iafor

journal of education language learning in education

Volume 13 – Issue 1 – 2025

Editor: Melinda Cowart

ISSN: 2187-0594

iafor

IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education
Volume 13 – Issue 1 – 2025

IAFOR Publications

The International Academic Forum

IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education

Editor
Melinda Cowart
Professor Emerita
Texas Woman's University (TWU), USA

Published by The International Academic Forum (IAFOR), Japan
IAFOR Publications, Sakae 1-16-26-201, Naka-ward, Aichi, Japan 460-0008

Executive Editor
Joseph Haldane
The International Academic Forum, Japan

Publications & Communications Coordinator: Mark Kenneth Camiling
Publications Manager: Nick Potts

IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education
Volume 13– Issue 1 – 2025

Published June 2, 2025

ISSN: 2187-0594

ije.iafor.org

Cover image:

IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education

Volume 13 – Issue 1 – 2025

Edited by Melinda Cowart
Professor Emerita
Texas Woman's University (TWU), USA

Table of Contents

From the Editor **1**
Melinda Cowart

Notes on Contributors **5**

Teaching Speaking in Kazakhstani EFL Classrooms: Negotiating Teacher Beliefs and Assessment Constraints **11**
Askat Tleuov

Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading: Insights from EFL Learners at a Science University **43**
Akihiro Saito

Fostering Learner Autonomy through a Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project in English for Specific Purposes Classrooms **69**
Napat Jitpaisarnwattana

The Invisible Struggle: Impact of COVID-19 and Digital Inequality on Students' Mental Well-Being **93**
Henry Sevilla-Morales
Lindsay Chaves-Fernández

Turning Conflict Experiences of Some into Resilience for All: An Impossible Task? **117**
Corine Philippart

Promoting Intercultural Competence in EFL Contexts: Insights from Vietnamese University Teachers **149**
Ngan-Giang Dang

Lexical Bundles: A Focused Framework for Enhancing Vocabulary and Syntax in English Composition Courses **171**
Sally Kondos

Students' Views on Language Diversity and Heritage Language Maintenance in The Indonesian Context **195**
Bayu Andika Prasatyo
Roosita Suci Wiryani
Tri Ananti Listiana
Corry Ester Siagian
Yanuarius Yanu Dharmawan
Christine Manara

Near-Peer Feedback: Shaping EFL Teacher Identity and Enhancing Classroom Learning **219**
Blerta Mustafa
Yllkë Paçarizi
Art Shala

Educational Potential of Student-Generated Visuals for Learning English as a Second Language in the Age of Artificial Intelligence **241**
Svitlana Mykytiuk
Olena Lysytska
Oleksandr Chastnyk
Serhii Mykytiuk

Reviewers **271**

From the Editor

Greetings readers!

Since the publication of the 2024 issue of the IAFOR *Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education* (IAFOR JOE: LLiE), the number of children and adults involved in learning an additional language has swiftly grown. To meet the language learning needs of all second language (L2) learners successfully globally, multiple needs exist, including adequately prepared, culturally competent teachers with the ability to differentiate instruction for a variety of needs, superior materials that are challenging, comprehensible, culturally relevant and sensitive, and strategies for efficient learning through high quality motivational, inspirational, and encouraging teaching and practice.

What can be observed in nations and societies are pervasive changes and challenges that remain from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as new concerns for the language and academic needs of L2 learners who are either of refugee status or who are forcibly displaced. As English grows in predominance in business, the legal sphere, nursing, science, technology, engineering, math, and other professions, so arises the necessity for exploring successful strategies for facilitating efficacious language growth for special purposes among adults. Another resource exists simultaneously as a strong challenge in the form of AI. A significant consideration is the effective, yet not unbridled, use of AI to benefit L2 learners. Undoubtedly, individuals and groups whose language learning goals are vastly diverse are migrating whether because of negative factors such as domestic tragedy, political unrest, civil instability, and war or for the more positive influences of seeking a change in location, family reunification, education, adventure, the desire to learn a new language or to establish a new career path. Both adverse and beneficial dynamics have created a sizable dislocation of a multiplicity of persons who must learn another language in order to obtain a job, attend school, and participate in a new society. Despite the motivations for expanding one's linguistic repertoire, the process is multilayered, stimulating, angst producing, instructive about people, languages, and cultures, and frequently challenging.

Multiple elements influence second language acquisition. Among the more powerful factors are the degree of acceptance by the macro society and culture, the preparation of educators to excellently teach L2 learners, and the extent to which the educational setting is comprehensible and welcoming. Educators have occasionally discovered that the negative affective aspects of language learning such as anxiety, cultural bereavement, language loss, rejection of language and ethnic identity, fear of ridicule because of behavioral or linguistic errors, and a lack of motivation and interest may combine to cause a psychological disequilibrium that slows or interrupts the second language acquisition process. Among forcibly displaced groups, the new language may be perceived as a type of mandatory language replacement, an assault on ethnic and linguistic identity. When students fail to see their cultural and language experiences reflected in the target language curriculum, they may be unable to imagine success in learning the additional language.

The authors of the articles in this issue have researched many of the topics related to L2 acquisition and second language teaching. They come from different countries, live in a variety of cultures, and speak different languages. Yet, they are united by the common language of researching, exploring, and discovering what is crucial in the quest for proficient second language acquisition.

Multilingualism, second language acquisition, second language learning and teaching, intercultural competence, and national language policy endure as important concerns for every nation. The movement of individuals from country to country and within nations persists. As the demographic group of second language learners expands in size, educators, scholars, and researchers who explore the complex nature of L2 acquisition and learning are vital to the improvement of second language teaching and enhanced learning. Readers of the articles in this issue of the IAFOR JOE: LLiE will encounter several studies that were conducted with adult language learners or the teachers of L2 learners. Commonalities that exist across nations and cultures where language learning is a consideration were similarly investigated.

Article 1

In the first article, "Teaching Speaking in Kazakhstani EFL Classrooms: Negotiating Teacher Beliefs and Assessment Constraints", Askat Tleuov investigated L2 speaking skills instruction via a multiple case study qualitative design research project to examine how educators envisioned and implemented speaking instruction within a test-oriented educational environment, concentrating on their individual instructional tactics, responses to circumstantial restrictions, and reconciliation of beliefs with policy.

Article 2

Akihiro Saito, author of "Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading: Insights from EFL Learners at a Science University", implemented a study to examine the characteristics of motivation and engagement in an Extensive Reading (ER) program implemented at a science university. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzed quantitative data such as total words read, quiz performance, and engagement levels. Analysis revealed that personal interest, familiarity with the material, and perceived learning value significantly influenced the students' book selection. The study emphasized the utility of providing diverse and appealing reading materials that were more easily comprehended, as well as structured goal-setting strategies, to improve involvement in ER programs.

Article 3

In "Fostering Learner Autonomy Through a Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project in English for Specific Purposes Classrooms" Napat Jitpaisarnwattana investigated the extent to which learner self-sufficiency could be cultivated through a digital storytelling (DST) project within a collaborative learning environment for undergraduate nursing candidates enrolled in an English for special purposes class. Findings revealed that greater student autonomy and awareness of their own language learning processes developed even when students worked collaboratively with the result that successful language acquisition took place.

Article 4
Henry Sevilla-Morales and Lindsay Chaves-Fernández, authors of, “The Invisible Struggle: Impact of COVID-19 and Digital Inequality on Students' Mental Well-Being” wrote about the findings from a phenomenological study that examined the lived experiences of socially disadvantaged students from the Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica, who faced digital inequality during emergency remote education amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their challenges during the transition to in-person classes in 2022. The results underscore the complex impact of digital inequality on the mental health of socially disadvantaged students and the transition back to in-person classes.

