





From Challenge to Commitment: When Confidence Meets Competence in EFL Student Teaching

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Abstract

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This study explored how perceived challenges of an intensive student teaching phase contributed to EFL pre-service teachers' confidence, competence, and career-related motivation. Data from 122 participants, collected through questionnaires and external assessment, underwent correlational analysis, multiple regression, and mediation modeling. The findings evinced that pedagogical challenges, especially in teaching language skills and instructional organization, undermined teaching confidence. Confidence, in turn, positively predicted competence and motivation to pursue teaching. Mediation analysis confirmed confidence as a key mechanism linking challenge perception to teaching motivation. Interestingly, while confidence correlated with competence, actual competence did not reduce perceived difficulty. Thus, confidence is simultaneously a vulnerable and powerful construct: affected by teaching challenges yet crucial for professional commitment. The findings underscore the need to build a strong foundation for competence and cultivate self-efficacy during initial teacher education to support professional retention.

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Introduction

Despite the rigorous academic preparation provided in initial teacher education programs, many aspiring language teachers enter the classroom feeling underprepared and doubting their capabilities in the face of real-world teaching challenges (Chong & Cheah, 2009; Lőrincz & Komar, 2023; Yin, 2019). The mismatch between perceived confidence and competence, confirmed by university credentials, signposts a paradox: Why should teacher candidates who have met key qualification milestones underestimate their professional readiness? Without doubt, learning to teach a foreign language, akin to any other discipline, poses an amalgamation of cognitive and emotional challenges (Amory & Johnson, 2023; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Lőrincz, 2024; Troudi & Mazandarani, 2024). Nowhere is this complexity more visible than in the student teaching phase, marked by a plethora of tensions as pre-service teachers transition from being students to assuming the role of educators (Goldhaber et al., 2017). A persistent challenge in this phase is the disconnect between theoretical coursework provided by university curricula and the practical demands of the classroom (Williams, 2024), reflecting the dichotomy between idealized teaching conceptions and school realities (Nguyen, 2014).

Understanding how pre-service teachers make sense of and brace themselves for these challenges is vital. As Agudo and Azzaro's (2018) poignantly observe, "perhaps the greatest failure or weakness in teacher education programs has been that of not preparing student teachers sufficiently for the emotional demands, dilemmas and challenges of the teaching profession" (p. 370). Challenges, construed here as the cognitive, affective, and situational difficulties encountered while learning to teach (Lőrincz, 2022a), can become more than temporary hurdles. They shape the evolving teacher identity, affect confidence and motivation, and may eventually determine whether newly qualified educators choose to remain in the profession.

This study, therefore, explores the interplay between pre-service EFL teachers' challenges they experienced during their practicum, their confidence to assume the teaching role, and their assessed teaching competence. Drawing on descriptive and inferential statistics, it seeks to illuminate the patterns of preparedness and performance, as well as the underlying dissonances that may compromise the transition from learning to teaching and, eventually, their professional intentions. In doing so, it aims to inform a more context-sensitive approach to teacher education, especially in times of crisis, as is the case in Ukraine, where the present study is contextualized.

Literature Review

Learning to teach a language is cognitively demanding and emotionally complex (Borg, 2015; Lőrincz, 2022a; Richards, 2022). It requires a set of competencies and dispositions, encompassing language proficiency, content knowledge, pedagogical expertise, and the emotional resilience to manage classroom unpredictability (Troudi & Mazandarani, 2024). The inherent changeability of this phase makes student teaching emotionally grueling, which can tamper with pre-service teachers' transition into the profession. Thus, challenges can undermine students' confidence and professional commitment, and ultimately, the educational program's effectiveness (Akçor & Savaşçı, 2020).

The development of teaching confidence, defined in this study as beliefs in their ability to perform instructional tasks effectively, is at the core of pre-service teachers' motivation and persistence in the profession. A lens in this respect presents Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, positing that individuals' beliefs in their capability to cope with tasks determine their behavior, especially in novel or high-stakes settings like school placement. In teacher education, competence and confidence form a nexus, typically signaled by performance assessments and academic achievements (Kozikoğlu & Senemoğlu, 2021). However, research suggests that high competence does not immediately translate into confidence, especially in emotionally charged situations like student teaching (Macías & Sánchez, 2015).

Initial teacher education aims to furnish pre-service teachers with foundational competencies, which serve as valuable resources for novice teachers when grappling with challenges in the early stages of their careers (Kozikoğlu & Senemoğlu, 2021; Lőrincz, 2022b). Being the central component of teacher preparation, school practicum serves as a platform offering pre-service teachers an opportunity to put to the test the knowledge and beliefs constructed by them through their coursework. Student teaching is a critical phase where theory converges with practice, and idealistic views are confronted with the realities of the classroom (Yin, 2019). For language teachers, this stage involves understanding what to teach (content knowledge) and how to teach it (pedagogical content knowledge) (Levrins/Lőrincz, 2022; Lőrincz, 2022; Richards, 2011). Aligning these competencies during school placement often induces cognitive dissonance, especially when early idealistic views confront complex classroom realities. In light of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, socially and culturally mediated contexts are indispensable for learning. Yet, in the absence of optimal scaffolding, practicing teachers may experience a heightened sense of inadequacy.

