

Investigation of Normal English Students' Educational Internship Improvements and Causes in Western China

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Internship programs are opportunities for undergraduates to gain practical knowledge and skill, as well as to cultivate personality on how to deal with real working environment. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of normal English students' internship, as well as the improvement aspects and causes. The study was designed to investigate internships through the use of quantitative research of 57 normal English students guided by theories of reflective teaching practice. The researchers used semi-structured questionnaire to do research of 57 students internship in a normal university in Western China. Most of them have improved their practical abilities in teaching and managing a class to some degree. Many students expressed that they gained a lot from practicing teaching English, although they are still weak in managing a large class, especially when facing some students who violated the class disciplines. 48 students think that educational internship has had very great or great impact on the improvements of teaching and educational abilities, occupying 84.21%, which indicates educational internship has gained great effectiveness. The research also explored the causes of students' improvements, such as students' positive attitudes and beliefs about teaching, their correct understanding about modern ideas of teaching, their active pacification in teaching and managing activities, and their frequent reflection on their practical activities.

Keywords: investigation, normal English students' internships, improvement and causes, Western China

Introduction

Educational internship of undergraduate is a policy in normal universities in China. Each year, normal students of Grade four in first semester will participate in internship programme. The purpose of internship is to improve normal students' practical abilities in teaching as subject teachers and managing or educating students as headteachers. Educational or teaching internships are very important practical work for normal students to do. Students are required to have at least a six-month internship in basic school as in primary, junior high, or senior high schools before they graduate by getting 6-12 credits. In 2016, the Ministry of Education of China released the document: "Opinions on Strengthening the Education Practice of Normal Students", which clearly decreed the need to actively carry out internship teaching and replacement training. Normal students are required to go to basic schools to practice teaching. The normal universities built a number of exemplary educational and long-term cooperative mechanism basic schools for normal students' educational practice in order to promote teacher training and teaching research.

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Internships also include voluntary supporting teaching in ethnic minority areas, which last half a year or one year, where, normal students dependently work because of lacking teachers or sometimes replace teachers who cannot work for some reasons. Normal students participate in teaching and managing a class as an assistant of the teachers in basic schools.

The author, as a supervisor of students' internship, has gone to more than 100 basic schools and has made internship patrol inspection of students in course teaching and classroom management each year. She knows about many details of the process in the program, such as the students' failure and success, their improvement and challenges in the course of internship.

This article will explore English major students' effectiveness in internship teaching and management and their educational improvement. Educational internship is necessary and important as it is the basic process that normal students must go through in order to integrate theories and practice together. In basic schools as in primary, junior high, and senior high schools, normal students observe teachers' teaching and then get practical experience and then practice teaching themselves in real classroom teaching and management. After that they reflect on the failure and success in the process, they get their perception of the work as a teacher and form their own understanding about the work of teachers. The study uses quantitative method to investigate 57 normal English major students of Leshan Normal University in western China, focusing on their internship improvements in internship programme. The research findings will benefit for shedding some light on improving the cultivation of normal students in teaching design and managing class in the future.

Overviews of Internships

In western countries, internships were called apprenticeships, which have been in existence for thousands of years and are "structured and career relevant work experiences obtained by students prior to graduation from an academic programme" (Taylor, 1988, p. 393). Bayerlein and Jeske claimed that internship program refers to students' short-term attachment in an industry or organization to develop real-world practical skills (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018) and to acquire real-world working experience, such as analytical, communication, teamwork, and negotiation skills (Jogan, 2019).

Many scholars have illustrated the functions and importance of Internships from different perspectives. Abbasi et al claimed that undergraduate's internship programmes become one of the main focus for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in order to boost graduates' employ ability (Abbasi, Ali, & Bibi, 2018). Tan Owee Kowang believed that internship programs are opportunities for undergraduates to gain practical knowledge and skill, as well as cultivate personality on how to deal with real working environment. As such, an effective internship program is essential for undergraduates' career development (Tan et al., 2023, p. 836). Tracz, Beare, and Torgerson (2018) stated that adjusting teacher preparation to establish school—university partnerships help candidates develop teacher identities and exceptional skills by providing supportive experiences in challenging situations. As part of specialist training, teaching internship is one of the effective forms of normal university students' professional development, which can integrate theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Brooks et al. suggested that research showed that internships had positive effects on students' personal and interpersonal skills, such as self-confidence, vocational self-concept, career awareness, autonomy, and positive citizenship (Brooks et al., 1995; Cook et al., 2015; Pratt & Pratt, 2010; Taylor, 1988). Empirical research shared consensus that internship program should prepare students with the required soft skill to adopt to the real working environment, such as communication and interpersonal skill (Anjum, 2020).