Article 5
In “Turning Conflict Experiences of Some into Resilience for All: An Impossible Task?”, author Corine Philippart explored the background and needs of refugee and forcibly displaced students in higher education. A collaborative mixed-methods approach was employed to identify needs from various participants, sources and methods as well as the discussion of less helpful teaching practices. Analysis showed that refugee and forcibly displaced learners are more at risk of experiencing teaching practices that are less advantageous for them resulting in an unfavorable outcome of reduced academic and second language acquisition success.

Article 6
Ngan-Giang Dang, author of “Promoting Intercultural Competence in EFL Contexts: Insights from Vietnamese University Teachers”, investigated teachers’ discernments of the inclusion of intercultural elements in their teaching as an attempt to enhance growth of students’ intercultural competence while learning English as a second language. The study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore how university teachers perceived the advance of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms. The findings disclosed that the teacher participants had incomplete understandings of intercultural competence and struggled to promote it within the constraints of their courses.

Article 7
In “Lexical Bundles: A Focused Framework for Enhancing Vocabulary and Syntax in English Composition Courses”, Sally Kondos examined the correlation between teaching formulaic language groups such as lexical bundles and improving writing skills in English composition courses for English learners. The findings showed that the explicit instruction of lexical bundles appreciably improved the overall writing grade of the experimental group.

Article 8
Bayu Andika Prasatyo, Roosita Suci Wiryani, Tri Ananti Listiana, Corry Ester Siagian, Yanuarius Yanu Dharmawan, and Christine Manara studied university students’ perspectives on language diversity and the preservation of heritage languages within the milieu of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. The outcomes pointed to the need for more considered energies to integrate heritage languages into educational dialogue and institutional contexts. Fostering heritage language use in school settings may affirm students’ cultural and language

identities, contribute to additional efforts in language preservation, and lead to enhanced academic and language learning success.

Article 9
In "Near-Peer Feedback: Shaping EFL Teacher Identity and Enhancing Classroom Learning" Blerta Mustafa, Yllkë Paçarizi, and Art Shala implemented a qualitative study to explore the function of near-peer feedback in defining the identities of pre-service teachers who taught English as a Foreign Language. Additionally, it examined the role of near-peer feedback in enhancing student learning. Findings showed that near-peer feedback facilitated improved learning for language learners.

Article 10
In "Educational Potential of Student-Generated Visuals for Learning English as a Second Language in the Age of Artificial Intelligence", Svitlana Mykytiuk, Olena Lysytska, Oleksandr Chastnyk, and Serhii Mykytiuk explored the educational value of student-generated digital visual content for learning English as a second language (ESL) by undergraduate students participating in a required foreign language course which is actually Introduction to Legal English. Students in the experimental group were given a structure for the controlled use of AI-generated materials to facilitate learning of English medium legal issues. The results showed that students considered integrating visual creation and structured AI-supported activities into English language learning as valuable for language skills development, advancing enthusiasm for completing assignments and the enhancement of digital skills.

The topics researched and discussed in the 2025 issue of the *IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education* will enlighten and encourage the reader about the critical thinking and innovative research that is ongoing in the field of second language acquisition and improved teaching and learning.

Happy reading!

Melinda Cowart
Professor Emerita, Texas Woman's University, USA
Editor, IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education

Notes on Contributors

Article 1

Teaching Speaking in Kazakhstani EFL Classrooms: Negotiating Teacher Beliefs and Assessment Constraints

Dr Askat Tleuov

Askat Tleuov is Assistant Professor of Education and Research Director at the College of Human Sciences & Education, KIMEP University, Almaty. He earned a PhD in Education from the University of Bath, United Kingdom. His scholarship interrogates teacher cognition, professional development, and the politics of education policy, especially within transitional post-Soviet contexts. Current projects, funded by national competitive grants, investigate higher-education internationalization and the institutional conditions that foster research productivity. He has published in Scopus-indexed journals, teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in research writing and critical pedagogy, and mentors early-career academics. Beyond campus, he contributes expert commentary to policy forums and consults schools seeking evidence-based improvement. An advocate of open science, he champions transparent methods and scholarly collaboration.

Email: a.tleuov@kimep.kz

Article 2

Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading: Insights from EFL Learners at a Science University

Dr Akihiro Saito

Akihiro Saito is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Arts and Sciences, Tokyo University of Science. His research covers applied linguistics, language education, and discourse studies, with a focus on learner perceptions, language policy, and the sociocultural dimensions of language learning. He employs both empirical and interpretive methodologies to explore how individuals navigate and are influenced by educational structures. Dr Saito serves as an Associate Editor for Psychology of Language and Communication (De Gruyter) and has published in journals such as the International Journal of Applied Linguistics (Wiley) and System (Elsevier).

Email: akihiro.saito@gmail.com

Article 3

Fostering Learner Autonomy through a Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project in English for Specific Purposes Classrooms

Napat Jitpaisarnwattana

Napat Jitpaisarnwattana (www.digital-elt.org) is a lecturer of English and Computer-assisted Language Learning at Silpakorn University, Thailand. He has recently finished a Master of Studies focusing on Machine Learning and Automated Language Assessment at Homerton College, University of Cambridge. He is an associate editor of rEFLections Journal and an

associate editor of the Malaysian Journal of ELT Research. His research interests include LMOOCs, the Internet of things, digital wellbeing, digital literacies, learning analytics, machine learning, natural language processing and AI in language education. His most recent publications are Language MOOCs: A Practical Guide for Teachers (Castledowns, 2025) and Humanising Technology in Second Language Education: Towards A Post-Humanist Perspective (Cambridge University Press, 2026).
E-mail: napat.jit@gmail.com

Article 4

The Invisible Struggle: Impact of COVID-19 and Digital Inequality on Students' Mental Well-Being

Henry Sevilla-Morales
Henry Sevilla-Morales has been a TESOL instructor for nearly 20 years across elementary, secondary, and higher education. He is an Associate Professor at the National University of Costa Rica (UNA) and the University of Costa Rica (UCR). He has over 20 publications, including research papers, essays, and short stories. His research has been presented at 30+ national and international conferences and published in journals and proceedings from Costa Rica, Colombia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Iran. His current research interests include learner autonomy, authentic assessment, testing washback, reflective writing, segmentals and suprasegmentals, and translation studies. He coordinated UNA's English Department from 2020 to 2021 and collaborates as a peer reviewer for national and international academic journals.
E-mails: henry.sevilla.morales@una.ac.cr; henry.sevillamorales@ucr.ac.cr

Lindsay Chaves-Fernández
Lindsay Chaves-Fernández has been a TESOL instructor for over twenty years across elementary, secondary, and higher education. She is an Associate Professor at the National University, Costa Rica (UNA). Her research has been presented at national and international conferences, with papers published in journals and proceedings from Costa Rica, Colombia, and Iran. She has also served as a peer reviewer for national and international journals. Her current research interests include ICT in teaching, learner diversity and motivation, authentic assessment, testing washback, segmentals and suprasegmentals in ELT, EFL teaching approaches, and translation studies. Professor Chaves-Fernández is actively involved in academic committees and initiatives aimed at improving ELT practices, teacher development, and language education policy.
E-mail: lindsay.chaves.fernandez@una.ac.cr

Article 5

Turning Conflict Experiences of Some into Resilience for All: An Impossible Task?

Corine Philippart

Corine Philippart is a doctoral researcher in education at the University of Luxembourg. Her work focuses on language learning for formally educated adult migrants, with an emphasis on inclusion, diversity, and learner-centered approaches in international and multilingual contexts. She has taught French as a foreign language to individuals with international protection status, an experience that sparked her interest in how language education can respond to the complex realities of learners with migration backgrounds. Her professional experience spans language instruction, digital learning coordination, and educational project management.