Moreover, novice teachers frequently report disillusionment upon discovering that learners do not fit neatly within the established language teaching and learning theories (Macías & Sánchez, 2015; Riesky, 2013). The former were confounded by the fact that despite their earnest attempts to engage learners with pertinent instructional content, many remain reluctant to exert themselves in the lessons (Copland et al., 2014). Moreover, some learners openly disregard the "authority" of pre-service teachers or disrupt lessons, fostering self-doubts about their competence and motivation (Lőrincz & Komar, 2023). Fortunately, existing literature provides ample evidence that while some learners may cause difficulties to pre-service teachers, dealing with motivated learners was reported to be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching (Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2014; Lőrincz & Komar, 2023).

Another persistent area of concern arises from the nature of EFL as a discipline, which serves as both the means and the end. As a result, EFL functions not only as the target of instructional intervention but also as a medium of communication and instructional management. Furthermore, with a communicative turn in language education, teachers' EFL proficiency expectations have increased manifold. That said, it is unsurprising that pre-service teachers consistently identify speaking EFL in the classroom as a paramount challenge (Viafara, 2011). A sizeable body of literature highlights that a lack of confidence in EFL proficiency was a continuous source of stress for language teachers (Behrooz & Amoozegar, 2014), causing an emotional struggle, feelings of uncertainty, and frustration (Richards, 2022). Adding to this, Xu (2018) pointed out that teaching a foreign language provoked

more intense emotional responses than other subjects, further complicating the learning-to-teach trajectory.

An additional source of challenge for EFL educators has emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bacova & Turner, 2023; Loo, 2023; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Tagzizadeh & Bazirat, 2022). Pre-service teachers, whose practicum placement transitioned to a virtual format, were found to be particularly susceptible to the complexities associated with online teaching (Aksoy, 2023; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Aside from the usual difficulties, prospective language teachers faced additional requirements, including the need for enhanced technical skills (Marshall et al., 2020). Furthermore, the absence of face-to-face interaction with both learners and mentor-teachers markedly influenced the learning-to-teach process of pre-service teachers (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), intensifying feelings of unpreparedness and frustration (Back et al., 2021). The lack of adequate preparation for the online teaching practicum also affected emotional well-being of practicing teachers, as they struggled to modify their teaching approaches and curricula to the new educational demands (Back et al., 2021; Tagzizadeh & Bazirat, 2022). For better or worse, before the outbreak of war, Ukrainian pre-service teachers had already gained experience with online EFL instruction, enabling them to develop preliminary expectations about the challenges ahead. Nonetheless, during their practicum, they reported being significantly impacted by online teaching difficulties (Lőrincz & Komar, 2023). Furthermore, the efforts to develop the competencies required for organizing online EFL instruction were complicated by the oscillation between online and offline formats, resulting in feelings of frustration and burnout (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

In all, while the literature has documented the cognitive, emotional, and situational challenges faced by pre-service teachers, relatively few studies have explored how such challenges influence their sense of preparedness. Even fewer have examined how perceived challenges relate to formal measurements of teaching competence and confidence. The nexus between self-belief and demonstrated competence remains under-researched and under-theorized, particularly in terms of their influence on teaching motivation, a key determinant of career commitment. Prompted by the above considerations, this study probes into the challenges experienced by pre-service teachers during the practicum and whether they hold implications for the sense of confidence and future professional engagement. Hence, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do perceived challenges predict pre-service EFL teachers' confidence in the teaching preparedness?
2. Is there a significant correlation between participants' confidence in their professional abilities and the competence as assessed by their university supervisors?
3. Does confidence mediate the relationship between perceived challenges and pre-service EFL teachers' motivation to pursue a teaching career?

Methods

Research design

The study adopted a quantitative exploratory research design to examine the relationships among a set of psychological and pedagogical variables associated with the EFL student teaching. Specifically, it used a correlational approach to disclose patterns of association and co-variation among perceived challenges, teaching

confidence, competence, and motivation (Creswell, 2012; Fraenkel et al., 2012). Data collected through a questionnaire were analyzed using Spearman's rank-order correlation, multiple regression, and mediation analysis to identify associations between variables and ascertain whether changes in one variable were reflected in one or more other variables.