Theory of Reflective Practice

The quality of students' internship is related closely to students' reflective teaching practice. Internships are practical activities for pre-service teachers, which have the quality of reflection, as pre-service teachers are the candidate of teachers who need to develop their professionalism. And they are lacking skills to be competent. Dewey (1938) considered reflective practice as intentional, systematic inquiry that is disciplined and that will ultimately lead to change and professional growth for teachers (reflection-on action). Dewey (1938) stated that teachers must have some attitudes considered important to using reflection. The attitudes are open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. He stated that the significance of reflection lies in critically examining and analyzing one's own thoughts, behaviors, and experiences to promote cognitive enhancement and practical improvement as a mental activity. Dewey also believed that some experiences foster growth and development, while others stifle growth and development. Not only is the experience important but also the way in which the learner engages with and reflects on the experience. Dewey (1938) viewed reflective inquiry as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends to constitutes reflective thought" (p. 16). Farrell (2012) believed that reflective practice is "a compass of sorts to guide teachers when they may be seeking direction as to what they are doing in the classrooms" (p. 15).

Accordingly, reflective practice is examined and subdivided into three categories: (a) reflection in-action; (b) reflection on-action; and (c) reflection for-action (Farrell, 2012; 2018). Schön (1983; 1987, as cited in Farrell, 2012) developed Dewey's concept and proposed the term reflection-in-action which means as a teacher's opportunity to use their intuitive knowledge while he or she is in ongoing teaching. Schon (1983) suggested that reflective teaching practice is a continuous process and involves learner thoughtfully considering one's own experience in applying knowledge to practice while being taught by professionals. In addition, McCabe, Walsh, Wideman, and Winter (2011) and Walsh (2011) argued that "If reflective practice is to assist teacher development, it needs to be taught on pre-service teacher programs, a position adopted elsewhere" (Mann & Walsh, 2017, p. 28). Ur (1999) said that the first and most important basis for professional progress is simply the teachers' own reflection on daily classroom events. So, she gives emphasis to personal progress through reflecting on one's own activities and practices that happened in the class and thinking. Azizah, Nurkamto, and Drajati (2018) stated through reflection, pre-service teachers implement some process, such as observe and evaluate their experiences and thoughts in which this conceptualizes them in order to increase skills and awareness of their feelings, beliefs, and assumptions of their experiences into their teaching practice.

There are many ways that normal students can employ in order to reflect on their teaching in teaching practicum, such as writing reflective journals, collaborative learning, recording of lessons, peer observation, etc.

Research Design

Research Questions

The formulated questions in this paper are:

What aspects have students improved a lot after educational internship? And how do they improve?

This paper mainly focuses on the following questions on English major students' internship.

1. What attitudes do students have toward teaching and education in internship?
2. What aspects have students improved a lot after internship?

3. How do students gain success in internship?
4. What are the weak aspects or difficulties that students have in internship?

Research Subjects

Participants. The participants were more than 100 undergraduate English major normal students of Grade 4 internship from a Chinese public normal university in Sichuan Province, from whom 57 (seven males and 50 females) participants are chosen as the research samples. The participants in this research have finished their educational internship in December of 2024. They practiced teaching in basic schools including 35 junior and 22 senior high schools in Sichuan Province in China. The nature of the internship schools includes two National Key, 20 Municipal Key, 11 County Key, and 24 Non-key schools, covering all types of schools in China, among which there are 42 public schools and 15 private schools.

The preliminary study was conducted in order to find out the improvements after the internship and the causes that lead students to improve their effectiveness in educational internship.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted under the quantitative method as the design.

Questionnaire. The research was conducted through delivering questionnaire to 100 undergraduate English major students who took part in the autumn educational internship in 2024, and 57 effective answers were collected.

The design of the questionnaire mainly focuses on students' attitudes and understanding about teaching, their improvements aspects, the paths students go through (how they improve their abilities), the weakness and challenges they face in internship.

Data Collection and Analysis

All questionnaires are semi-structured survey designed. English major undergraduate who really participated in internship in 2024 are required to choose single or multiple choices according to their own intention and experiences. And the statistics are automatically counted by Questionnaire Star. And all the data are carefully analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Students' Improvements

First the investigation focuses on the improvement that students have gained in internship. By analyzing the data from the questionnaires, the results are showed as in the figures below. The following statistics will answer this question: What aspects have students' improved a lot after internship? The first group questions include two questions as the following:

Question 1: How is your practical ability in teaching English during your internship? [Multiple Choice Question]

It indicates from Figure 1 that 37 students believe that they have improved their English teaching ability a lot, occupying 64.91%. 17 students think that their practical ability in English teaching is average, occupying 29.82%. Only three students think their practical ability is low.

Question 2: How was your ability to manage a class during your internship? [Multiple Choice Question]

Figure 2 indicates that 19 students believe they have relatively high abilities in managing classroom teaching, occupying 33%. Six students think that they have high abilities in managing classroom teaching, occupying

10.52 %, while 30 students think their managing abilities are in average level, occupying 52.63%. It indicates that more than half students' abilities in managing a class are in average level, which needs improving.