Article 6

Promoting Intercultural Competence in EFL Contexts: Insights from Vietnamese University Teachers

Dr Ngan-Giang Dang

Ngan-Giang Dang is a lecturer at Hanoi University. She holds a PhD in Humanistic Studies from the University of Ferrara, Italy. She has extensive teaching experience in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs in English Studies and TESOL. She also serves as a reviewer for several academic journals in applied linguistics and foreign language education. Her research interests include intercultural competence, language assessment, and foreign language teaching methodologies.

E-mail: giangdn@hanu.edu.vn

Article 7

Lexical Bundles: A Focused Framework for Enhancing Vocabulary and Syntax in English Composition Courses

Dr Sally Kondos

Sally Kondos holds a doctorate in English Language from the University of Exeter. She is an Assistant Professor of English at the American University in Dubai. With over 20 years of teaching experience, she is passionate about advancing language education and enhancing the learning experience for her students. Dr. Kondos' research interests include applied linguistics, second language acquisition, vocabulary studies, and phraseology, allowing her to explore the complexities of language learning. She is committed to developing innovative teaching strategies that foster engagement and promote effective communication skills. Her work has been published in several leading academic journals, contributing significantly to the field's understanding of language acquisition and pedagogy.

E-mail: sallykondos@gmail.com

Article 8

Students' Views on Language Diversity and Heritage Language Maintenance in The Indonesian Context

Bayu Andika Prasatyo
Bayu Andika Prasatyo is a doctoral candidate in Applied English Linguistics at Atma Jaya Catholic University, Jakarta, Indonesia. Currently he is a lecturer at the Department of English, STBA Technocrat. His research interests include world Englishes, language acquisition, identity and general issues in Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition.
E-mail: bayuandikaprasatyo@gmail.com

Roosita Suci Wiryani
Roosita Suci Wiryani is currently pursuing her doctorate degree in Applied English Linguistics at Universitas Katolik Atma Jaya, Jakarta. She teaches not only Business Communication at the Business Department of Universitas Prasetiya Mulya but also compulsory English at the Humanities Department of Universitas Multimedia Nusantara. In addition, she is a Cambridge CELTA holder and the founder of an in-house corporate English training provider named Global English Academy, as well as a practitioner of public speaking and personal branding in the tourism sector. Her interests comprise Second Language Acquisition and current issues in Sociolinguistics.

Tri Ananti Listiana
Tri Ananti Listiana has been a Lecturer and Faculty Member at Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, majoring in Hospitality Business since 2023. Previously, from 2014 to 2023, Tri Ananti Listiana taught at Prasetiya Mulya University, majoring in Business Management, teaching the Business Communication course. Receiving a bachelor's degree in biology from Padjadjaran University and master's degree in business and general management from the Indonesian Management Development Institute (IPMI) piqued her interest in how English can further one's education and business career. This inspired her to pursue a Doctorate in Applied English Linguistics at Atmajaya Catholic University.

Corry Ester Margaret Siagian
Corry Ester Margaret Siagian is a doctoral candidate in English Applied Linguistics at Atmajaya Catholic University, Jakarta Indonesia. Currently she is a lecturer in English Department, Universitas Darma Agung, Indonesia. Her research interests are English Medium Instruction, English Language Teaching, English for Specific Purposes, and English for Academic Purposes.

Yanuarius Yanu Dharmawan
Yanuarius Yanu Dharmawan is a doctoral candidate in English Applied Linguistics at Atma Jaya Catholic University, Jakarta, Indonesia. He is a senior lecturer at English Language Education Department, Bandar Lampung University. His research interests are in Bilingualism, Pragmatics and Second Language Acquisition.

Christine Manara
Christine Manara lectures in the Doctoral Program in Applied English Linguistics at Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, Jakarta. Her research interests include language teaching methodology, critical literacy, intercultural communication, teachers' professional learning and identity, and English as a Lingua Franca Pedagogy.

Article 9
Near-Peer Feedback: Shaping EFL Teacher Identity and Enhancing Classroom Learning

Dr Blerta Mustafa
Blerta Mustafa is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina. She also coordinates the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) at the university and serves as an experienced teacher trainer for both CTE and the Kosova English Teachers' Network (KETNET). Her academic research interests include developing academic writing skills, feedback practices, innovative pedagogies that promote student voice and choice, and curriculum co-construction. In her role at CTE, she supports faculty through active learning strategies, alternative assessment practices, and peer observation. Through KETNET, she fosters professional development among pre-service and in-service English teachers by equipping them with innovative, inclusive, and student-centered methodologies.
E-mail: blerta.mustafa@uni-pr.edu

Yllkë Paçarizi
Yllkë Paçarizi teaches at the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina" and serves as a senior teacher trainer with the Kosova English Teachers Network (KETNET). Her work in higher education focuses on developing students' research literacy, academic writing, critical thinking, and digital skills essential for 21st-century learning and teaching. As a teacher trainer, she supports teachers in using differentiation and competency-based instruction to promote learner agency, collaboration, and meaningful student engagement. Yllkë's main research interests include teacher professional development and inclusive education.
E-mails: yllka.pacarizi@uni-pr.edu; pacariziyllke@gmail.com

Art Shala
Art Shala recently earned his master's degree in Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication from James Madison University, where he will begin teaching as an adjunct instructor in Fall 2025. He holds a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Prishtina and is an active member of the Kosova English Teachers Network (KETNET). His research interests explore how education, media, and communication shape teaching and learning. Art's work also includes writing center support, user-centered design, user experience, content creation, and visual rhetorics, with a focus on inclusive and globally relevant practices.
E-mails: Art.shala.1@hotmail.com; Shala3ax@jmu.edu

Article 10

Educational Potential of Student-Generated Visuals for Learning English as a Second Language in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Dr Svitlana Mykytiuk
Svitlana Mykytiuk is a PhD in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv, Ukraine. The research interests are innovative methods of teaching foreign languages, technology-assisted learning, and comparative study of literature.
E-mail: s.s.mykytyuk@nlu.edu.ua

Dr Olena Lysytska
Olena Lysytska is a PhD in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv, Ukraine. The research interests are innovative methods of teaching foreign languages, English for special purposes, English as a second language, and intercultural communication.
E-mail: o.p.lysytska@nlu.edu.ua

Dr Oleksandr Chastnyk
Oleksandr Chastnyk is a PhD in Art Criticism, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Foreign Languages, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv, Ukraine. The research interests are methods of teaching foreign languages, technology-enhanced language learning, and art criticism studies.
E-mail: o.s.chastnyk@nlu.edu.ua

Dr Serhii Mykytiuk
Serhii Mykytiuk is a Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, PhD in Psychology, and Full Professor at the Department of Pedagogical and Psychological Anthropology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine. The research interests are educational psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, and interactive teaching methods.
E-mail: s.mykytiuk@hnpu.edu.ua

Teaching Speaking in Kazakhstani EFL Classrooms: Negotiating Teacher Beliefs and Assessment Constraints

Askat Tleuov
KIMEP University, Kazakhstan

Abstract

Despite communicative goals in English language instruction, speaking skills remain underemphasized in Kazakhstani secondary schools where assessment policies prioritize grammar and reading proficiency. This study examined how four experienced EFL teachers conceptualized and implemented speaking instruction within an exam-oriented educational context, focusing on their instructional approaches, responses to contextual constraints, and reconciliation of beliefs with practice. Employing a multiple-case qualitative design, data were collected through (POIs), classroom observations, and stimulated-recall interviews. Thematic analysis revealed variations in instructional approaches, with teachers navigating tensions between beliefs about oral proficiency and institutional pressures. Some participants adopted direct, structured methodologies emphasizing controlled output, while others incorporated communicative, learner-centered activities. Contextual factors, including curriculum mandates, high-stakes testing, and student proficiency levels, influenced instructional choices, though teachers demonstrated agency through localized adaptations. The study highlights the affective dimensions of speaking instruction, particularly strategies for mitigating learner anxiety and balancing error correction with motivation. Findings point to the need for assessment reforms that integrate speaking components and targeted professional development to equip teachers with effective oral skills pedagogy. This research examined the interaction between teacher cognition and contextual factors, contributing to the understanding of teacher intervention within assessment-driven educational systems in EFL contexts.