Participants

A cohort of 122 EFL pre-service teachers agreed to participate in this study after being informed of its objectives. They were currently enrolled in English language and literature education programs, comprising 72 individuals at the undergraduate level and 50 at the graduate level, across two universities situated in the central and western regions of Ukraine. The teaching placement duration was approximately six weeks for bachelor's students and one to two months for master's students. The variation in the field experience duration is accounted for by the autonomy granted to educational institutions, as mandated by Ukraine's legal regulations. The teaching practicum occurred in diverse locations, encompassing comprehensive secondary schools or grammar schools across the country. Throughout this period, the pre-service teachers were engaged at various educational levels, supervised by EFL mentor teachers. Notably, the participants were non-native speakers of English.

Following the established ethical guidelines, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. The consent form provided details about the purpose of the study and clarified that anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained. Participants were reassured that their responses would be solely used for research purposes and all disclosing data would be excluded from publication.

Context

In its pursuit of integration into the European education system, Ukraine has been striving to align itself with global education standards. This endeavor prompted the modernization of its conventional education system, a legacy inherited from the former USSR. However, this effort has faced a setback with a military invasion of its territory on February 24th, 2022, resulting in substantial human and material losses. Despite the adverse consequences of the war, the Ukrainian education sector has demonstrated remarkable resolve to enhance its educational quality. Students continue to be actively engaged in school practicum programs, whether conducted offline in shelters, online, or in a hybrid format, across the various regions of the country. However, the context of student teaching has become notably more demanding due to the compounded effects of the war and the transition to online or hybrid student teaching models.

Data Collection and Analysis

The principal instrument in this research was a structured questionnaire composed of subscales measuring the core variables: perceived challenges during student teaching, confidence to assume teaching responsibilities, and motivation to pursue a career in EFL education (see Appendix). The questionnaire comprises adapted and self-developed items informed by an extensive literature review and the prior qualitative and quantitative insights

(Lőrincz & Komar, 2023). The instrument was adapted to tap into the hybrid teaching formats used during school placement.

Teaching confidence was assessed after consulting the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale by Klassen et al. (2012). Items were modified to reflect the EFL teaching practicum with a focus on confidence in lesson planning and delivery, classroom management, the use of English as the medium of instruction, managing unexpected situations, attending to student misbehavior.

Perceived challenges were measured using an expanded and adapted version of the scale developed by Lőrincz and Komar (2023), comprising four subdomains: (a) Challenges in teaching EFL competencies includes seven items covering language aspects (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading), (b) Challenges in organizing EFL instruction (7 items: e.g., selecting appropriate methodology, techniques, course content, personalizing), (c) Challenges in interacting with learners (5 items: rapport-building, discipline issues, learner engagement, classroom atmosphere), (d) Online teaching challenges (6 items: using platforms, online resources, digital tools, handling technical issues). The overall challenge was computed by determining the mean score derived from all the aforementioned items.

To gauge student motivation to pursue a teaching career, a 7-item scale was constructed grounded in prior literature and available scales on teacher motivation (Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2012; Klassen et al., 2012). The scale included items tapping future career-related intentions, commitment to EFL teaching, intrinsic enjoyment of dealing with learners, and teaching English.

The responses were elicited on a five-point Likert scale, with one standing for the lowest level of agreement and five – the strongest level of endorsement (e.g., 1 – not challenging at all, 5 – extremely challenging; 1 – not confident at all, 5 – very confident). The respondents completed the questionnaire in an online format during the final week of their school placement.

Competence was evaluated based on three academic performance indicators. Their practical English course grade represented language proficiency. Evaluation results in language pedagogy course reflected their pedagogical content knowledge, while the summative grade obtained for school practicum indicated their actual teaching performance. The overall competence was calculated by determining the mean score of these grades. Due to competence being an interval variable represented by grades on a 100-point scale, it was transformed into an ordinal scale for statistical analysis. Specifically, grades within the range of 60-70 were categorized as "slightly prepared," grades 71-80 as "moderately prepared," grades 81-90 as "prepared," and grades 91-100 as "very prepared."

The quantitative data elicited through a questionnaire were analyzed using the SPSS (Version 23) software package. To explore the relationships among perceived challenges, teaching confidence, competence, and motivation, a bivariate correlation was performed, and the Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated. This

non-parametric statistic is employed when data distribution normality assumptions are violated. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to evaluate the internal reliability of each subscale. The effect size was determined using the following scale: ± 1 indicating a small effect, ± 3 representing a medium effect, and ± 5 denoting a large effect (Field, 2024). A two-tailed test was chosen as the direction of the relationship between variables was not predicted.

In addition, the Wilcoxon's Signed-Rank Test was employed to examine differences between perceived confidence and competence, as assessed by their university lecturers and mentors. This test was selected because the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were not met. Finally, to examine the relationships among challenges, teaching confidence, and motivation, a serial multiple mediation analysis was conducted utilizing PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) in SPSS. It was selected to test whether confidence mediated the relationship between perceived challenges and motivation to become a teacher. Bootstrapping with 5.000 resamples was employed to measure indirect effects and produce 95% confidence intervals. This method allows for assessing direct and indirect effects in serial mediation chains, uncovering how challenges link to motivation in the context of initial teacher education.

