive terms (e.g., avoiding “guys” or “boys/girls” when addressing the group).
9	I am comfortable with my stance and gestures (e.g., projecting a positive, confident stance; using posture and gestures to enhance verbal information).
10	I am comfortable with my limb movements and mannerisms (e.g., using hand and body movements to complement verbal messages and convey confidence).
11	I am comfortable with my professional manner and relational communication (e.g., aligning verbal and non-verbal communication and developing relationships).
12	I am mindful of focusing on the person who is communicating (e.g., demonstrating listening behaviours and requesting repetition when necessary).
13	I am comfortable asking clarifying questions to check interpretation and meaning.
14	I am comfortable building conversation by following up with probing questions.
15	I am comfortable asking someone to repeat when I am unable to hear the communication clearly.

The survey results provide some preliminary evidence on the contribution of the Program to participants' perceived confidence in classroom communication. Key results are summarised below:

- While some participants attended the weekly sessions more frequently than others, more frequent attendance was associated with stronger confidence in classroom communication ($r = .364, p < .001$).
- Overall, perceived confidence in classroom communication demonstrated a gradual growth over a seven-week period. However, there is no statistically significant growth found between any consecutive weeks. In general, participants in weeks 1 and 2 reported lower perceived confidence in classroom communication than participants in weeks 3-7. As participants in each weekly session were not identical, the result here shows that participants in later weeks were more confident in classroom communication than those in earlier weeks.
- For the 10 participants who attended weeks 2-6 consistently, their perceived confidence in classroom communication sustained, with no statistically significant change over time. The non-significant result may be due to small sample size. However, their perceived confidence in classroom communication was consistently higher than the 'random attendees'. The effect size of this difference is medium-to-

large for week 2 ($d = .516, p < .137$), week 3 ($d = .545, p < .119$), week 4 ($d = .684, p < .059$), and week 6 ($d = .615, p < .084$), and small-to-medium for week 5 ($d = .383, p < .257$). This implies a potential effect of consistent participation on perceived confidence in classroom communication.

- In general, perceived confidence in classroom communication did not demonstrate a statistically significant gender difference, except in week 5 where a medium-to-large gender difference was observed ($d = .675, p = .033$) between males ($M = 6.1$) and females ($M = 5.6$).
- A predominant proportion of the participants (78.8%) did not have a teacher education or teaching/education-related degree. For those who did, their perceived confidence in classroom communication was not statistically significantly different from those who did not. This indicates that classroom communication remains statistically equally challenging among our participants, irrespective of their previous educational backgrounds.

Phase 2: Focus Group Interviews

Each focus group interview lasted approximately 75 minutes to explore the effects of the Program on participants' communication competence and placement experiences. Participants particularly appreciated the support from peer mentors while also commenting on the challenges they faced during placements, highlighting areas for future support.

Improving communication competence and building professional relationships through verbal and non-verbal skills

Participants consistently emphasised on why and how the Program helped them develop effective verbal skills, which in turn supported their classroom communication during their placement experience:

I learned useful skills like how to introduce myself, how to have a small talk, and how to work in a team. I also practiced classroom communication, which made it easier to interact with students and teachers.

[The Program] let me realise how important the tone [and] the pitch is ... how they really affect your meaning. And I kind of use this kind of skills during my placement when I have a small conversation with my students and also with my mentors.

This highlights how the practice of seemingly routine and communicative acts – small talk and introduction – in everyday communication can significantly strengthen their confidence to meaningfully interact in classroom contexts. The Program also supported international pre-service teachers to develop their verbal communication skills in building relationships beyond the immediate classroom contexts:

I recall ... a session [which we get to practice] how to start [small talk] when you meet a new teaching staff ... how to build connections, how to ask some questions. I found that ... really useful when I was doing my placement, especially during the morning

time or the recess time. I met a lot of different teaching staff ... so I always think of ... what kind of topic can I ask them? Like, what kind of questions can I ask them? ... I asked them and built the connections [with them].

