THE PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS TOWARD A TRAINING PROGRAM INTEGRATING ONLINE COACHING

Siwaporn Saito[i],
Supong Tangkiengsirisin
Language Institute,
Thammasat University,
Thailand

Abstract:

This research article explores the perceptions of pre-service EFL teachers towards a training program integrating online coaching in developing instructional skills in critical thinking. The program was designed to provide pre-service EFL teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach critical thinking to young learners in English classrooms. The participants were asked to provide their opinions on the program through a perception questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study revealed that pre-service EFL teachers had positive perceptions towards the training program integrating online coaching. They commented that the program was beneficial in improving their instructional skills in critical thinking. The results of this study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of pre-service EFL teachers toward a training program integrating online coaching.

Keywords: critical thinking, pre-service EFL teacher training, perceptions, online coaching

1. Introduction

The teaching profession is instrumental in shaping the education of citizens in all fields and is viewed as the best hope for bringing about social change and a nation's destiny (Pushpanadham, 2020). Because of these reasons, the teacher preparation process has become one of the most vital aspects of the educational system. However, in light of social, economic, and political developments that have posed challenges to classical education's goals, teacher education systems have gone through substantial changes in recent years, necessitating the redefinition of the concept of the "ideal teacher" with an emphasis on the continuum of teacher preparation and in-service training (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001).

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[i] Correspondence: email pop.saito@gmail.com

In Thailand, developing quality teachers is a significant priority of the national education system. Therefore, the Ministry of Education has implemented several teacher preparation programs in universities nationwide to ensure that students receive the best education possible. These programs focus on equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide quality teachings, such as developing teaching skills, knowledge of classroom management and assessment, and using technology in the classroom. The programs also emphasize developing knowledge and skills related to teaching various subject areas, like mathematics, science, and English.

The teaching practicum is a crucial part of teacher education programs, helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing student teachers with hands-on experience. During the practicum, pre-service teachers can get used to classes, students, and teaching programs, all while supervised by experienced school and university supervisors. The objectives of teaching practice are to give pre-service teachers real-life classroom experience under the supervision of professional teachers, to allow pre-service teachers to put educational theories into practice, and to provide them with a chance to further develop professional skills, competencies, personal characteristics, and experience for full-time teaching after graduation (Aglazor, 2017). Also, the practicum can affect pre-service teachers' perceptions of their readiness to teach and professional growth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002).

In the 21st century, critical thinking is essential for students to be successful. This is reflected in the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008), which explicitly states one of the key competencies must-haves for students is "thinking capacity." This means that students should be able to think analytically, synthetically, constructively, critically, and systematically to make informed decisions about themselves and the world around them. To ensure students are prepared to face the challenges of a world that increasingly relies on digital knowledge and skills, teachers and administrators must invest in providing them with the necessary training for critical thinking. This must begin early, as students need frequent and repeated exposure to such practices. In addition to giving them the capacity to solve problems and think outside the box creatively, this training will instill the confidence to take on such tasks (Changwong, 2018).

In Thailand, several issues have been identified as hindering the teaching of critical thinking, such as a focus on rote learning, a lack of teacher training and motivation, and a lack of emphasis on this skill in the Thai education system. To illustrate, the traditional method of teaching and learning in primary and tertiary education, mainly composed of lecturing, is inadequate in cultivating a love of learning and enabling students to practice different skills. In addition, this method of knowledge transmission relies on memorization, and teaching activities lack variety and creativity (Aksornkan, 2020; Prommak, 2019; Namsaeng & Sukying, 2021). Furthermore, the large volume of content and the number of students make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized instruction, thus depriving students of the opportunity to participate in the learning process and be assessed and evaluated on their acquired knowledge. These problems in

teaching have resulted in students lacking the necessary environment to learn and develop critical thinking.

Teachers are particularly crucial in teaching critical thinking skills. Language teachers, in particular, can assist students in developing critical thinking skills (Asgharheidari & Tahriri, 2015). However, some research on critical thinking instruction suggests that some obstacles to critical thinking instruction may be caused by teachers themselves, such as a lack of training, inadequate resources, preconceived notions, and time limits. In addition, despite most teachers claiming to teach critical thinking implicitly, most students do not develop the necessary thinking abilities (Fisher, 2007).