Keywords: assessment washback, contextual constraints, EFL teaching, speaking instruction, teacher agency, teacher cognition

English language education has become increasingly important in Kazakhstan's drive toward international integration and economic development. As the country positions itself in the global arena, proficiency in English – particularly speaking skills – has emerged as a determinant of academic success and professional advancement. Within this evolving landscape, the implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) across 44 universities exemplifies a substantial institutional push toward English proficiency, catalyzing innovations in teaching methodologies and student engagement strategies (Gaipov et al., 2024).

The current status of English language teaching in Kazakhstan reflects an intricate interplay between aspirational policies and practical constraints. While English holds a dominant position within the country's language education policy, alongside Kazakh and Russian, its implementation faces substantial challenges, resulting in generally low proficiency levels among students (Khassanov et al., 2024). Teachers navigate multiple barriers ranging from limited language proficiency to psychological impediments, often exacerbated by teacher-student dynamics and evaluative learning environments (Yessenbekova, 2024). These challenges are noticeable in speaking instruction, where the disconnect between policy aspirations and classroom realities becomes evident.

At the secondary level, the foreign-language strand of the State Compulsory Education Standard (Order #348, 2022) lists speaking outcomes but allocates summative marks almost exclusively to reading comprehension and grammatical accuracy; L2 speaking remains a formative-only target (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). The Unified National Test (UNT) – Kazakhstan’s principal high-stakes school-exit and university-entrance exam – contains 120 multiple-choice items worth up to 140 points, assessing history, mathematical literacy, reading literacy, and two profile subjects; no oral component is included. The optional English profile block likewise measures lexico-grammatical recognition through multiple-choice tasks (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). Because school rankings hinge on these reading literacy and subject-content scores, teachers prioritize test-relevant sub-skills. School-level English-only classroom directives as reported by teachers (Ismail et al., 2018) further curtail strategic L1 scaffolding. Collectively, these conditions shape the instructional space for L2 oral skills teaching and learning (Yessenbekova, 2024).

Speaking competence is an important element in today's globalized context, extending its significance beyond classroom settings. Research indicates that effective oral communication can facilitate professional engagement across cultural boundaries, particularly in specialized English language contexts where communicative ability combines with cultural awareness and pragmatic knowledge (Saptiany & Prabowo, 2024). Some educational approaches incorporating technology and task-oriented methodologies show potential for enhancing speaking instruction, though evidence suggests their application varies considerably across different educational environments (Raj & Baisel, 2024).

A close examination of current research reveals theoretical and practical gaps in the understanding of speaking instruction within Kazakhstan's unique educational context. While

studies have extensively documented EMI adoption at higher education levels (Gaipov et al., 2024), speaking instruction at the secondary school level remains underexplored, creating a blind spot in the literature on how younger learners develop speaking proficiency. This chasm is noteworthy, as school years represent a critical period for language skill development. Furthermore, existing research has failed to adequately examine the complex relationship between assessment-driven educational systems and speaking instruction. Though studies acknowledge the impact of standardized testing on teaching practices (Begimbetova et al., 2023), they have not systematically investigated how teachers navigate these challenges while attempting to develop students' oral proficiency. This limitation suggests that effective pedagogical strategies within assessment-driven contexts remain insufficiently examined in the current literature.

Present-day research approaches have primarily focused on documenting surface-level challenges without examining in depth the underlying mechanisms through which contextual realities affect teaching practices. While studies highlight various difficulties faced by teachers (Tajik et al., 2023), they have not adequately explored how teachers' beliefs and practices evolve in response to these issues. This lack of theoretical engagement with the relationship between teacher cognition and institutional constraints poses challenges for developing interventions that support teachers in balancing communicative goals with evaluation-driven requirements.

To address these gaps, this study examined how four experienced EFL teachers in Kazakhstani secondary schools conceptualized and implemented speaking instruction within an assessment-driven educational context. Through a multiple-case qualitative design, the research investigated how teachers navigated contextual constraints while attempting to develop students' oral proficiency.

The study addressed three primary research questions:

1. How do Kazakhstani EFL teachers conceptualize and operationalize the teaching of speaking skills in their classrooms?
2. In what ways do contextual factors shape or constrain teachers' speaking instruction?
3. How do teachers reconcile their stated beliefs with their classroom practices when faced with contradictory pressures?

The findings reveal variations in instructional approaches, with teachers adopting diverse strategies to balance communicative goals with institutional requirements. Some participants favored direct, structured methodologies emphasizing controlled output, while others incorporated more communicative, learner-centered activities. Contextual factors, including curriculum mandates, student proficiency levels, and washback from standardized testing, influenced these instructional choices, often leading to compromises between fluency and accuracy.

Literature Review

Speaking Instruction in EFL Contexts

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes practical communication skills and positions speaking proficiency as central to language competence, with research demonstrating its effectiveness in enhancing students' oral performance through interactive activities that simulate authentic communication (Wei et al., 2024). While studies consistently report increased fluency and confidence through CLT implementation, its success varies based on teacher preparedness and resource availability (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024). In Kazakhstan's language education context, traditional teaching methods often persist alongside CLT principles. In practice, these "traditional" lessons still mirror Soviet-era grammar-translation and audiolingual routines in which teachers front-load rules, drill memorized dialogues, and assign decontextualized gap-fills, with minimal spontaneous learner talk (Ismail et al., 2018; Tuspekova et al., 2020). Related approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning reflect a hybrid stance that combines local and global educational epistemologies (Bedeker et al., 2024). This adaptation highlights the need to understand how communicative approaches function within assessment-driven educational systems. Most existing studies adopt a purely CLT lens. Few engage sociocultural theory, which can better examine teacher agency under systemic constraints – a perspective the present study adopted.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), particularly when combined with communicative approaches, effectively facilitates meaningful interaction through activities like role-plays and discussions, improving both interaction patterns and pronunciation fluency (Herrera et al., 2024). However, Bedeker et al. (2024) report only marginal gains from similar tasks in Kazakhstani EMI contexts, suggesting that institutional assessment culture—rather than task type *per se*—moderates instructional efficacy. Digital resources enhance vocabulary acquisition while maintaining student engagement (Alharbi et al., 2024), while storytelling strategies provide contextually rich opportunities for communication practice (Nair & Yunus, 2021). These findings indicate that effective speaking instruction requires combining interactive elements with context-rich learning experiences—especially valuable in EFL settings where authentic language use opportunities may be limited.

Teacher Cognition and Practice

Teacher cognition—comprising beliefs, knowledge, and decision-making processes—fundamentally shapes EFL speaking instruction approaches (Borg, 2015). Tensions frequently emerge between stated beliefs and actual teaching practices due to contextual challenges and traditional methods, markedly evident in corrective feedback approaches where implementation varies between novice and experienced teachers (Borg, 2017). These disparities highlight how contextual factors shape teaching practices and underscore the need for reflective professional development.

