

EFL Students' Perceptions of Their Graduation Internship: A Study at a Center of Foreign Languages in Vietnam

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Abstract—Graduation internship is a typical type of experiential learning. Educational institutions have increasingly offered various types of experiential learning through which students can develop knowledge, skills, and values from practical experiences outside traditional academic settings. Gaining professional experiences through graduation internship has enormous benefits, especially in this competitive employment market. This descriptive study aimed to investigate a group of EFL student interns for their perceived benefits and challenges of a five-week graduation internship at a center of foreign languages in a central university in South Vietnam. The findings revealed that all the interns had positive perceptions towards their graduation internship in spite of several typical challenges such as strict deadlines and the time limit of internship program.

Index Terms—benefits, challenges, experiential learning, graduation internship, interns

I. INTRODUCTION

Graduation internships have conventionally been used as a valuable way for university students to get first-hand job knowledge and practical experience to be ready for their employability in this increasingly competitive labor market (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020). In the context of EFL teaching and learning, graduation internship programs are designed for a smooth transition from student to teacher. At the same time through teaching internship assignments, the teacher training institutions can have valuable opportunity to evaluate teaching capabilities of their future colleagues (Mahdi, 2023).

Teaching internship for graduation in EFL context has been extensively studied around the world, especially in aspects of practice teaching and teacher-teaching enhancement (Tran & Vu, 2020). In line with numerous studies about obvious benefits of this teaching practice (Rogayan & Reusia, 2021), many researchers also examined typical challenges facing interns during their internship program (Aldabbus, 2020). While a considerable amount of research exists on internships in higher education settings, there is limited research exploring interns' perceptions of this type of experiential learning at a center of foreign languages.

This empirical study examines a group of EFL students about their perceived benefits and challenges with their graduation internship program at a center for foreign languages. Understanding prospective teachers' perceptions about teaching internship may provide both interns and educational administrators with necessary insights for improving the quality of the program.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Graduation Internship as an Experiential Learning

Graduation internship is one typical example of experiential learning, the process of which generally focuses on four important phases including experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting, which in turn, leads to further experiencing (Stirling et al., 2017). In general context, experiential learning programs may be of undergraduate research, studying abroad, internships, service learning or learning communities. In most universities, internship programs are popular as for university students, it is important to outsource their learning experiences, and not rely solely on the theoretical knowledge, particularly, in today's competitive labour market, many businesses generally prioritise applicants based on their level of experiential learning (Safitri et al., 2022).

B. Graduation Internship Program and Its Benefits

Participating in an internship program at educational institutions for students is believed to have many significant benefits. The students will be exposed to various situations where they can deepen their understanding of theoretical knowledge and its practical applications. Much of literature (Jogan, 2019) has identified typical advantages of teaching internships for students including academic benefits and job-related benefits. According to Chhinzer and Russo (2018), students undertaking internship program tend to improve their study outcomes because a number of academic skills such as analytical and creative thinking skills, information search and problem solving skills are specially enhanced

during internship program. Although a single internship experience may not guarantee students' learning outcomes and the performance may vary in different contexts, four categories of academic benefits are generally identified consisting of knowledge, academic-related competencies, non-technical competencies and technical competencies (Luk & Chan, 2021). Knowledge covers both general and disciplinary knowledge. Academic-related competencies include writing, problem-solving and research skills as well as the ability to identify the relationship between theory and practice. Technical competencies mainly refer to IT skills, while non-technical competencies generally refer to interpersonal skills.

Internship program is a good bridge to complete the gap between classrooms and workplace, which helps interns to learn job-related knowledge and skills together with workplace experience and skills (Bawica, 2021). During internship programs, classroom knowledge definitely becomes more practically meaningful. In general context, students who participate in work-related activities possess essential soft skills such as communication skills, teamwork, time management, etc., allowing students to better accelerate job performance (Shaheen et al., 2022).