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the perceptions of pre-service EFL teachers toward the training program integrating online coaching in enhancing their instructional skills in critical thinking. The study's objective is addressed through the research question: What are pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions toward the training program integrating online coaching in improving their instructional skills in critical thinking?

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Research Design
The researcher applied mixed-method experimental research. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using various research instruments.

2.2 Research Participants
The participants in this study are 22 pre-service EFL teachers from the Faculty of Education in a state university in the lower north of Thailand. The participants were purposively selected because they are in their third year of study and will have their teaching practicum in schools for one year in the 2023 academic year. Consequently, they must be equipped with various teaching methods in the language classroom.

2.3 Research Instruments
The research instruments in the current study consisted of a perception questionnaire and questions for semi-structured interviews.

2.4 Details of the Training Program Integrating Online Coaching
The training program in this study was developed based on the integrative framework of an effective professional development program by Joyce and Showers (2002) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). Thus, five essential components were included in this program: 1) Theory, 2) Modeling/ Demonstration, 3) Practice, 4) Coaching, and 5) Active Learning. The online coaching process was developed based on the four models of practical coaching framework by Joyce and Showers (1982); Whitmore (2009); Pierce (2015); Knight (2021). Consequently, there were five important components considered for the coaching model in this study, which were 1) Goal Setting, 2) Observation, 3)

Feedback, 4) Learning, and 5). Improving. The coaching session was delivered online once a week for six consecutive weeks via a video conference application. This coaching session lasted 30-45 minutes.

Five experts were asked to evaluate the appropriateness and quality of the training program. The contents of the training program were revised according to expert comments and suggestions. The training program was then piloted with non-participants. Consequently, problems such as time allocation for each topic and activities that needed to be adapted for more active learning were identified.

2.5 Data Collection
This study was conducted for seven weeks during the second semester of the 2022 academic year. It aimed to help pre-service teachers develop teaching skills in critical thinking. The study included a three-day training workshop and online coaching sessions for six weeks. In addition, participants were asked to provide their opinions toward the training program through a perception questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

2.6 Data Analysis
This mixed-methods research study involved collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were taken from a perception questionnaire, and qualitative data were taken from the pre-service EFL teachers' semi-structured interviews. Afterward, the data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to answer the research question.

3. Results

The findings from the perception questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were revealed as follows:

Table 3.1: The Opinions of Pre-Service EFL Teachers
toward the Training Program Integrating Online Coaching

Statement	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. The overall quality of the training program was satisfactory.	4.69	0.53
2. The training program provided the necessary skills for teaching critical thinking.	4.63	0.55
3. The training program helped you change your approach to critical thinking teaching.	4.43	0.92
4. The training program addressed your individual learning needs.	4.37	0.94
5. The duration of the training program was sufficient to master the required skills.	4.11	1.02
6. The training program met your expectations.	4.23	1.03
7. The training program content was relevant and applicable to your teaching job.	4.69	0.73
8. The training program was well organized and structured.	4.57	0.81
9. The training materials help you understand the subject matter.	4.29	0.54
10. The activities helped you develop your critical thinking skills and critical thinking teaching.	4.51	0.89
11. You received sufficient support from the trainers during the training program.	4.56	0.79
12. The trainers demonstrated sufficient expertise and knowledge of the subject matter.	4.49	0.96
13. The trainers were able to explain and demonstrate the material.	4.89	0.32

14. The online coaching component of the program was useful.	4.40	0.85
15. The online coaching component of the program helped you develop teaching in critical thinking.	4.86	0.43

This survey showed that participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with the overall quality of the training program. The results demonstrated that the program effectively provided the necessary skills for teaching critical thinking. The training program participants expressed great satisfaction with the program's quality and found the content relevant and useful for their teaching.

The top three items were as the following: the trainers were able to explain and demonstrate the material ($\overline{X}$ = 4.89, SD = 0.32). The online coaching component of the program was seen to be especially beneficial in helping develop teaching skills in critical thinking ($\overline{X}$ = 4.86, SD = 0.43). The overall quality of the training program was satisfactory ($\overline{X}$ = 4.69, SD = 0.53), and the training program content was relevant and applicable to the teaching job ($\overline{X}$ = 4.69, SD = 0.73).

For the bottom three items, the survey results indicated that the participants were generally satisfied with the duration of the training program ($\overline{X}$ = 4.11, SD = 1.02); the training program met their expectations. ($\overline{X}$ = 4.23, SD = 1.03); the materials that helped them comprehend the subject matter ($\overline{X}$ = 4.29, SD = 0.54), respectively.