Although the field of teacher cognition research is steadily expanding, its application to speaking instruction remains comparatively limited. While studies examining teacher beliefs and practices regarding reading, grammar, and vocabulary instruction are abundant in the literature (Li, 2020), comparatively little attention has been given to how teachers conceptualize and implement speaking instruction, particularly in EFL contexts. This lack of attention is especially notable given the centrality of oral proficiency in communicative language teaching approaches and the unique challenges speaking instruction presents in assessment-driven educational environments.

Challenges in Speaking Instruction

In Kazakhstani EFL classrooms, speaking instruction encounters barriers across curricular and institutional dimensions. Rigid curriculum requirements restrict the implementation of interactive activities that enhance speaking skills (Cao et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2018; Tuspekova et al., 2020; Yessenbekova, 2024). While Tuspekova et al. (2020) relied on a self-report questionnaire distributed to 42 teachers, Ismail et al. (2018) triangulated survey data with eight classroom observations, revealing a systematic gap between declared priorities and actual practice. This disparity underlines the need for triangulated designs such as the present study. Inadequate professional development opportunities further limit teachers' capacity to adopt interactive approaches (Xuan Mai et al., 2024). Sociocultural factors, particularly deep-rooted norms around authority and limited learner autonomy, affect student participation and willingness to engage in speaking activities. As in other high-context cultures, students may defer to teacher authority and avoid initiative in speech. They may view oral risk-taking as inappropriate or anxiety-inducing (Noor, 2024). This dynamic may be compounded by speaking anxiety, which may manifest as fear of public error, low confidence – psycholinguistic barriers shown to negatively affect performance and oral engagement (Hussein et al., 2019). These factors may contribute to conditions in which students are reluctant to act autonomously or take ownership of oral language practice in class.

Assessment systems influence teachers' ability to prioritize speaking skills in Kazakhstan's high-stakes testing environment. The emphasis on standardized tests like the UNT has narrowed the curriculum, with teachers prioritizing test-related content over oral proficiency development (Fleming & Shinjee, 2024). This focus on quantifiable outcomes marginalizes speaking skills, which are challenging to measure through standardized formats (Borger, 2019). The pressure to meet external targets results in teaching approaches emphasizing rote learning over communicative practices (Bhattacharya, 2022), primarily affecting rural areas with limited educational resources (Iddings et al., 2021).

The concept of assessment washback – the influence of testing on teaching and learning – is well-established in applied linguistics (Cheng, 2005). High-stakes, grammar-focused exams often generate negative washback, shifting instructional attention away from L2 productive skills like speaking and toward testable sub-skills such as grammar and reading comprehension (Dong et al., 2021; Kılıçkaya, 2016). In Kazakhstan, where L2 oral communication is absent from major national exams, the potential for negative washback remains high. However, little

research has examined how EFL teachers locally interpret or resist this influence when attempting to develop students' L2 oral proficiency.

When clear, measurable goals for oral communication are absent, lesson planning often defaults to a narrow and repetitive set of drill-type tasks, producing monotonous activity cycles that do little to extend students' communication range (Pan, 2024). Moreover, students with limited productive language tend to disengage, particularly toward the end of the school day, which reduces the effectiveness of speaking activities (Husnaini et al., 2024). Large class sizes complicate individual attention and effective pronunciation correction (Sharma, 2024), while time constraints pose challenges in finding suitable tasks for diverse student backgrounds (Albino, 2017). In Kazakhstan, teacher-centered norms in public state schools rooted in post-Soviet educational traditions limit students' opportunities for spontaneous oral production in EFL classrooms (Tuspekova et al., 2020). Likewise, hierarchical teacher-student relationships and a lack of emotional support further inhibit learner autonomy and speaking confidence (Ismail et al., 2018). These culturally embedded issues may be mediated through increased use of student-centered speaking tasks, greater teacher attention to emotional support during oral activities, and gradual incorporation of classroom routines that promote learner autonomy.

Methods

Study Design

This inquiry adopted a qualitative collective (multiple-case) instrumental explanatory case-study design with embedded units of analysis (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2018). Each of the four in-service EFL teachers working in a Kazakhstani state secondary school constituted a bounded case, selected to address the study's research questions concerning teacher cognition, pedagogical practice, and contextual constraints in the teaching of speaking. Within each case, four embedded units were analyzed: a) teachers' espoused conceptions of teaching speaking; b) enacted classroom practice; c) contextual constraints the teacher perceived or negotiated; and d) the strategies used to reconcile belief-practice tensions. Examining these sub-units separately enabled within-case explanation building. A subsequent cross-case synthesis then identified convergent and divergent explanatory patterns. A collective design was selected because the phenomenon of interest – how speaking instruction is negotiated under contextual pressures – can be illuminated more convincingly by contrasting several theoretically replicating cases than by a single exemplar. This facilitated an "analytic generalization" rather than "statistical inference" (Yin, 2018, pp. 40-42).

The study was situated within a social-constructivist interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective assumes that understandings of classroom practice are co-constructed through interaction. Accordingly, semi-structured POIs, naturalistic lesson observations, and stimulated-recall dialogues were combined to elicit participants' multiple realities. An interpretive orientation aligned with the research questions, which probed *how* teachers made meaning of speaking pedagogy, *how* contextual factors influenced that meaning, and *how*

teachers reconciled belief-practice relationships. These issues necessitated subjective, context-dependent inquiry rather than objective measurement.

Participants and Context

This study involved four in-service EFL teachers—Peter, David, Adam, and Mary—recruited from a state comprehensive secondary school in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on three criteria: a) a bachelor's degree at minimum in English language teaching (ELT) or equivalent; b) at least one year of continuos EFL teaching experience in state schools; c) engagement in EFL-related professional development. These criteria were selected to ensure that participants possessed sufficient formal training, contextual familiarity, and professional enagement to provide informed and reflective insights into the conceptualization and enactment of speaking instruction in state school settings. All four met these criteria. Three were male and one female; each held a BA in ELT from a Kazakhstani university and had a minimum of three years of total EFL teaching experience in state schools.

Participant recruitment involved approaching six secondary schools in Almaty. In four cases, access was denied by principals citing practical concerns such as scheduling, renovations, or curriculum changes. A fifth principal allowed recruitment emails to be sent by the secretary to EFL teachers, but no teachers volunteered. Access was ultimately secured at a sixth school, led by a principal with a PhD in Education and research experience. She introduced the study to the English department and facilitated an in-person presentation. Seven of eight EFL teachers attended; five initially volunteered. After reviewing the study details and consent forms, one withdrew due to discomfort with audio-recorded lessons, leaving four participants teaching across grades 7 to 10.

Although drawn from a single institutional context, the four teachers represented a range of perspectives and pedagogical approaches to speaking instruction. This internal diversity enabled meaningful comparisons within a shared policy environment. Consistent with a bounded case-study design (Yin, 2018), the single-site focus allowed in-depth exploration of how EFL teachers interpret and respond to contextual factors.

Data Collection

Pre-Observation Interviews

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researcher based on established teacher cognition literature (Borg, 2015) and qualitative interviewing guidelines (Adams, 2015). The guide was then piloted with two master's students in foreign language education at the researcher's university who were concurrently teaching English in private language schools and had prior experience in state schools. Piloting led to several refinements. For example, a double-barreled item on fluency versus accuracy was split into two discrete questions, the term

washback was replaced with a clearer phrase – exam influence, and potentially leading questions about the role of L1 were reformulated.

Following these adjustments, each participant completed two POIs. The first elicited professional background, training history, and personal language-learning experience; the second probed beliefs about teaching speaking, perceived contextual constraints, and learner needs. Interviews were conducted in English, although teachers occasionally used Kazakh or Russian terms for added clarity.