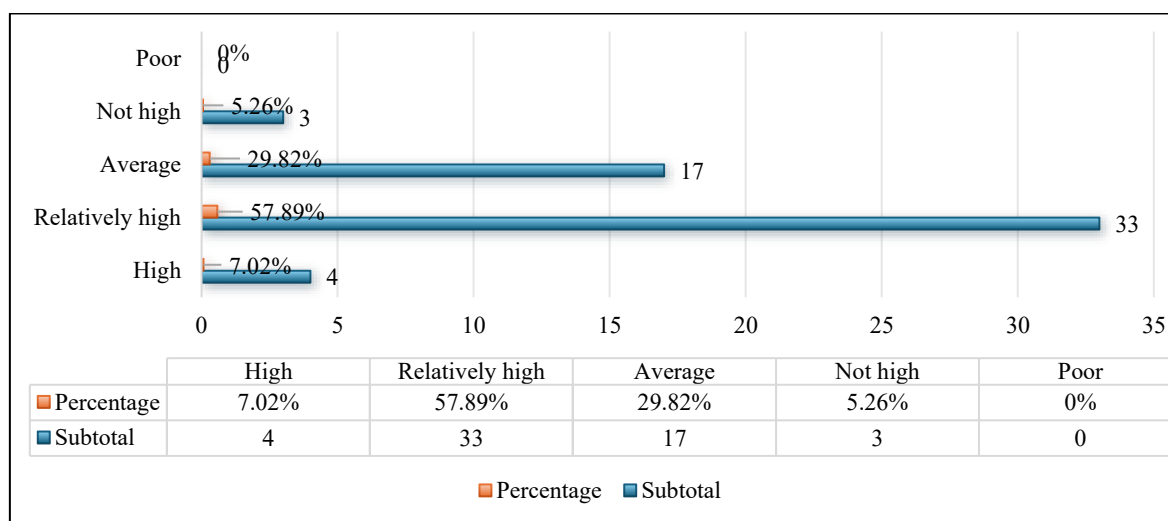


Figure 1. Normal students' English practical teaching ability.

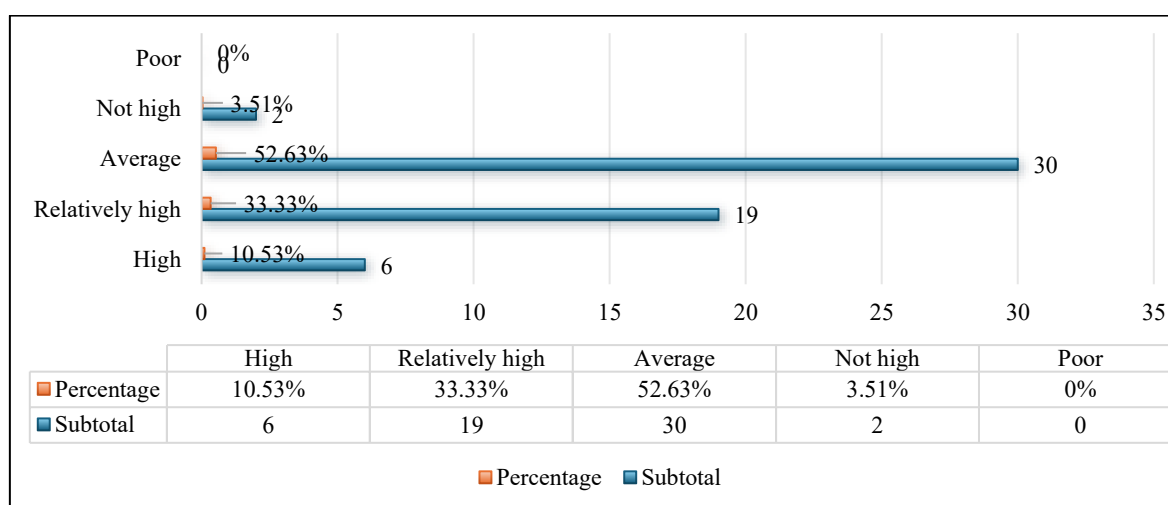


Figure 2. Normal students' classroom management abilities.

However, compared to their prior experience without taking part in the internship, most of them have improved their practical abilities in teaching and managing a class to some degree. Many students expressed that they gained a lot from practice teaching English, although they are still weak in managing a large class, especially when facing some students who violate the class disciplines.

From the statistics in Figure 1 and Figure 2, they show that students abilities in teaching English and managing classes have been improved, as there are individual differences among students. Some students may improve their abilities quickly, while some may improve slowly. The statistics also indicate that only a few students expressed their little improvement in teaching and management.

The Reasons of Improvements

Why students can improve their teaching and managing abilities in a few months' internship programme? The following discussion will focus on the reasons based on three questions.