A panel of three experts in EFL teacher education reviewed the instrument for item clarity, relevance, and contextual sensitivity. Based on their comments, minor changes were introduced to the wording of the questionnaire. The internal consistency analysis yielded the following Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficients: perceived challenges $\alpha = .89$, teaching confidence $\alpha = .83$, motivation $\alpha = .77$. The results demonstrated good internal consistency, indicating that the subscales measured a coherent construct. Additionally, to mitigate the risk of researcher bias, the researcher refrained from participating in grading coursework or school practicum assessments.

To explore the structural validity of the revised instrument, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted utilizing principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation in SPSS. Its sampling adequacy was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of .721. Barlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2 (946) = 725.5$, $p < .001$, proving data suitability for factor analysis. Based on the factor matrix results, the scree plot, and the factor plot in rotated factor space, three factors were extracted in line with the conceptual structure of the questionnaire. The given factors accounted for 62.5% of the total variance. The first factor is related to challenges assessment, the second to teaching confidence, and the third is to teaching motivation. Most factors demonstrated moderate to strong loadings on the respective factors, with negligible cross-loadings (see Table 1). Hence, the EFA results confirm the construct validity of the adapted instrument.

Table 1. Factor Matrix for the EFA with Principal Axis Factoring and Oblimin Rotation

Item	Factor 1 challenges	Factor 2 confidence	Factor 3 motivation
teaching grammar	.78	.02	-.04
teaching vocabulary	.75	.01	-.04
teaching pronunciation	.66	-.13	-.01

Item	Factor 1 challenges	Factor 2 confidence	Factor 3 motivation
teaching speaking	.70	.09	-.24
teaching writing	.72	-.12	.00
teaching listening	.69	.05	-.03
teaching reading	.68	-.04	.13
selecting appropriate methods and techniques	.79	.07	-.19
selecting appropriate materials	.71	.04	.00
planning lessons aligned with curriculum	.76	-.02	-.01
adjusting materials to learners' proficiency levels	.74	.05	.02
personalizing instruction to meet learner needs	.70	-.03	.11
managing lesson timing	.63	.01	.02
establishing rapport with learners	.60	.15	.07
encouraging learner participation	.58	.11	.09
engaging less proficient learners	.62	.04	.10
managing student misbehavior	.55	.16	.07
creating positive classroom atmosphere	.59	.09	.06
using online platforms to deliver lessons	.47	.15	.03
applying digital tools in online lessons	.48	.18	.01
using online resources	.50	.14	.00
adapting materials for online formats	.52	.12	-.01
engaging learners online	.45	.16	.05
managing technical issues	.43	.17	-.04
confident teaching in a classroom	.09	.75	.08
confident speaking English during lessons	.12	.79	.06
confident explaining material	.03	.77	.09
confident planning lessons	-.01	.74	.04
confident managing unexpected situations	.14	.71	.10
confident dealing with disruptive behavior	-.03	.69	.06
confident assessing learners	.04	.73	.03
I enjoy helping students learn English	.02	.11	.81
I enjoy dealing with learners	.05	.08	.79
I intend to become an English teacher	.00	.30	.82
I am likely to pursue a long-term career in EFL teaching	.01	.00	.84
I would recommend EFL teaching as a career	.03	.24	.78
I plan to seek further training	.09	.15	.77
Practicum increased my interest in teaching	.04	.31	.62

Extraction method: principal axis factoring

Rotation method: oblimin with Kaiser normalization

Results

Table 2 sets out descriptive statistics for the key variables computed to provide an overview of EFL pre-service teacher perceptions, self-ratings, and performance outcomes.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Challenges in teaching language skills	2.58	.91
Challenges in organizing instruction	2.42	.89
Challenges in interacting with learners	2.17	.86
Online teaching challenges	2.35	.98
Overall challenge level	2.43	.77
Teaching confidence	3.82	.94
Teaching motivation	3.45	1.2

Competence area	Mean %	Mean (scale grade)	Std. Dev. %	Std. Dev. (scale grade)
EFL proficiency (exam grades)	85.5	4	6.42	1.19
Teaching competence (practicum grade)	89.4	4.44	5.83	.92
Pedagogical content knowledge grade	83.9	3.88	7.15	1.18

On average, the respondents reported a moderate level of challenge experienced during their teaching practicum ($M=2.43$, $SD=.77$). The greatest difficulties were caused by teaching language skills ($M=2.58$, $SD=.91$) and organizing instruction ($M=2.42$, $SD=.89$). Having to deal with learners ($M=2.17$, $SD=.86$) and transitioning to online teaching ($M=2.35$, $SD=.98$) were slightly less challenging. Contrastingly, participants rated their teaching confidence relatively high ($M=3.82$, $SD=.94$) and were moderately motivated to opt for teaching as a career ($M=3.45$, $SD=1.2$).