Classroom Observations

Following the interviews, ten observations of each teacher's EFL classes (CO1-CO4) were conducted, for a total of forty observed lessons. Each class lasted 45 minutes. All classes were audio-recorded, and field notes were gathered as well. Observations allowed for a real-time examination of:

- The selection and structure of speaking tasks such as scripted versus open-ended.
- Patterns of interaction such as pair work, small groups, or whole-class discussions.
- Teacher interventions such as error correction strategies, use of L1, and student engagement.

Observation records were expanded soon afterward to capture contextual details. This included adding descriptive notes about classroom atmosphere, non-verbal cues, seating arrangements and any spontaneous teacher or student behaviors that were not captured in the audio-recordings. Although the presence of a researcher can influence natural behaviors (Ciesielska et al., 2018), the study's multi-phase design – interviews both before and after the lessons – aimed to mitigate potential observer effects by allowing teachers to discuss how they felt about being observed and whether they had adapted their usual style.

Stimulated-Recall Interviews

Five stimulated-recall interviews (SRI) were conducted with each teacher – one after every second observed lesson – to elicit the cognitive rationales underlying instructional decision-points related to speaking instruction (Gass & Mackey, 2016). Within 48 hours of each lesson pair, three or four audio extracts of 30–90 seconds each were selected. The excerpts captured a decision made by the teacher, such as initiating or terminating a speaking task, choosing to correct or ignore a spoken error, switching between L1 and English, or reallocating learners between pair, group, and whole-class interaction. These moments, identified from field-note annotations of critical incidents, were replayed to teachers on a laptop. Playback was paused after each clip and teachers were invited to reflect on decisions regarding the teaching of speaking, contextualize those choices, and evaluate how these aligned or conflicted with their personal pedagogical beliefs (Tondeur et al., 2017). This technique yielded a rich understanding of how teachers rationalize spontaneous or planned modifications to their

speaking activities and how they perceive the influence of contextual factors. Twenty SRI transcripts were generated (11 hours of talk) which were coded for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Data collection lasted for four months. All data – POIs, field notes from classroom observations, and transcripts of SRIs – were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The process began with repeated readings of transcripts and observation records to gain familiarity with each teacher's narrative and classroom events. During initial coding, passages were labeled according to salient categories, such as direct vs. indirect instruction, speaking anxiety, contextual constraints, and error correction stance. These codes were refined through focused coding to reveal overarching themes that corresponded to patterns observed across participants. Triangulation (Renz et al., 2018) was achieved by comparing teacher statements, classroom behaviors, and their subsequent reflections in SRIs, capturing both alignment and dissonance between stated beliefs and observed practices.

Ethical Considerations, Reflexivity, and Trustworthiness

At the time of data collection (January–April 2023) the researcher's university had not yet established a formal institutional review board (IRB). Consequently, ethical oversight followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). Participation in the study was voluntary. Written gatekeeper permission was obtained from the participating school's principal, and all teacher-participants provided written informed consent. The participants were assigned pseudonyms (Peter, David, Adam, and Mary) to protect their identities. Classroom observations minimized disruption to teaching activities, and student privacy was maintained by avoiding collection of identifying information.

A reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher throughout the study (Meyer & Willis, 2019), with ongoing notes on personal assumptions about Kazakhstani EFL contexts and reflecting on how these might shape interpretations.. Member-checking strengthened both ethical practice and trustworthiness, as teachers reviewed interview summaries to verify accurate representation of their views. To ensure dependability, all transcripts were coded manually using a stable coding frame developed through iterative readings, with ongoing memo-writing to document analytic decisions. The coding framework was applied systematically across all data types and revisited as themes were refined. Data triangulation through multiple collection phases – POIs, classroom observations, and SRIs – ensured a robust perspective on teacher cognition and practical constraints, aligning with recognized standards for trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All research data were stored securely and will be destroyed within three years of study completion.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' classroom practices around speaking instruction reveal how pedagogical choices are shaped by a continuous negotiation between individual beliefs, institutional pressures, and student needs. The analysis situates classroom observations within relevant theoretical frameworks and demonstrates how pedagogical practices reflect and respond to broader disciplinary perspectives.

The study used a multi-phase approach. Initial (POIs) established teachers' backgrounds and beliefs, followed by ten classroom observations per teacher (labeled CO1-CO10). Stimulated-recall interviews (SRIs) after every two observations captured teachers' rationales for instructional decisions and their navigation of contextual constraints.

The following subsections integrate data from all three sources (POIs, SRIs, and classroom observations) to demonstrate how teacher cognition, institutional factors, and student characteristics shape speaking instruction in Kazakhstani secondary schools.

Approaches to Speaking Instruction

In the observed classrooms, the teachers balanced teacher-led techniques with more open-ended, communicative tasks to differing degrees. All four participants—Peter, David, Adam, and Mary—recognized the importance of oral proficiency, yet they adopted varying instructional approaches informed by their beliefs, experiences, and teaching contexts. Despite working within comparable teaching conditions, the four teachers employed distinct methods for developing oral proficiency, shaped by their positions along the continuum between direct (controlled) and indirect (transfer) approaches.

Direct and Indirect Methodologies

The findings reveal that David consistently favored a direct, teacher-centered approach, whereas Mary combined explicit instruction with more communicative tasks. Peter and Adam leaned more heavily on indirect, learner-centered approaches, though they occasionally turned to controlled exercises for less proficient learners.

David believed that mastery of grammar and vocabulary must precede genuine fluency. As he explained, "All the activities that we do, such as dialogues, pair work, memorization and extra reading, are designed to prepare students for that aim [speaking freely later]" (SRI6). In practice, David's lessons often included grammar drills and text recitations, reflecting a skill-getting perspective (Cook, 2016). During multiple observations, half of his class time was spent on these controlled activities (CO3, CO4). He recalled learning in a similar way: "An English teacher would always ask us to memorize texts … It was good for learning vocabulary" (POI2). This personal history influenced his view that well-structured tasks lead to "the rest," namely freer speaking.

Mary employed direct instruction before moving quickly to communicative activities, blending structure with fluency practice. “Grammar knowledge is internalized faster because it was practiced through speaking activities immediately after the grammar work … the instruction should be there,” she noted (SRI9). In lessons, she introduced a specific grammatical point and then transitioned to small-group discussions, reflecting Hughes and Reed’s (2016) recommendation of pairing explicit teaching with functional practice. Although she retained a teacher-led segment to ensure accuracy, Mary’s approach confirms the possibility of merging direct and indirect methods within a single lesson cycle.

In contrast to David’s consistent structure, Peter favored freer speech once students demonstrated basic competence. During observations of his more advanced classes, he devoted extended segments to open-ended group projects, reserving memorized dialogues for only the weakest groups (CO6, CO7). He explained that learners at higher levels “already have enough words and grammar to speak freely, so I don’t push them to follow a script” (SRI2). This flexibility aligned with a scaffolding process in which early controlled stages give way to more spontaneous interaction (Azir, 2019).

Adam identified with an indirect, communicative method. He believed “it’s all about getting them to speak no matter what” (SRI4), frequently allowing students to explore topics in small groups or whole-class discussions with minimal teacher intervention. Although Adam acknowledged moments of unstructured “only practicing,” his emphasis on continuous oral exchange supported the argument that authentic conversation fosters more naturalistic language acquisition (Burns, 2019). In his classes, pair or group talk accounted for the majority of the speaking time (CO5, CO8), indicating that work on accuracy, while present, was less extensive than in David’s lessons.