Students' understanding about teaching. Question 3: In your opinion, in what aspects can the implementation of “moral education and talent cultivation” be carried out? [Multiple Choice Question]

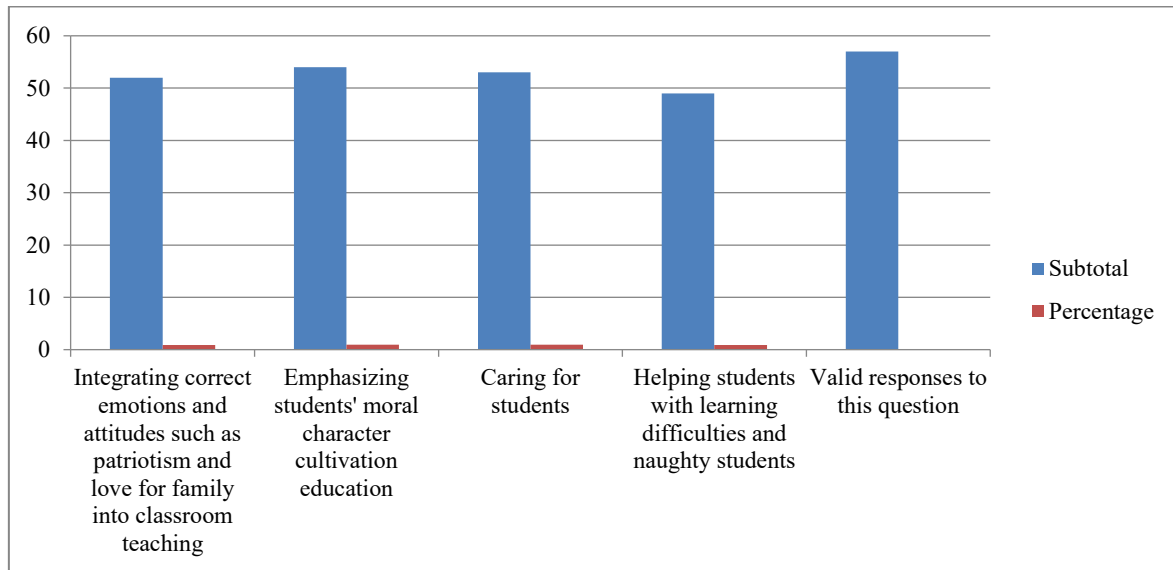


Figure 3. Normal students' implementation of “moral education and talent cultivation”.

Figure 3 shows students' attitudes to their understanding about “moral education and talent cultivation”. More than 85.96% students have positive attitudes toward teaching and education. They also have deep understanding about the teaching beliefs, for example, they integrated correct emotions and attitudes, such as patriotism and love for family into classroom teaching. They emphasized students' moral character cultivation education. They cared for students, e.g., helping students with learning difficulties and naughty students.

Question 4: Which areas of knowledge do you think an excellent teacher should master? [Multiple Choice Question]

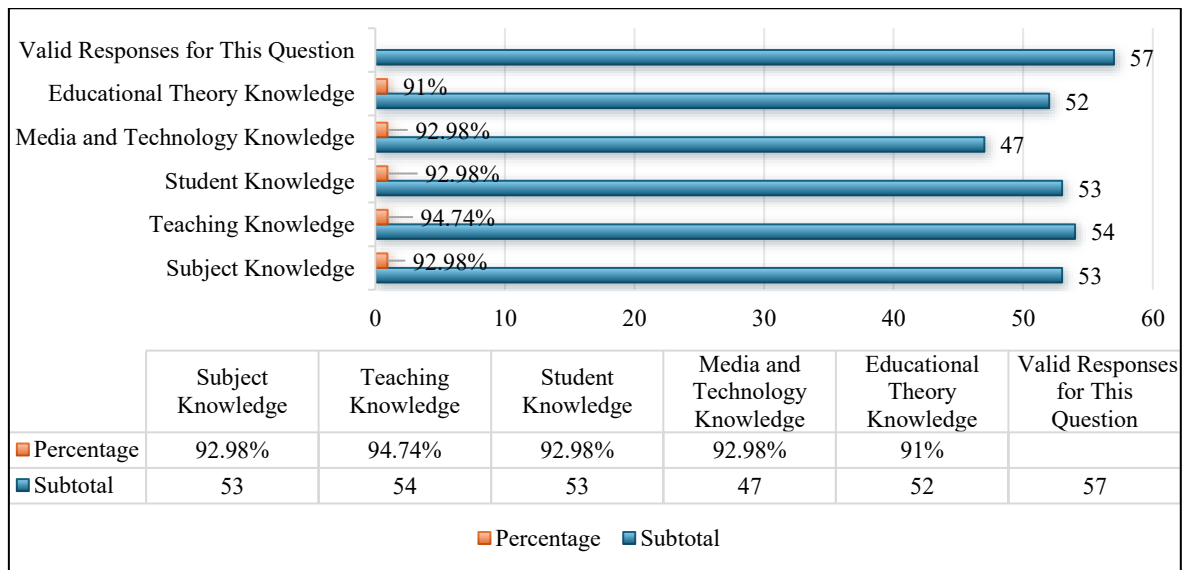


Figure 4. Areas of knowledge excellent teachers should master.

Figure 4 indicates that an excellent teacher should master subject knowledge, teaching knowledge, student knowledge, media knowledge, and technology knowledge. More than 82.46% students claimed that the knowledge is the base for excellent teachers to master. As the normal students should know about the five areas of knowledge, they can educate students in proper and effective ways.