In terms of competence indicators, the participants demonstrated strong academic performance. The average grade in teaching practicum was the highest (89.4 , $SD=5.83$), followed by EFL proficiency exam score (85.5 , $SD=6.42$), and a grade in language teaching methodology (83.9 , $SD=7.15$). Hence, the sample was generally adequately prepared for teaching practicum, yet this real-life classroom experience was not challenge-free.

A Spearman's rho coefficient was calculated to analyze the relationship between a cluster of variables connected to the challenges of EFL student teaching, their confidence in taking on teaching responsibilities, and their motivation to pursue a teaching career (see Table 3).

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations among EFL Pre-service Teachers' Perceived Challenges, Confidence, and Motivation

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Challenges in	1.000	.682**	.377**	.262**	.956**	-.242**	-.087
Correlation							

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
teaching EFL competencies	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.004	.000	.004	.308
2. Challenges in organizing EFL instruction	Correlation	.682**	1.000	.325**	.159	.791**	-.350**	-.214*
	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.080	.000	.000	.011
3. Challenges in interacting with learners	Correlation	.377**	.325**	1.000	.182*	.534**	-.230**	-.135
	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.045	.000	.006	.112
4. Online teaching challenges	Correlation	.262**	.159	.182*	1.000	.389**	-.173	-.185*
	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.080	.045	.	.000	.057	.041
5. Overall challenge	Correlation	.956**	.791**	.534**	.389**	1.000	-.298**	-.128
	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.002	.160
6. Teaching confidence	Correlation	-.242**	-.350**	-.230**	-.173	-.298**	1.00	.180*
	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.000	.006	.057	.002	.	.033
7. Teaching motivation	Correlation	-.087	-.214*	-.135	-.185*	-.128	.180*	1.000
	Coefficient							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.308	.011	.112	.041	.160	.033	.
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).								
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).								

The results indicate a significant negative correlation of medium effect size between participants' overall perceived challenge levels and their confidence in taking on teaching responsibilities ($r_s = -.298$, $p = .002$). This suggests that the more confident pre-service teachers felt about their teaching preparedness, the fewer challenges they reported. Inverse relationships were likewise observed between confidence and specific challenge domains: challenges in organizing EFL instruction ($r_s = -.35$, $p < .001$), teaching language competencies ($r_s = -.242$, $p = .004$), interacting with learners ($r_s = -.23$, $p = .006$).

The four aspects of challenge demonstrated strong intercorrelations. The overall level of challenge very strongly correlated with challenges of teaching EFL aspects and skills ($r_s = .956$, $p > .001$), strongly correlated with challenges of organizing instruction ($r_s = .791$, $p < .001$), moderately correlated with challenges of dealing with learners ($r_s = .534$, $p < .001$), and online teaching ($r_s = .389$, $p < .001$). To better understand the contribution of each aspect to the overall level of difficulty, squared correlation coefficients were calculated. The data suggest that pre-service teachers are seriously challenged by teaching language competencies, accounting for 47.8% of the variance in their perceived overall challenge level. Following closely are the challenges of organizing and delivering instruction, explaining 39.5% of the variance, while dealing with learners contributes to 26.7% of the variance, and online teaching to 19.5%.

Motivation was weakly but significantly inversely correlated with challenges of organizing instruction ($r_s = -.214$, $p = .011$) and online teaching ($r_s = -.185$, $p = .041$). Hence, participants experiencing greater difficulties with instructional organization and online environments tended to be less motivated to pursue a teaching career. Notably, there was no significant relationship between overall perceptions of challenges and motivation ($r_s = -.128$, $p = .16$). However, a significant positive correlation was observed between confidence and motivation ($r_s = .18$, $p = .033$), albeit of a small effect size. Thus, participants who felt more confident in their capabilities appeared more inclined to take up teaching as a career.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficients were computed to explore the relationship between pre-service EFL teachers' perceived teaching confidence, their actual competence expressed in grades, and experienced challenges (Table 4). Particular attention was given to whether more competent individuals tended to report less challenged, and whether higher competence was associated with lower difficulty.

Table 4. Bivariate Correlations between Confidence and Competence

Variables		competence	challenge	confidence	competence (EFL proficiency)	confidence in EFL proficiency
competence	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	-.043	.370**	.919**	.238**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.661	.000	.000	.009
	Correlation Coefficient	-.043	1.00	-.319**	.013	-.234**
challenge	Sig. (2-tailed)	.661	.	.000	.896	.010
	Correlation Coefficient	.370**	-.319**	1.00	.295**	.849**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.001	.000
confidence	Correlation Coefficient	.919**	.013	.295**	1.00	.170
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.896	.001	.	.063
	Correlation Coefficient	.238**	-.234**	.849**	.170	1.00
competence in EFL proficiency	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.010	.000	.063	.
	Correlation Coefficient	.238**	-.234**	.849**	.170	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.010	.000	.063	.