3.1 Opinions toward the Training Program Integrating Online Coaching from Semi-Structured Interviews

This part presented the findings from the semi-structured interviews; three emergent themes were the training program's usefulness, the advantages, and the disadvantages of online coaching in the training program.

A. The Usefulness of the Training Program Integrating Online Coaching

The results from the semi-structured interviews showed that the training program was effective in helping pre-service teachers plan and teach critical thinking.

a. Usefulness of the Training Program

The participants reported that the training program provided them with the knowledge, strategies, and resources needed to effectively plan and teach critical thinking. They noted that the program gave them a deeper understanding of the importance of critical thinking and the tools required to teach it successfully. Furthermore, they commented that the program empowered them to teach critical thinking confidently.

One of the pre-service teachers revealed:

"The training program was extremely beneficial in helping me better understand the importance of critical thinking and to develop strategies to plan and teach it in my classroom effectively. Also, it provided me with useful resources such as strategies and approaches to teach critical thinking and to gain the confidence to use them in my classrooms." (PST03)

Another participant said:

"The training program has been useful in helping me have a clear picture of what critical thinking is and how I should plan lessons to teach critical thinking. At first, I don't know much about critical thinking. However, through the program, I am exposed to active learning techniques that help me explore complex concepts and apply critical thinking strategies to my own teaching and learning. And the program also helps me develop strategies to engage my students in critical thinking activities and to foster an environment of collaboration and inquiry." (PST19)

b. Effectiveness of Online Coaching Process

According to the results, it could be concluded that the online coaching sessions in training were very effective in helping the pre-service teachers improve their instructional skills in critical thinking, especially in goal setting and feedback. In addition, some participants agreed that the steps of online coaching were beneficial and led to the training program's effectiveness. To illustrate, feedback and goal setting in this training program have been invaluable tools for improving teachers' practice. This is because feedback helps some participants identify their strengths and weaknesses and then create a plan of action to improve their teaching. Goal setting helps focus on improvement areas and provides motivation and direction. Therefore, it is evident that the training program integrating online coaching offered valuable tools to help pre-service teachers become better teachers, especially in teaching critical thinking.

As one of the participants stated:

"For me, I think that feedback is an effective way to motivate and engage students, as well as to encourage continuous improvement of teaching. Also, the step of goal setting in the coaching session was great. It not only helped me stay on track and remain motivated but also allowed me to measure my progress and successes. This was especially helpful because it allowed me to identify areas of improvement and focus my energy on those areas." (PST18)

Another participant commented:

"I found that feedback and goal setting in this teacher training program were immensely useful tools for my development. Feedback provides an objective and authoritative assessment of my performance, enabling me to know what I have done right and what I can do to improve. This is an invaluable tool to help me become a better teacher. Goal setting is also incredibly beneficial. Setting objectives and targeting specific areas of improvement can be a great motivator and help me stay focused on the task at hand. It also helps me to be accountable for my progress and gives me a sense of purpose and direction." (PST08)

One of the participants said:

"Feedback and goal setting in this training program have been of great help to me as a student teacher. They have enabled me to identify and focus on areas of improvement and have been a great source of motivation and guidance. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to attend such a program. The program allowed me to identify my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and to create a plan of action to improve my teaching. I feel that this program has provided me with useful tools to help me become a better teacher." (PST17)

B. Advantages of Online Coaching

The advantages of online coaching sessions in training are numerous. These include flexibility, convenience, and lower costs associated with travel and physical space compared to traditional in-person sessions. Online coaching sessions are more cost-effective than conventional in-person training by eliminating the need for travel and accommodation expenses.

a. Convenience and Flexibility

The main advantage of using online coaching is the convenience it offers. It allows people to access coaching from any location, at any time, and from any device. This makes it much easier for students to fit their coaching sessions into their busy schedules, and they do not have to worry about traveling to sessions.