And the most important thing that I learned from this Program: Never be afraid [to ask] when I'm not sure what others are talking about. So overall my placement [had] really good communications with both my mentor and my colleagues.

Participants also reflected on how the Program helped them develop non-verbal communication skills – such as gestures, eye contact, and body language – which they found essential for responding effectively to class dynamics. The following highlights the strategies they identified:

One scenario is about ... when you are writing on the whiteboard, you need to ... also pay attention to your students from time to time. You should not have your backs to your students for all the time ... So during my placement, every time when I need to write on the whiteboard, I remember this advice, yeah.

It's like non-talking but you can use any other kind of listening strategies to encourage your students ... and you can give ... your eye contact [to] the students. I think this can be an effective way to encourage your students because you show your respect to your students and they will feel 'I'm really involved' in this kind of context. And they can do much better and they will. They would try their best to engage with the class.

Importantly, participants learned to employ verbal and non-verbal skills simultaneously in classroom communication. See the following excerpt as an example:

Yes, one incident happened when a student did not understand my instructions. At first, I felt nervous, but I remembered what I learned from the Program about speaking slowly, using simple words, and checking for understanding. I repeated the instruction in another way and used body language to support my words. The student then understood and joined the activity. This experience showed me how important clear communication and patience are.

This reflection illustrates how practising clear and deliberate communication strategies can enhance student engagement and learning.

The value of peer mentoring

Notably, the support of the senior peer mentors, who had completed their professional placement experience, was an important component of the Program. Observing and interacting with these experienced peers during the Program helped participants gain insights into classroom communication and professional expectations, reducing uncertainty and encouraging active engagement. This peer-supported experience then translated into greater perceived confidence during placements, enabling participants to build stronger relationships with students, mentor teachers, and school staff. Some reflected:

... one thing I really appreciate ... in each session that we also have a senior student ... and a teacher [sitting] with us at a table and no matter what questions we have, we can ask them and they share their practical advice to us based on their placement experience.

I think it reduces my anxiety because [I heard] different experiences [from] the [peer mentor] about their previous placements they shared ...they can reduce my anxiety of the placement.

Challenges of teaching well in placements

While the focus groups primarily explored how the Program contributed to communication competence and professional relationships in classroom and school settings, participants also discussed challenges encountered during their first teaching placement. A recurring issue was classroom management:

... during our placement, we do face a lot of student behaviour issues or other like tricky things.

... my mentor (teacher mentor at school) complains that [my] classroom management sometimes is too harsh, sometimes it's too loose and [I] should find a balance point.

In some cases, these challenges were intensified by cultural differences in approaches to classroom management:

I have some experience teaching in China and in China ... the classroom management skills [are] sometimes rougher and [a] stiffer line [than] Australian ones.

In other cases, educational and cultural differences between home and Australian contexts further complicated participants' placement experience:

... because I am from Malaysia ... when I was studying it was all teacher centred teaching pedagogies...

... [In Australia] we always learned [across] all our courses that we [must] differentiate our pedagogies and teaching strategies. But I found I can't help covering every student in my class. I can't even differentiate [the class].

I felt really bad ... because maybe [I gave] too much content for a Friday afternoon class ... but I never ... experience this kind of culture shock. Yeah. And because in China ... no matter ... what time [the lesson] is ... whether it's on a Friday or Saturday or even Sunday ... [there is] no excuse... [we] always [learn] a lot of content as students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper presents a practice-led International Student Pre-service Teacher Placement Preparation Program. Survey findings provide preliminary evidence of the Program's contribution to participants' development of classroom communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal. Focus group data extend these findings, indicating that initiatives to build communication competence are most effective when embedded within sustained relational support from peer mentors and teacher educators. Participants' accounts suggest that communication development supported not only classroom interaction but also relationship-building with mentor teachers and school staff, helping to reduce uncertainty in placement contexts. Learning occurred not only through structured workshop instruction but also through participation in a collaborative and reflective professional community. Building on this evidence, several recommendations follow.