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The respondents' teaching confidence demonstrated a moderate, statistically significant correlation with their teaching competence ($r_s = .37$, $p < .001$). Confidence was also strongly associated with self-reported EFL proficiency ($r_s = .849$, $p < .001$) and showed a smaller but significant correlation with objectively assessed EFL proficiency ($r_s = .295$, $p < .001$). Thus, higher confidence tends to be attributable to perceived and measured language ability. However, the correlation between perceived and actual EFL proficiency was positive but did not reach statistical significance ($r_s = .17$, $p = .063$), suggesting that pre-service teachers' confidence in using English during instruction was not directly contingent on their actual language performance.

Conversely, the relationship between competence and perceived challenges was negligible and not statistically significant ($r_s = -.043$, $p < .661$). At the same time, confidence and challenge were inversely related ($r_s = -.319$, $p < .001$). As seen, competent individuals did not report experiencing fewer difficulties; thus, confidence appears to be a key mediating factor mitigating the perceived difficulty of the teaching experience.

To compare students' confidence with their competence as assessed by university lecturers, a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was conducted (Table 5). This choice fell on this test given the ordinal nature of the confidence ratings and the paired comparison of two related samples.

Table 5. Comparison of Teaching Confidence and Competence: Results of a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

	Test Statistics			
	competence – confidence (overall)	EFL proficiency competence - confidence	teaching competence - confidence	pedagogical content knowledge - confidence
Z	-1.3 _b	-1.00 _c	-3.65 _c	-1.76 _b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.194	.315	.000	.079
a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test				
b. Based on positive ranks.				
c. Based on negative ranks.				

The test results indicate that there was a statistically significant difference between teaching confidence and competence ($z = -3.65$, $p < .001$). There was strong evidence that pre-service teachers rated their confidence lower when compared to the assessment of their teaching competence during school practicum by their university supervisors. The effect size for this difference was large: $\eta^2 = .561$. Accordingly, 56.1% of the variance in the ranks was attributed to the disparity between the self-appraisal of pre-service teachers and the external assessment of their student teaching performance.

In contrast, there was no statistically significant difference between overall competence and confidence ($z = -1.3$, $p = .194$), competence and confidence in EFL proficiency ($z = -1.00$, $p = .315$), as well as pedagogical content knowledge and confidence ($z = -1.76$, $p = .079$). Thus, while pre-service teachers tended to assess their subject-matter knowledge and language competence in alignment with external assessments, they underestimated their

teaching competence – even when their practicum evaluations suggested otherwise. Hence, there is a need for education programs to support the development of teaching self-efficacy, especially in the practicum phase, where disconnects are the most evident making students vulnerable to the influence of negative self-appraisal.

Table 6 displays the findings of a serial mediation analysis conducted to observe whether teaching confidence mediated the relationship between perceived challenges and motivation to pursue a teaching career.

Table 6. Summary of Regression Models for Mediation Analysis

<i>Model Summary: confidence</i>	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	.29	.08	1.18	10.5	1.00	122	.002
<i>Model Summary: motivation</i>							
	.19	.034	1.52	2.13	2.00	122	.12
<i>Model Summary: total effect on motivation</i>							
	.05	.002	1.61	.24	1.00	122	.62
<i>Regression coefficients predicting confidence</i>							
<i>Model: confidence</i>							
coefficient	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>		
constant	9.21	.38	24.56	.00	.8.47	9.95	
challenge	-.04	.01	-3.36	.001	-.07	-.02	
<i>Model: motivation</i>							
constant	1.9	1.00	1.9	.06	-.08	3.88	
challenge	.004	.01	.28	.78	-.02	.03	
confidence	.21	.09	2.14	.035	.02	.4	
<i>Model: total effect</i>							
<i>(motivation)</i>							
constant	3.40	.43	8.00	.00	2.56	4.24	
challenge	-.01	.014	-.39	.695	-.03	.02	
<i>Model summary of outcome variable: Motivation</i>							
Total effect of challenge on motivation	-.01	.014	-.39	.695	-.03	.02	
Direct effect of challenge on motivation	.004	.014	.28	.78	-.024	.032	
<i>Regression coefficients predicting motivation (direct effect)</i>							
Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI		BootULCI			
confidence	-.009	.004		-.018		.001	

The first regression model revealed that challenges had a significantly negative effect on teaching confidence ($B = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $p = .001$). Hence, a greater level of challenges was associated with lower teaching confidence. The first model accounted for 8% of the variance in confidence ($R^2 = .08$, $F(1, 122) = 10.5$, $p = .002$). The second regression model revealed that motivation was significantly predicted by confidence ($B = .21$, $SE = .09$, $p = .035$). At the same time, the direct effect of challenges on motivation remained statistically non-significant ($B = .004$,