In this regard, many participants expressed their views as follows:

"The main advantage of online coaching sessions in training is the ability to reach a broader audience. With online coaching, you can reach people who cannot physically attend a training session. It also allows for a more flexible schedule and saves time and money." (PST08)

"One of the biggest advantages of online coaching sessions is convenience. Participants can attend the sessions without having to travel or take time away from their day-to-day lives. This makes it possible for people to attend the sessions from anywhere in the world. Online coaching sessions offer greater flexibility in terms of timing and scheduling, which can be a great benefit for busy professionals like teachers." (PST06)

"The primary advantage of online coaching is the convenience and accessibility it offers. Online coaching sessions can be conducted from any location and at any time, making it ideal for busy people who may not have time to attend a physical coaching session." (PST07)

"Online coaching sessions have a lot of advantages. One of the main advantages is the convenience. With online coaching sessions, learners can access their courses from any location with internet access. They don't have to go to a physical location for training." (PST11)

"The main advantage of online coaching is that it can be done from anywhere. This makes it convenient for those who may not be able to attend in-person coaching sessions due to geographical limitations or scheduling conflicts." (PST20)

b. Cost-Saving

Online coaching sessions in training allow for a broader audience and a more flexible schedule and can save both time and money. Online coaching also eliminates the need for expensive travel costs, making it a cost-effective option for many.

In this regard, two of the participants expressed their views as follows*:*

"For me, the advantage of online coaching sessions is cost savings. By attending the sessions online, I can save on travel expenses, accommodations, and other costs associated with in-person training." (PST06)

"Online coaching sessions are often more cost-effective than traditional in-person sessions, as they don't require the costs associated with travel, lodging, and other expenses." (PST04)

C. Disadvantages of Online Coaching

There are some disadvantages to using online coaching sessions in training. This is due to the fact that it can be difficult to establish a personal connection with a coach, and technical difficulties may occur. In addition, it lacks face-to-face interaction and a lack of hands-on guidance. Also, to ensure success, self-discipline is required to maximize the benefits of online coaching.

a. Require More Self-Discipline

Online coaching sessions offer an alternative to traditional in-person training sessions, but there are some drawbacks. Without face-to-face interaction, learners may be unable to ask questions or receive feedback as easily. Additionally, online sessions may require more self-discipline and motivation from the learners.

One pre-service EFL teacher shared:

"In my opinion, I think there are some disadvantages to online coaching sessions. This is because online sessions may require more self-discipline and motivation from the learner, as they don't have an instructor to monitor them." (PST05)

b. Lack of Personal Interactivity

The main disadvantage is the lack of a personal connection with the coach, as well as the lack of interactivity compared to traditional in-person sessions. Additionally, some topics may require more face-to-face interaction, making online coaching sessions less suitable. In this regard, three of the participants stated:

"The main disadvantage of online coaching is that it can be difficult to establish a personal connection with the coach. Moreover, online coaching sessions can be less interactive than traditional in-person sessions, as the coach is not physically present to provide feedback or guidance." (PST09)

"The main disadvantage of online coaching is that there is a greater element of risk involved since the coach may not be able to observe the student and provide feedback in real time. Online coaching may not be suitable for those who prefer to have a more hands-on approach or need more personal guidance." (PST03)

"On the downside, there can be a lack of personal interaction, which can be important in certain types of training. Online coaching sessions may not be suitable for everyone, as some may require more face-to-face interaction." (PST16)

c. Technical Challenges

Another drawback of using online coaching sessions for training is technical challenges like network connectivity, slow internet connection, and audio/visual issues.

Some participants addressed this issue as follows:

"There are some technical challenges associated with online coaching sessions, such as network connectivity and audio/visual problems, which can be difficult to manage." (PST01)

"Yes, there are some drawbacks to online coaching sessions. For me, the biggest issue is. And the quality of the audio and video may be lower than in in-person sessions, making it difficult to communicate effectively. Online coaching sessions can be more difficult to manage and monitor, as it can be hard to keep track of attendance and participation." (PST21)

"I think online coaching can be a great way to reach a broad audience, but it is important to consider the potential drawbacks. For example, if the technology fails during the session, getting the material back on track can be difficult. There is also the potential for distraction and lack of focus due to being in an online setting." (PST12)

"For me, I saw some drawbacks to online coaching. Technical difficulties can be an issue with online coaching, as internet connection problems or computer malfunctions can interrupt the session." (PST17)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The data from quantitative and qualitative findings both demonstrated a positive impact of the training program integrating online coaching on pre-service EFL teachers'

instructional skills in critical thinking. In addition, the quantitative results showed that the pre-service EFL teachers' skills had positive perceptions toward the program. At the same time, the qualitative findings from the interviews illustrated the details and in-depth information of pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions toward the program.