First, communication development should be strengthened across the placement trajectory. To enhance responsiveness, future iterations of the Program could incorporate a brief needs analysis prior to implementation, enabling workshop content to align more closely with participants' expressed concerns regarding communication in classroom and school contexts. Pre-placement workshops could be extended in both frequency and duration – for example, to 90 minutes per session – to allow sustained rehearsal of communication strategies in a supportive environment. Incorporating short video-recorded micro-teaching segments may further enhance self-awareness and reflective capacity. Communication development may also be strengthened by making everyday teaching contexts more explicit as sites for rehearsal. While participants often recognised the need to “practise more”, clearer guidance on how settings such as student-organised activities can be used to rehearse specific verbal and relational strategies would be beneficial. Structured post-placement workshops should be introduced to enable participants to consolidate learning through guided reflection, contextualised practice, and renewed peer engagement. In addition, communication skill development should be more systematically embedded within professional experience courses through structured activities that foster both verbal and non-verbal competence. Longitudinal follow-up may further illuminate the sustainability of communication gains and their potential influence on employment trajectories.

Second, targeted strategies are needed to build self-confidence and professional networks. Facilitated question-and-answer workshops involving experienced and early-career teachers could provide authentic insights into local schooling contexts while strengthening contextualised professional communication. Biannual information sessions on teacher registration processes and employment pathways would clarify procedural expectations and potentially encourage engagement in school-based support roles, thereby increasing contextual familiarity and confidence. Establishing alumni networks led by peer mentors could further cultivate informal professional communities in which international pre-service teachers practise professional communication within socially supportive environments. Participants could also be more explicitly encouraged to join relevant local professional teacher associations and engage in professional development activities with clear guidance on student memberships and entry pathways to reduce barriers to participation.

Third, to address placement-related challenges – particularly those arising from differing educational cultures and classroom management practices – we recommend

strengthening international pre-service teachers' intercultural communication through sustained exposure to authentic school contexts. Integrating local pre-service teacher volunteers into program activities could enhance peer learning, foster cross-cultural collaboration, and provide situated insights into how interactional norms (e.g., rapport-building, authority, and behavioural expectations) are enacted in Australian classrooms. Expanding opportunities for structured observation, volunteering, and guided participation would further support pedagogical confidence and contextual understanding. In addition, scaffolded classroom management training – incorporating role-play, scenario-based simulations, and iterative rehearsal across teacher education courses – would offer a supportive environment to practise and refine strategies prior to and during placement. Consideration could also be given to providing brief guidance for mentor teachers on the communicative and cultural challenges faced by international pre-service teachers. We also recommend encouraging reflective and critical sense-making, enabling participants to recognise differences without dismissing their prior pedagogical strengths. This approach supports the integration of diverse educational perspectives, positioning international pre-service teachers not only as learners adapting to a new context but also as contributors who can enrich professional dialogue and pedagogical diversity within school communities.

Finally, supporting international students' professional development is critical not only within teacher education but across professional degrees more broadly. Insights derived from the Program may inform the design of comparable practice-led models in fields such as nursing, social work, medicine, counselling, and accountancy. Such models should cultivate communication competence and professional confidence through targeted, context-responsive approaches. Institutional support must also extend to course coordinators and tutors, enabling them to embed tailored communication and confidence-building strategies aligned with the specific needs of international student cohorts. Strengthened partnerships between universities and professional workplaces are essential for developing integrated support structures that facilitate meaningful engagement with practice settings and contribute to addressing workforce capacity and skills shortages in Australia.

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Ethics

This study was approved from the University of South Australian Human Research Ethics (Ethics Number: 206224). All participants confirmed their participation was voluntary and gave informed consent.

AI Statement

This paper was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence technology including ChatGPT or Grammarly.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest regarding this publication.

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