SE=.01, $p=.78$). The model explained only 3.4% of the variance in motivation ($R^2=.034$, $F(2, 122) = 2.13$, $p=.12$). The total effect of challenges on teaching motivation was also non-significant ($B=-.01$, SE=.014, $p=.695$). Thus, challenges are not a meaningful predictor of motivation and do not deter students from opting for the teaching profession. However, their indirect effect on motivation via confidence was significant (indirect effect = .009, Boot SE= .004, 95% CI (-.018, -.001)), confirming a mediation effect. It can be inferred that perceived challenges reduce teaching motivation indirectly through their detrimental effect on confidence. As seen, challenges per se do not directly lower motivation, though they may undermine students' self-efficacy, which can eventually decrease students' commitment to the teaching profession.

Discussion

This study provides a window into the influence of challenges encountered during EFL teaching practicum on pre-service teachers' confidence in their professional preparedness, and whether the latter converges with their actual competence level. It additionally looks into students' intentions to commit to teaching through the lens of challenges.

In terms of the first research question, the findings revealed that perceived challenges were a significant negative predictor of teaching confidence. The strongest contributions stemmed from challenges associated with teaching EFL competencies, instructional planning, and implementation. This is unsurprising given that existing research unequivocally demonstrates the complexity of translating theoretical knowledge into practice for novice teachers (Williams, 2024; Yin, 2019). Online teaching and dealing with learners were rated less severe, which was somewhat unexpected, considering the prevailing depiction in literature of online EFL teaching as a highly challenging experience (Bacova & Turner, 2023), with its technical dimensions outranking pedagogical dimensions of challenges (Taghizadeh & Basirat, 2022).

Challenges related to dealing with learners, in particular, attending to discipline, were deemed particularly demanding aspects of language instruction in previous research (Macías & Sánchez, 2015). However, in the current study, they emerged as less predictive of confidence than pedagogical challenges. As can be seen, the major preoccupation of Ukrainian EFL pre-service teachers is learners' language proficiency, which accords with previous research (Zambak & Bedir, 2023), while learners themselves and technical issues of language teaching appear to be of lesser concern. At the same time, increasing familiarity with digital tools following the COVID-19 pandemic and local war-related factors may have influenced pre-service teachers' perceptions.

The subsequent research phase probed for the connection between the participants' confidence and university-assessed competence. A significant moderate-to-strong correlation was observed, evidencing that more competent students generally felt more confident. Confidence EFL pre-service teachers held in terms of their language proficiency and their ability to use English for instructional purposes were not contingent upon their actual EFL proficiency in this study. It may reflect culturally bound notions of what constitutes "sufficient" proficiency for effective language teaching. There is little agreement concerning the language fluency expectations across settings (Edwards & Roger, 2015; Karas & Faez, 2020). In the Ukrainian context, EFL pre-service teachers may regard

their communicative competence as adequate for effective teaching, regardless of standardized assessment criteria (Lőrincz & Komar, 2023).

Notably, the findings showed that the relationship between competence and perceived challenges was negligible and did not reach statistical significance. Hence, it is not competence per se that mitigates experienced challenges, but rather confidence in one's ability. In other words, competent teacher candidates did not necessarily feel less challenged, though they tended to be more confident and, hence, more resilient in the face of instructional hardships. Less competent students likewise felt no more challenged than their more effective peers. Confidence, therefore, plays a key mediating role determining how challenges are perceived and tackled.

The investigation into the alignment between EFL pre-service teachers' self-rated confidence and their competence, undertaken through a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, revealed a discrepancy. The results indicated that the participants tended to undervalue their teaching abilities compared to external evaluation. This counters literature showing that pre-service teachers typically overestimate their teaching competence (Norton, 2019). The results may reflect culture-specific modesty or uncertainty stemming from limited teaching experience, as discussed by Cheung (2015). Alternatively, it may invite reflection through the lens of the Dunning-Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), holding that individuals with limited experience or knowledge overestimate their capabilities, while their more knowledgeable counterparts tend to underestimate theirs. In the context of the obtained findings, the discrepancy may suggest that extensive exposure to teaching during practicum has led students to a greater awareness of teaching complexity or even self-criticism. Their underestimation could signal metacognitive development and reflexivity, crucial attributes in teacher education.