Question 5: How helpful are teaching theories in guiding your teaching? [Single Choice Question]

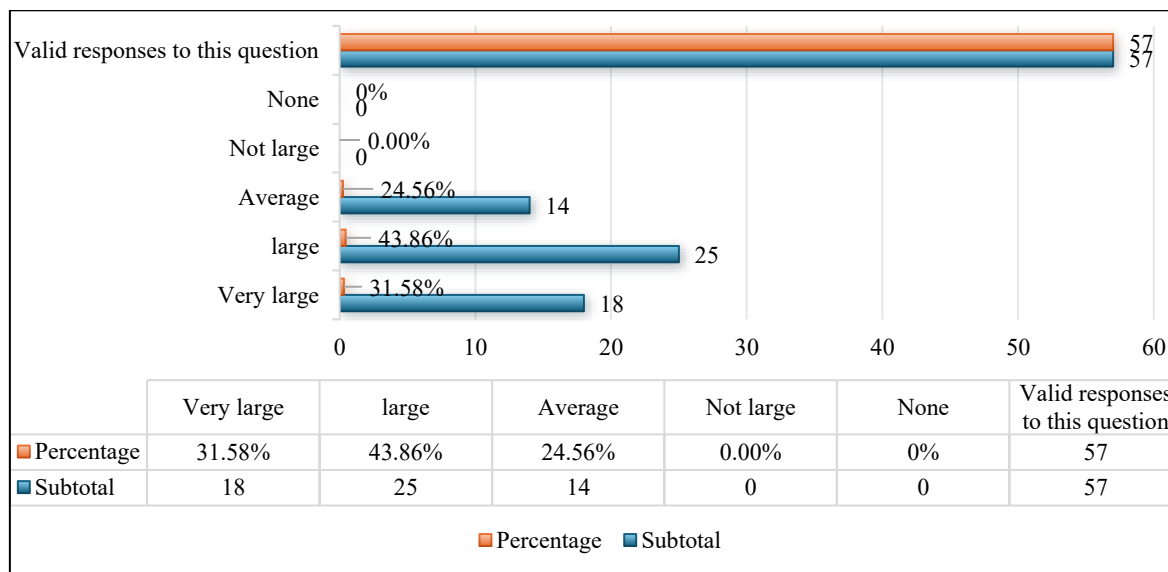


Figure 5. The importance of teaching theories.

Figure 5 is about the importance of teaching theories, as they can guide teachers' teaching by providing ideas and beliefs to teachers. Pre-service teachers should be equipped with some theories to guide the teaching and education in cultivating talents.

The statistics shows that 43 students claim that teaching theories are helpful in guiding teaching, occupying 75.44%. However, 14 students think that theories are average helpful in teaching, which means some students have not fully realized the importance of the role of theories.

The group of questions above is to investigate pre-service students' understanding and attitudes about teaching and education, as it is the base of gaining success in teaching.

Paths to go to improvements. The following investigation is about how students do or gain experiences in internship based on four questions.

Question 6: How many classes did you observe during your internship? [Single Choice Question]

Figure 6 shows that students observed lessons given by their course supervisors actively in internship. 54 students expressed that they observed more than 20 sessions, occupying 94.74%. Only three students observed a few lessons.

Students enter classroom to observe classes given by supervisor and gain a lot of indirect precious experiences in teaching and management. They can learn many experiences and knowledge, for example, how to prepare lessons, how to teach, and how to implement the teaching smoothly. And these experiences are good for them to build up the ideas and ways in their own teaching, which help them adopt the correct ways in teaching English and education.

Question 7: How many classes have you given? [Single Choice Question]

In Figure 7, six students said that they gave more than 30 lessons, and 26 students gave about 20 lessons. However, 25 students claimed that they gave less than 10 lessons. This is because some schools provided less opportunities to students, as the schools are worrying about teaching qualities. So, students practice teaching in real classes under the guidance of the supervisor, which will improve their teaching abilities greatly, as they will learn a lot in real classroom teaching when facing real students, vivid classroom environment, and try to solve the problems by themselves.