The analysis of the pre-service EFL teachers' perception questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews revealed that the pre-service EFL teachers found the training integrating online coaching to improve their instructional skills in critical thinking. The pre-service EFL teachers felt they had developed their instructional skills after completing the program. Furthermore, they noted that the training increased their motivation, attention, and enthusiasm for teaching critical thinking. The following could be discussed as factors that led to the program's successful integration of online coaching. The result of this study aligns with Punnoi's study (2019), which found that the training course on organizing teaching activities to promote critical thinking skills was of the highest level. The researchers suggested that the success of the training involved various learning factors, such as allowing participants to express their knowledge and abilities independently, exchanging ideas, listening to suggestions, thinking and making decisions by themselves, and connecting their previous learning experiences to new knowledge. In addition, the facilitators were required to possess knowledge and abilities in organizing activities, delivering content, and taking action to maintain the situation and reach the pre-planned goals. All of these components combined created an environment that was conducive to the development of critical thinking skills. Furthermore, by equipping pre-service teachers with the theoretical and practical knowledge of educational methods and techniques and allowing them to observe and interact with experienced teachers, teacher training programs help them acquire the skills and confidence necessary to develop and implement critical thinking-based lesson plans.

The effectiveness of teacher training programs using active learning strategies has been proven in research and practice. Studies have found that such programs lead to higher student engagement and improved student outcomes. Furthermore, teachers who have gone through active learning training have been found to have better classroom management skills and are better able to differentiate instruction based on the individual needs of their students. This evidence indicates that active learning-based teacher training programs effectively enhance student engagement and achievement. Incorporating active learning in the training program has been found to generate the highest satisfaction with the program. This is because, in an active learning environment, students are allowed to participate in the learning process and take responsibility for their education. This involves activities such as listening, discussing, reflecting, thinking, and working on ideas or academic subjects individually or with their teacher's guidance. Through this process, students can sharpen their thinking skills, as they must understand the material to come up with solutions (Mongkhondao, 2015). Also, allowing teachers to partake in the same learning activities they are designing for their students is often used as a form of active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

This study provides evidence that introducing coaching as a follow-up activity to a teacher training program can be beneficial in improving teacher performance. And coaching is a valuable form of professional development for teachers that can enhance the success of teacher training programs. In comparison to one-time workshop methods, which can be ineffective because the participants do not have a chance to get feedback, coaching provides an opportunity for teachers to be actively involved in the learning process, allowing them to gain a greater understanding of the training material and apply it in a more effective manner (Makmulma, 2019).

The research found that using coaching led to teachers having higher levels of motivation, knowledge, and confidence. These three key areas are essential for any teacher to be successful in the classroom. Coaching is also beneficial when transitioning to a new role, refining one's work habits, adapting to changes in the environment, or overcoming certain obstacles (DiGirolamo, 2015). Also, coaching is an effective way of supervising and mentoring EFL teachers. The student teachers and coaches reported feeling less anxious and more open to sharing their successes and failures. Reflection and feedback allowed the student teachers to improve their professional skills and teaching techniques while fostering a sense of collaboration between the participants. The study also focused on the development of teacher efficacy and instructional skills, with the results showing a positive impact on the participants' development (Ürün Göker, 2021; Melekhina & Barabasheva, 2019).

In addition, the step of goal setting in coaching sessions yielded great results for the training program. This is because goal setting can provide motivation, direction, and purpose. Achieving better results is possible when goals are challenging yet attainable. The more demanding the goal is, the greater the satisfaction when it is achieved. The highest commitment to the goal is achieved when an individual believes it is essential and achievable. Monitoring progress and providing feedback can effectively achieve the goal (Locke & Latham, 2002, cited in Berg & Karlsen, 2012).

It is evident that coaching can be a powerful tool for teachers to improve their teaching and benefit their students. This highlights how coaching can be an effective tool for improving teacher performance. And online coaching can be a powerful tool for teacher training programs. By providing educators with access to real-time feedback and resources, online coaching can help to ensure that teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of their students. Additionally, online coaching can foster stronger relationships between teachers and administrators and promote teacher collaboration. Thus, integrating online coaching into teacher training programs can be a valuable tool for improving instructional practices.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors
Siwaporn Saito is a PhD candidate at the Language Institute of Thammasat University, Thailand.
Supong Tangkiengsirisin is an associate professor at the Language Institute of Thammasat University, Thailand.

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