To sum up, these participants demonstrate how classroom discourse can move along a direct–indirect continuum depending on teacher beliefs, students’ language readiness, and time constraints. This diversity matches theories that argue for dynamic, context-tailored approaches rather than strict adherence to a single method (Willis, 2015).

Context-Sensitive Instructional Choices

Although teaching took place in the same state secondary school, each participant molded speaking instruction to address learner needs, institutional expectations, and their own personal teaching philosophies (Horwitz, 2020). Identical or similar external contexts did not produce uniform practices, demonstrating how teachers’ perceived environments shape choices differently.

David’s classes featured controlled tasks and memorization—“the sooner they master all the grammar content the sooner they begin to do the rest” (POI2)—whereas Adam swapped textbook themes for more locally relevant topics. “If I see the text topic is about ‘British on Holiday,’ I replace it with local examples,” Adam explained, so students could connect personal experiences to the conversation (SRI5). Observational data show these more

spontaneous discussions often lasted longer than planned, an outcome Adam viewed positively (CO5). Their contrasting methods highlight how individual perceptions of students' proficiency and engagement underpin context-sensitive practice (Shin et al., 2020).

Peter also demonstrated sensitivity to mixed-ability groups. He noted that "some students already have enough words and grammar … so I don't push them to follow a script" (SRI2), preferring localized scaffolding for struggling learners and freer dialogues for more confident ones. In one lesson, he allowed advanced students to conduct peer-led Q&A sessions, while novices relied on written prompts and word banks (CO7). This dual approach maximized classroom participation and seemed to reduce student anxiety.

Similarly, Mary recognized that a blanket English-only guideline might heighten stress for beginners, particularly in extended classes. At more advanced levels, however, she encouraged exclusive L2 use to stretch students' linguistic capacities (CO6). Her subtle calibration reinforced the notion that teachers respond to local conditions—like fatigue, scheduling, and class size—by adjusting the relative amounts of control and freedom in speaking tasks (Villada et al., 2018).

Taken together, these teachers' evolving, context-sensitive strategies revealed how on-the-ground realities mediate methodological choices. That four educators in the same school could employ such distinct approaches testifies to the complexity of speaking instruction and reveals the role of teacher cognition in shaping classroom discourse (Borg, 2015). By adopting or adapting direct techniques, indirect tasks, or a combination, participants forged practices suited to their particular learner groups, thus demonstrating a pragmatic synthesis of pedagogical ideals and real-world constraints.

Speaking Tasks and Interactional Dynamics

The observed speaking tasks varied across classrooms, informed by teachers' instructional priorities and mediated through different interactional modes. These tasks reflected an interplay between teachers' stated beliefs, classroom practices, and anticipated student learning outcomes. Rather than offering a mere inventory of activities, the analysis considers how these practices correspond with established perspectives on oral language pedagogy (Burns, 2019; Richards, 2017).

Task Types and Pedagogical Implementation

All four participants employed a range of speaking tasks, from scripted memorization and monologic presentations to more open-ended or localized activities. David's instruction centered on controlled, memorized tasks. He reasoned that "when they memorize short texts – like 'Boat Race' or 'Sydney Olympics' – they build the habit of speaking with fewer grammar mistakes" (SRI6). Observational data (CO4, CO5) confirmed multiple recitation activities, supporting a skill-getting perspective (Newton & Nation, 2020). However, students appeared

to spend limited time producing their own utterances, suggesting a potential trade-off between grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency (Vercellotti, 2017).

Adam, by contrast, placed learners in contextualized, open-ended tasks. Instead of following the textbook theme "British on Holiday," he encouraged discussions of local travel experiences (SRI5), and in one observed session (CO7) students spontaneously extended the task, indicating strong engagement. While this approach resonates with research that emphasizes authenticity and personal relevance (Richards, 2017), some students appeared hesitant when they lacked sufficient vocabulary (CO7). These moments highlighted the tension between rich, communicative opportunities and the need for targeted language support (Pakula, 2019).

Mary and Peter adopted hybrid methods that connect structured and open-ended elements. Mary incorporated time-limited yet student-selected presentations, explaining, "They can choose any topic they want to present, as long as they speak in English for at least three minutes" (POI2). Observations (CO2) showed students tackling diverse subjects, and several reported feeling more motivated because they could speak about personal interests (Mary's informal follow-up notes). Peter took a further step by embedding interactive Q&A into presentations – "After each presentation, you need to ask at least one question" (SRI4) – thereby shifting "talk as performance" (Richards, 2017) toward more dialogic, meaning-focused interactions. While observational data (CO3, CO6) confirmed higher levels of student engagement, it also revealed variability in the depth of peer questioning, suggesting that teacher guidance on formulating questions could further enhance the task's learning potential (Newton & Nation, 2020).

These findings illustrate how teachers balance accuracy, fluency, and complexity through different task configurations. Importantly, all participants prioritized speaking but differed in how they scaffolded or localized activities based on their perceptions of student ability and institutional pressures.

Interaction Choices: Patterns, Beliefs, and Rationale

Just as the choice of task reflected differing beliefs about speaking development, so did teachers' decisions regarding pair work, small groups, and whole-class discussions. David primarily utilized pair work: "Pair work is easier to manage and helps me check each pair's progress quickly" (SRI4). Observations (CO1, CO5) revealed frequent dyadic drills aimed at reinforcing textbook material. While these activities allowed David to monitor accuracy more directly, some quieter students contributed minimal utterances, raising questions about turn-taking equity (Greer & Potter, 2015).

Peter's group-based approach, conversely, fostered peer scaffolding: "When they are in groups, even shy students have to participate" (SRI3). Classroom data (CO4, CO7) indicated that small-group problem-solving tasks – such as designing class trips – encouraged broad interaction and negotiation of meaning (Zhu & Carless, 2018). This more sociocultural perspective (Sun & Zhang, 2021) suited Peter's goal of maximizing student talk, though it

sometimes required extra guidance to ensure all voices were heard. Meanwhile, Adam often opted for whole-class discussions, believing "sometimes, we all just talk together about a single topic. It feels more natural if everyone's involved at once" (SRI6). Observation (CO6) confirmed high levels of spontaneous participation but also revealed that stronger students occasionally dominated, aligning with the ongoing tension between authenticity and balanced opportunity (Burns, 2019).

Mary flexibly combined these modes by arranging desks "in four corners" (SRI7), rotating students between pairs, small groups, and quick plenary sessions (CO2, CO3). She aimed to capitalize on each interaction type's affordances – dyadic for immediate feedback, group work for collaboration, whole-class for community building. This structured variety suggests a nuanced understanding of how shifting interaction patterns can reinforce communicative, cognitive, and affective outcomes (Namaziandost et al., 2020).

Overall, the varied interactional patterns aligned with each teacher's beliefs about how best to foster speaking development in a Kazakhstani secondary school context. Pair work and memorization supported tight control over linguistic forms, while group tasks and open discussions promoted a higher incidence of spontaneous output. These interactional choices, particularly those employed by Peter and Mary, resonate with calls in the literature for student-centered approaches to mitigate the constraints of teacher-dominated classroom norms (Ismail et al., 2018; Tuspekova et al., 2020). Their use of group-based and rotating formats provided more opportunities for learners to initiate speech, thereby fostering conditions more conducive to learner autonomy.