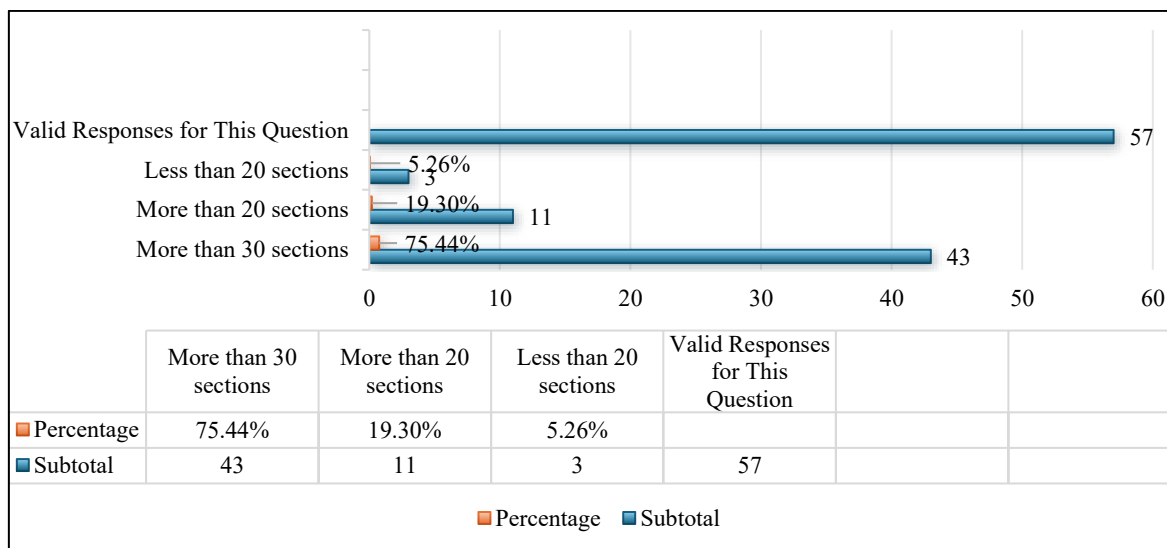


Figure 6. Classes normal students observed during internship.

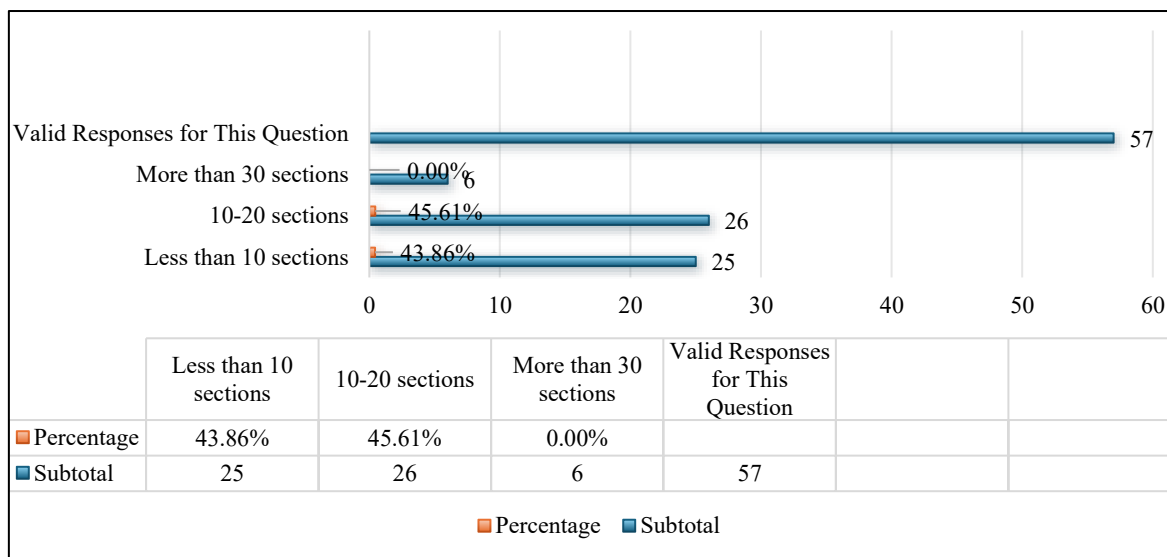


Figure 7. Classes normal students have given.

Question 8: Do you reflect on your teaching and conduct action research to improve your teaching situation?
[Single Choice Question]

In Figure 8, 27 students frequently reflected on their own teaching. 25 students sometimes reflected, which indicates that students have awareness of reflection. By reflection, they do some corrections and practice more, and then they can improve their teaching.

In this research, it is found that pre-service teachers conduct reflection directly while teaching. This is in line with some studies that when teacher reviews his teaching directly in teaching process, it is called as reflection-in-action.

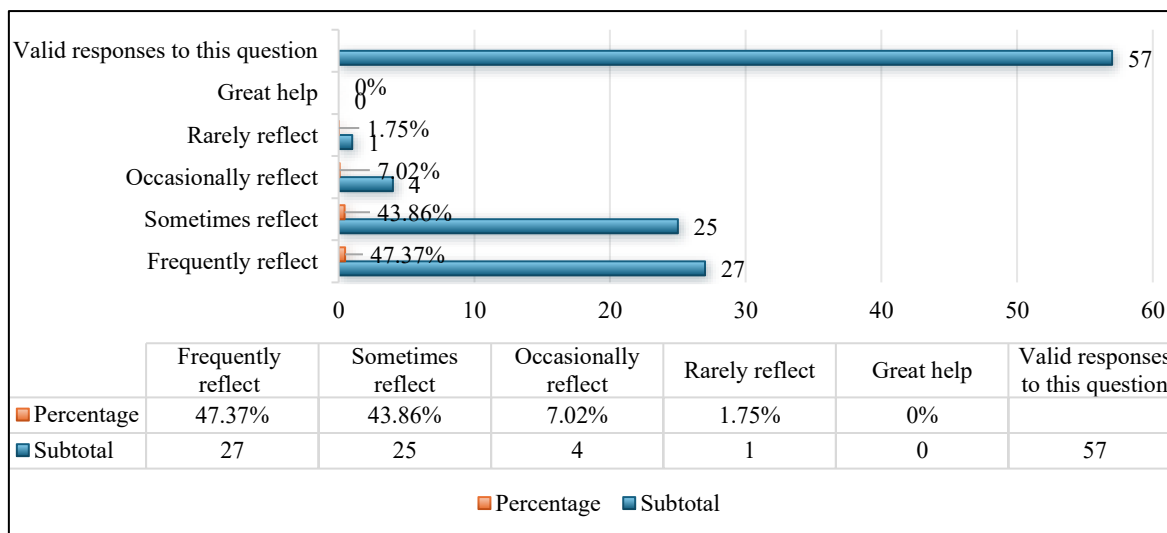


Figure 8. Normal students' reflection on their teaching.