Finally, teaching confidence was shown to mediate the relationship between perceived challenges and teaching motivation, though the strength of the indirect effect was modest. Thus, confidence functions as a psychological scaffold: while challenges may undermine self-efficacy beliefs, more confident individuals are more likely to maintain motivation and commitment in the face of difficulties. This finding is supported by Bandura's (1997) theoretical assumptions, maintaining self-efficacy as a central mediator between demands and intrinsic motivation. In teacher education, confidence has been shown to buffer the effects of perceived difficulties (Pfitzner-Eden, 2016). It was likewise a reliable predictor of teaching effectiveness and long-term commitment to teaching (Klassen & Tse, 2014; Yuan & Zhang, 2022). In this respect, this study contributes to this research line by demonstrating that confidence operates as a motivational catalyst for staying power in the profession. Furthermore, it appears that pre-service teachers with strong self-beliefs view challenges as growth opportunities rather than insurmountable obstacles, thereby sustaining their interest in teaching (Lauermann & König, 2016). Contrastingly, self-doubt and low confidence may amplify perceived difficulties, leading to demotivation or even the intention to withdraw.

Taken together, the study evinced the role of confidence as a product of challenges students encounter while learning to teach and a predictor of subsequent engagement in teaching. Though teaching confidence may not directly reflect competence, it is a vital ingredient of evolving professional identity and motivation (Klassen & Tse, 2014). Teacher education programs should, therefore, invest not only in developing adequate competencies

but also in resilient self-efficacy beliefs. If left unaddressed, underconfidence may deter otherwise capable individuals from choosing careers in teaching because of the challenges novice teachers frequently experience.

Conclusions

The challenges associated with learning to teach are inherently woven into professional preparation. Even so, if compounded by lack of confidence, they may have a detrimental effect on teacher candidates' future career intentions. Therefore, this study explored how perceived challenges experienced during practicum related to EFL pre-service teachers' confidence, competence, and motivation.

The findings evince that confidence comes under the influence of perceived challenges and is contingent on competence. It was shown that the more challenges pre-service teachers encountered, the lower their confidence was in handling teaching responsibilities, especially in terms of EFL competence development, and instructional planning and delivery. Notably, teaching confidence was not strongly affected by challenges associated with online teaching and managing learner interactions, hence, subject-specific challenges carry greater psychological weight at this stage. Additionally, teaching confidence was positively correlated with externally evaluated aspects of competence, yet, according to a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, the participants tended to underestimate their teaching competence compared to external evaluations. Such incongruence, possibly caused by growing metacognitive awareness, points to the need for shaping accurate self-assessment during practicum. Importantly, the study disclosed that confidence served as a mediator between difficulties and teaching motivation. Though challenges did not directly influence participants' career-related intentions, their negative influence was channeled by a decline in teaching confidence. Hence, it reinforces the role of self-efficacy as a central mechanism in promoting teacher motivation and staying power in the profession.

A note of caution on the results' generalizability is warranted. For one thing, correlational research used in the study's first part does not permit drawing causal inferences. Even though mediation analysis was further employed to explore directional relationships and potential effects, the obtained findings also require cautious interpretation and should ideally be supported by longitudinal or experimental research. Future research could, therefore, explore longitudinal patterns in confidence and competence development, or observe how cultural factors affect the alignment between self-perceptions and actual teaching effectiveness.

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Appendix. EFL Student Teaching Challenges, Confidence, and Motivation Questionnaire

I. Challenges

a. Challenges in teaching EFL competencies

1= not challenging at all, 5=extremely challenging

1. teaching grammar
2. teaching vocabulary
3. teaching pronunciation
4. teaching speaking
5. teaching writing
6. teaching listening
7. teaching reading

b. Challenges in organizing EFL instruction

1= not challenging at all, 5=extremely challenging

1. selecting appropriate methods and techniques
2. selecting appropriate materials
3. planning lessons aligned with curriculum
4. adjusting instructional materials to learners' proficiency levels
5. personalizing instruction to meet learner needs
6. assigning level-appropriate homework
7. managing lesson timing

c. Challenges in interacting with learners

1= not challenging at all, 5=extremely challenging

1. establishing rapport with learners
2. encouraging learner participation in class
3. engaging less proficient learners
4. managing student misbehavior
5. creating positive classroom atmosphere

d. Online teaching challenges

1= not challenging at all, 5=extremely challenging

1. using online platforms to deliver lessons
2. applying digital tools in online lessons
3. using online resources
4. adapting teaching materials for online formats
5. engaging learners in virtual settings
6. managing technical issues during online lessons

II. Teaching Confidence

1= not confident at all, 5= very confident

1. I feel confident about my ability to teach English.
2. I feel confident speaking English during lessons.

3. I feel confident explaining new material in the lessons.
4. I feel confident planning EFL lessons to meet students' interests and needs.
5. I feel confident managing unexpected situations in the classroom.
6. I feel confident dealing with disruptive student behavior.
7. I feel confident assessing learners' progress.

III. Motivation to pursue a teaching career

1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree

1. I enjoy helping students learn English.
2. I enjoy dealing with learners.
3. I intend to become an English teacher.
4. I am likely to pursue a long-term career in EFL teaching.
5. I would recommend EFL teaching as a career to others.
6. I plan to seek further training to strengthen my EFL teaching competence.
7. My practicum experience increased my interest in teaching EFL.