C. Graduation Internship Program and Its Challenges

In spite of prominent advantages, several critics (Shaketange et al., 2017) have also expressed their concerns of internship programs. One common problem is the insufficient positions for internship in educational institutions at a specific time as graduation internship generally take place during a limited period. For this reason, the quality of internships may suffer when there is insufficient support or monitoring from the mentors or administrators (Hora & Chen, 2020). Another issue is about legal concern of unpaid internships, which is generally unethical and can lead to exploitation of young labour force (Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). In addition, differing expectations from businesses, universities, and interns may lead to a lack of meaningful experiences for the stakeholders.

D. CFL and Its Graduation Internship Programs

The Center of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam (hereafter referred to as "the Center" or CFL), is one of the leading centers in Can Tho City, providing fee-paid courses of learning foreign languages including English, French, Chinese, Japanese and Korean with the total of about 2.000 learners at a time. The Center has its own policies of staff recruitment and staff development. Since the academic year 2022-2023, the Center has established a comprehensive program of graduation internship for undergraduates from different local universities to provide experiential learning for soon-to-graduate students. The program duration is 5 weeks. During the program, interns will be responsible for both teaching and office or administration work. For teaching, interns are required to attend teaching demonstrations, prepare assigned lesson plans, and have direct teaching sessions. For administration and office work, interns can help with tasks such as answering phones, acting as the front desk receptionist for learners, parents and visitors, and preparing learner's profile. If interns have their majors in related fields to communications, marketing, or social media, they can assist the Center with planning and creating social media posts, designing marketing leaflets, or brainstorming new marketing strategies to promote learning programs at the Center. They can also assist by translating documents of course descriptions, recruitment announcements or selected teaching materials from Vietnamese into a target language such as English, Chinese, Japanese or Korean. Interns' responsibilities are flexible and will vary based on each intern's skills sets. At the end of internship program, individual interns are evaluated based on the stated evaluation criteria.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

In this study, a descriptive survey method was employed, in which online questionnaires were distributed to the all interns at a center of foreign languages. Questionnaires are considered an effective research tool that can help to collect data from a large number of respondents within a time constraint (Gay et al., 2012).

B. Participants

The survey was administered to all 35 interns at the CFL in the academic year 2023-2024. All of them are third-year students of English Studies program in Can Tho University. The basic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS (N = 35)

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender:		
Female	23	65.7%
Male	12	34.3%

C. Instruments

There are three main parts in the survey. The first section consisted of 15 items about perceived benefits during graduation internship at the CFL. The second section had 10 items asking participants to list possible challenges. The

third section asked an open-ended question about interns’ suggestions to improve quality of internship program.

IV. RESULTS

The results and discussion are presented based on a detailed analysis of the data analysis from the closed-ended and open-ended questions from the survey.

A. Result From the Closed-Ended Questions

(a). Benefits of Graduation Internship Program

The student participants were asked to rate their levels of agreement with the given benefits of graduation internship at the CFL. The results were presented in the Table 2.

TABLE 2
PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF GRADUATION INTERNSHIP PROGRAM (N = 35)

I (intern) can ...	Mean	SD	Scale				
			0	1	2	3	4
become more adaptable to different circumstances.	3.89	.323				4	31
enhance my communication skills.	3.83	.453			1	4	30
expand my working relationships.	3.80	.406				7	28
understand job values.	3.77	.490			1	6	28
build my future career plans.	3.77	.426				8	27
expand my professional knowledge.	3.74	.505			1	7	27
know how to perform vital tasks in the working position.	3.69	.530			1	9	25
apply academic knowledge on experiential learning.	3.69	.583			2	7	26
become more mature in terms of personality.	3.66	.639		1		9	25
confirm my career aspirations and career goals.	3.66	.539			1	10	24
enhance my team work skills.	3.63	.646		1		10	24
enhance my English language proficiency.	3.60	.812	1		1	8	25
enhance my employability skills.	3.60	.695		1	1	9	24
enhance my skills in computer and office facility usage.	3.57	.815	1		1	9	24
enhance my problem-solving skills.	3.54	.701		1	1	11	22
Overall mean score	3.69						

It is noteworthy that the student participants in this study recognized the benefit of “becoming more adaptable to different circumstances” as the most important with the highest mean score of 3.89. It is reasonable that adaptability is the key for success not only in the academic environment but more vital in any workplace (Razak et al., 2018).