Question 9: How do you think the school's teaching research activities have influenced your teaching improvement? [Multiple Choice Question]

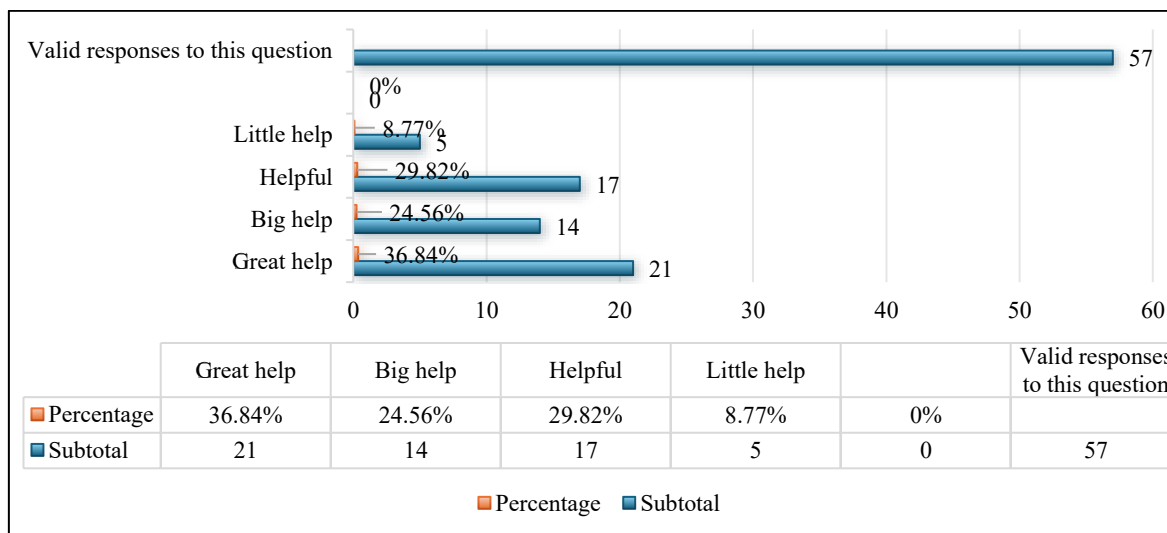


Figure 9. The influence of teaching research activities.

Figure 9 shows the majority of students, occupying 91.23%, believed that teaching research activities have influenced their teaching improvements.

They took part in schools' teaching research activities. By discussing teaching, they get more new ideas and experiences from the matured teachers. In this way they can improve their teaching and management as pre-service teachers. The group of questions above is to investigate students' paths to internship improvements. These elements are necessary and important for students to improve their English practical abilities.

Discussion

The impact of educational internship on students' improvements. Question 10: Do you think that the educational internship has had an impact on the improvement of your teaching and educational abilities? [Multiple Choice Question]

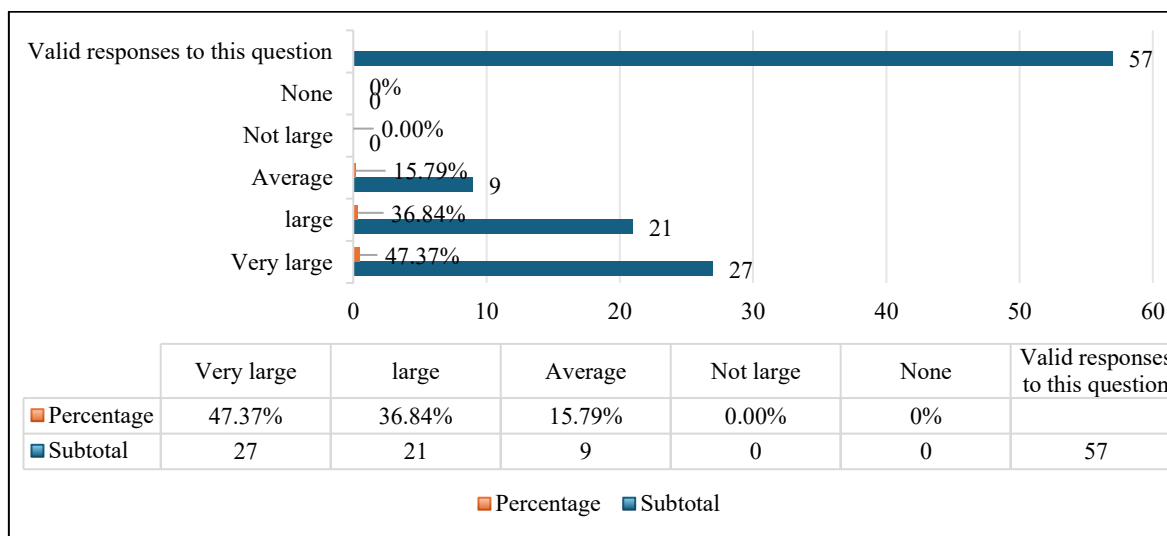


Figure 10. The impact of educational internship on students' improvements.

In Figure 10, 27 students claimed that educational internship has had very large impact on the improvements of teaching and educational abilities, occupying 47.37%. And 21 students claimed that it has had large impact, occupying 36.84%, which indicates educational internship has great effectiveness on students' improvement of teaching and managing classes.

In Chinese internship programme, normal English students will go through the process in internships: First, listening to and observing excellent teachers teaching; second, giving lessons in real class; and third, reflecting on their own teaching and then practicing more under the guidance of excellent teachers, and ultimately improving their own teaching. After normal English students take part in internships, they observe the teacher's teaching and management, while they are thinking about the lessons that they are observing from the following aspects: the ideas that guide teachers' teaching, the teaching methods and aids that teachers use in teaching. Normal English students get indirect experience from the excellent matured teachers. They use these ideas and ways in their own teaching and after that, they reflect on their own teaching from imitation to adding their own ideas and methods in teaching. Normal students promote their teaching abilities by repeated reflective practice.

Weak aspects (challenges). Question 11: What was the aspect you felt weakest in during your internship? [Multiple Choice Question]

Figure 11 indicates many normal students felt weak in managing discipline, dealing with naughty students, lacking teaching wit, etc., as they will solve the real questions in reality which they did not meet before. And the answers are not on the books, which need seeking by themselves. And many problems should be solved by using teaching wit. There is a long way to go for them to improve their practical abilities in English teaching and classroom management.

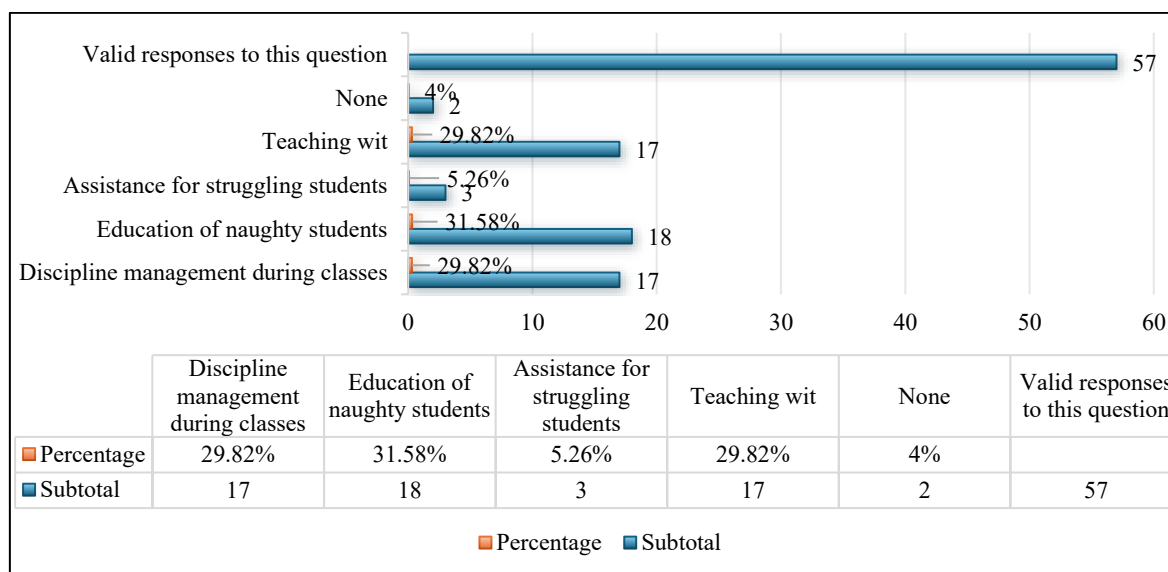


Figure 11. Weak aspects normal students have.

Conclusion

Students improve their teaching and management abilities in internship, which shows that educational internship is the key path to students' improvements in practical abilities.

The effectiveness is shown apparently in internship program. Many elements will influence the effectiveness of educational internship: students' attitudes and beliefs about teaching, their understanding about modern ideas of teaching. Positive attitudes will improve students' understanding about teaching and learning. The investigation also showed that students' active participation in teaching and management will improve the effectiveness of internship, for example, listening to many classes given by the supervisors, managing a class meeting, taking part in the teaching research seminars, discussing with the matured teachers, reflecting on their own teaching after giving a lesson in real classroom teaching. Also, normal English students meet some difficulties in their work. They feel weak in managing naughty students, which is a great challenge for them. This work will be strengthened in the future.

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