“Enhancing my communication skills” and “expanding my working relationships” are two other perceived benefits with the high mean scores of 3.83 and 3.80, respectively. The results are much in line with previous study, emphasizing the influence of internships on the development of soft skills for students (Saleh & Muh, 2023).

The other benefits with which the interns agreed most are job-related such as “understanding job values”, “building my future career plans” and “expanding my professional knowledge”. It is expected that these benefits are highly recognized as internships are experience of practical work through which student interns are able to self-evaluate personal and professional abilities to prepare for career opportunities (Sadia, 2020).

“Knowing how to perform vital tasks in the working position” and “applying academic knowledge on experiential learning” are two stated benefits with the same mean scores of 3.69. Similarly, the two other benefits “becoming more mature in terms of personality” and “confirming my career aspirations and career goals” had the same relatively high mean scores of 3.60. It is explainable that most student participants in this study believed internships are a great opportunity to learn more about their personal interests and career goals.

The two perceived benefits “enhancing my skills in computer and office facility usage” and “enhancing my problem-solving skills” have the lowest mean scores of 3.57 and 3.54, respectively. It is speculated that the intern participants in this study had limited opportunity to learn and use office facilities such as photocopiers and facsimile machine, and it is expected that the interns are not fully responsible for solving problems during this experiential learning.

(b). Challenges of Graduation Internship Program

Beside the prominent benefits, the student participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the stated challenges of their internship program. The following Table 3 presented the responses from the 35 interns.

TABLE 3
PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF GRADUATION INTERNSHIP PROGRAM (N = 35)

During my internship, ...	Mean	SD	Scale				
			0	1	2	3	4
The Center is not respectful with the interns.	.43	1.065	28	4		1	2
The support from the Center is not sufficient enough.	.83	1.272	20	9	1	2	3
The assessing method of the internship is inappropriate.	.86	1.375	22	5	3	1	4
I have slow adaptation to the working environment.	1.20	1.256	12	12	7		4
I have a lack of confidence and dynamic.	1.26	1.268	10	16	3	2	4
The working time is not sufficient for me to learn from the internship job.	1.34	1.434	15	4	10	1	5
I do not have sufficient professional knowledge.	1.37	1.285	10	12	7	2	4
I do not have sufficient personal skills.	1.43	1.357	11	9	9	1	5
Tasks assigned do not relate to the major learnt at university.	1.46	1.442	14	4	8	5	4
The theories learnt do not relate to working tasks.	1.57	1.378	9	11	6	4	5
Overall mean score	1.18						

It is slightly surprising that most participants focused on the issues “The Center is not respectful with the interns” and “The support from the Center is not sufficient enough” as the most concern. It is noteworthy that very high percentage of the respondents disagreed with these challenges during their internship. This result is in accordance with several previous studies (Vo et al., 2022), indicating support from host organizations is vital for interns’ satisfaction.

The issue of “the assessing method of the internship is inappropriate” also has low level of agreement from the participants with the mean scores of 0.86. It is explainable that the student interns in this study were satisfactory with their internship’s performance evaluation; however, this speculation needs further investigation such as in-depth interviews.

The two challenges “I have slow adaptation to the working environment” and “I have a lack of confidence and dynamic” refer to personal readiness for a working environment. It is natural that inadequate preparation can cause a disappointing internship. Although the level of agreement with these challenges is not high, with the mean scores of 1.20 and 1.26, respectively, the results can be a good reference to help the interns to make the most of their internship time through necessary preparation such as following institutional internship guideline (Tan et al., 2023).

The perceived challenge “The theories learnt do not relate to working tasks” had the highest mean score of 1.57, though this value is not greatly significant for consideration. This finding is slightly consistent with the existing literature on internships, which suggests that they generally provide students with hands-on, practical experience that is often difficult to replicate in a classroom environment (Jolo et al., 2023).

B. Results From Open-Ended Question

In the survey questions, the participants were also invited to provide suggestions for improving internship quality from their own experience. Their answers were classified into the four main themes including extending the program length, assigning more hours of teaching demonstrations, allocating more flexible schedule to complete tasks, and building relationship between interns and their mentors.

Regarding the current 5-week program at the Center, most of the interns were not much satisfactory with this short time and proposed an internship program of at least 10-week duration, so that they can have more opportunities to learn and practice more extensively about the future job environment. Some common suggestions were as follows.

The centre should assign more working days per week from the beginning of the internship (three days a week is not enough to meet the requirement of 200 working hours for each intern student), so there are a lot of tasks to do when it comes to two weeks before the end of the internship.

I think our Center is already very good, but if possible, I think we just need to extend the internship program to 10 weeks.

The internship is very effective, but if we can have more time to learn and practice better. Five weeks is not sufficient for such experiential learning.

Another shared concern that many participants suggested is that the Center should arrange more hours for teaching demonstrations, especially with young learners. It is explainable that many of these interns may apply for their job position as English teachers at many language centers, and internship experience is a valuable preparation for their future.

I hope that the Center will assign 2 more teaching hours so that interns can practice more.

I think interns should have more opportunities to teach children because to be a good teacher requires a lot of extra-specialty skills like emotion management, time management, patience, etc...

From my perspective, I hope that interns can have more time for demo teaching so that they can practice more.

Several interns in the survey mentioned the issue of strict deadlines and the time constraint for completing tasks in time. They suggested allocating more appropriate tasks for both offline and online schedule. Some typical suggestions were as follows.

Try not to put too many deadlines on the last week of the internship.

I think the center should divide the time reasonably between weeks so that interns can accomplish tasks punctually.

The first week is very challenging as we are not familiar with the environment, and the last week is challenging with too many deadlines. The Center should allocate more flexible schedule.

Building more effective relationship between interns and their mentors to enhance the internship quality is also a common suggestion of many intern participants.

I expect to have more training and sharing sessions with mentors. It is very necessary to discuss and learn from our experienced mentors.

I suggest meeting the mentors at the very first week of the internship program so that we can discuss work plan better.

Working with the mentors is very useful and necessary. I suggest having more sharing sessions with mentors in different groups so that we can learn from each other better.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that the internship program was generally perceived as highly productive with the participants' strong agreement on the given benefits with the overall mean score of 3.69. It is expected that the internship has significant influence on the students' future career preparation (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020). The students in this study recognized the importance of communication skills and network relationships are key factors for job opportunities. The students also showed their high level of agreement with the received benefit of applying academic knowledge in various tasks during the internship program. It was also further revealed that skills in computer and office facility usage are necessary for students during internship. Indeed, a wide range of skills such as teamwork skills and problem-solving skills were recognized as beneficial in the internship programme.

Through this study, it was also found that the 5-week internship duration was significantly not sufficient to accomplish various tasks. As suggested in existing literature of teaching internship (Mwelwa & Mawela, 2021), a 12-week program can be appropriate and effective for many interns to adapt to this experiential learning process. Similarly, as commonly suggested in this study, many prospective teachers expect to have more hours of teaching demonstrations, especially with young learners as this is very valuable experience for their future career.

In terms of the perceived challenges of internship experience, most of the participants had low levels of agreement with the ten given suggested issues with the overall mean score of 1.18. In line with the extant literature that analyses the possible problems (Ugalingan et al., 2022; Vo et al., 2022), individual personality and personal preparation generally are the most concern. In this study, "slow adaptation to the working environment" and "lack of confidence and dynamic" are typical barriers for many interns. It is worth noting that the challenges encountered during the internship program can be necessary to prepare the prospective teachers for their readiness for different problems and situations in future work environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through a survey of self-perception, this study aims to investigate the student interns' view on the internship program at a center of foreign languages in Vietnam. The results revealed the participants' high level of agreement with the suggested benefits, and relatively low level of agreement with the given challenges during the internship. Some important suggestions to enhance the internship quality were also presented including extending more internship duration and building more effective relationship between interns and their mentors.

This study can be a valuable reference for student interns. A successful and qualified intern should be able to have a willingness to learn and practice. By this, it is expected that the intern students will face fewer challenges and have more meaningful experiences.

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