One finding stands in contrast to concerns raised in earlier research that Kazakhstani students, shaped by post-Soviet educational traditions and high-context cultural norms, tend to defer authority and avoid risk-taking (Hussein et al., 2019; Noor, 2024). Although those dynamics were observable in David's classes, teachers like Peter and Adam appeared to challenge these tendencies by creating interactional routines that required initiative, negotiation of meaning, and peer-led participation. A notable and thus somewhat unexpected observation was that some shy or previously disengaged students appeared to participate more actively when provided with structured yet flexible speaking roles in group settings. In this way, the study both supports and complicates prior research. While hierarchical constraints persist, certain instructional formats can soften their effects. This may suggest that learner autonomy is not fixed by culture but can be incrementally cultivated through pedagogical design. The differentiated interaction patterns, while informed by local contextual factors and individual teacher cognition, seemingly mirror broader pedagogical tensions identified in the literature. Namely, the balance between authenticity and control, fluency, and accuracy, and student comfort and linguistic stretch (Hughes & Reed, 2016).

Affective Dimensions in Speaking Instruction

Emotional security, teacher–student rapport, and learner confidence appeared to play an influential role in shaping the teaching of oral skills across the observed classrooms. In

alignment with humanistic perspectives (Byram et al., 2023) and sociocultural frameworks (Sun & Zhang, 2021), the data illustrate how teachers constructed supportive environments and navigated L1 use alongside error correction.

Fostering Safe and Motivating Environments

An overriding concern among the four teachers was learner well-being, especially in contexts where speaking English can provoke anxiety or self-consciousness. Peter's account vividly reveals how a student's negative experience shaped his avoidance of immediate error interruption: "A student once told me he hated English because the teacher always corrected him right away. That was a turning point for me" (POI2). Observations (CO2, CO4) corroborated his minimal on-the-spot correction strategy, signaling a consistent alignment between belief and practice – an example of methodological triangulation (interviews plus classroom evidence). This pattern echoes concerns reported in Kazakhstani secondary schools, where immediate public correction has been associated with heightened learner anxiety (Ismail et al., 2018) and reluctance to speak (Yessenbekova, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, Peter's emphasis on respecting learners' emotional comfort resonates with Byram et al.'s (2023) humanistic approach, wherein psychological safety is paramount to encouraging risk-taking. Moreover, one could interpret his practice as an application of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Moriña, 2022), as he actively minimizes stressors to promote comprehensible output. However, some off-record comments by advanced-level students (field notes) indicated a desire for more immediate correction to refine their spoken accuracy, hinting at a subtle tension between emotional reassurance and targeted feedback (Moriña, 2022).

Mary similarly structured her lessons to build confidence incrementally. She reported letting "them practice in smaller groups first" (SRI6) before transitioning to higher-stakes speaking tasks. Observational data (CO3, CO6) showed that after these low-pressure warm-ups, more reticent learners tended to participate willingly in open-class speech. This scaffolding approach—reminiscent of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Xi & Lantolf, 2021)—aims to strike a balance between challenge and emotional safety. One group of students spontaneously reflected, "We feel braver when we've tested our ideas in smaller groups" (field notes), suggesting a positive affective impact. Yet Mary also admitted occasionally running short on time for the whole-class stage, illustrating how institutional pacing requirements might constrain fully realized supportive measures. Her staged approach thus illustrates how confidence building can partially offset culturally rooted hesitation without eliminating time-pressure constraints identified in prior local studies (Tuspekova et al., 2020).

David approached affective concerns by adjusting his expectations according to the lesson's timing, acknowledging that "if they've done five or six lessons already that day, I see no problem in letting them use L1 to clarify a point" (SRI5). In CO5, this pragmatism led to more relaxed speaking activities, albeit with limited grammar correction. Some students reported feeling relieved that "he doesn't push grammar too hard at the end of the day," though one

particularly ambitious learner quietly mentioned wanting more rigorous error feedback "to improve faster" (field notes). This discrepancy reveals how an affectively sensitive approach may at times conflict with certain students' desire for higher challenge and more robust feedback, thus underscoring the importance of teacher awareness of diverse learning preferences.

Adam consistently highlighted risk-taking, claiming that "if they have fear, they'll never speak up" (SRI1). Observations (CO2, CO7) bore out his immediate praise of any attempt at spoken output, reinforcing Burns' (2019) argument that positive reinforcement boosts learners' willingness to communicate. Nonetheless, a few students appeared to plateau, repeating the same basic sentence structures without further linguistic development (CO7). An unexpected observation was that the absence of form-focused feedback occasionally coincided with a plateau in syntactic complexity which seems to diverge from studies that equate increased willingness to communicate with proportional linguistic growth (Liu & Jin, 2024). This outcome points to a trade-off: wholeheartedly encouraging risk-taking can promote spoken fluency but may insufficiently scaffold accuracy or complexity if more systematic feedback is lacking (Vercellotti, 2017).

Cases illustrate that affect-oriented strategies can lower the perceived affective filter yet benefit from balance with calibrated feedback to sustain linguistic development. This is an issue of relevance in contexts where foreign language speaking accuracy is seldom formally tested in state schools. Data indicate that while psychological comfort typically expands learners' willingness to speak, it may also leave gaps in targeted intervention for those seeking rapid improvement or more advanced error correction. This tension sets the stage for a deeper look at how teachers manage two elements—L1 usage and error treatment—that carry strong affective implications. Classroom-level evidence from the current study refines the earlier, anxiety-focused work by Hussein et al. (2019) and suggests a practical pathway for professional development programs that aim to integrate affective scaffolding with targeted oral feedback.

Balancing L1 Use and Error Correction for Learner Confidence

A further dimension of affective pedagogy lies in how teachers navigate students' mother tongue and corrections of spoken errors—both of which can profoundly shape learners' confidence (Bremner, 2021). Mary, for instance, articulated a differentiated L1 strategy: "Beginners need the option to express difficult ideas in L1 sometimes. But for advanced students, I say 'only English'" (SRI4). CO1 and CO2 illustrated that she indeed permitted limited L1 for novice learners, enabling them to contribute more fully to discussions rather than remaining silent. This pragmatic translanguaging (Shin et al., 2020) helped build a sense of inclusion, though she reported feeling pressure from the administration, who expected a largely English-only environment. Balancing these sometimes-conflicting directives highlights the "so what?" of her approach: despite potential institutional constraints, she prioritizes emotional security, especially for those at lower proficiency levels.

David's stance toward L1 similarly reflected a belief that "maintaining positive attitudes" in fatigued students overrode strict language separation (SRI5). However, in CO3 and CO7, once students clarified a confusing term in L1, he nudged them back into English quickly. This gentle pivot, corroborated by direct observation, demonstrates how his approach tactically uses L1 as a scaffold without derailing class-wide English use. Some advanced learners expressed a preference for a stricter no-L1 approach, claiming that it forced them to "think harder in English" (field notes). Such varied preferences confirm the complexity of teacher decisions around language policy, underscoring the influence of student identity, motivation, and skill level on an optimal mix of L1 and L2.

Peter adopted a delayed-correction model that intersected with his minimal on-the-spot strategy: "I prefer to take notes during speaking and correct them afterward, so they don't lose confidence" (POI2). Observations (CO4) showed him quietly jotting down repeated errors, which he would address in a short whole-class session. This method resonates with immediate vs. postponed feedback debates in the literature (Zhu & Carless, 2018). Most students apparently appreciated his approach; one noted feeling "safer to talk" (field notes) because the teacher wasn't "jumping in" at every small slip. Yet a couple of more advanced students found the general, post-task feedback less relevant to their individual issues. This discrepancy points to a tension between ensuring a low-stress environment for the majority and providing higher-level learners with the precision they desire.

Adam, by contrast, occasionally corrected "major mistakes" mid-speech but tried "to be friendly about it" (SRI3). Observational data (CO5) showed him interrupting only when confusion impeded comprehension, consistent with a partial focus-on-form approach (Newton & Nation, 2020). While this seemed to keep discourse relatively fluid, at least one shy student appeared startled during the first correction mid-sentence, suggesting that even gentle interruptions can momentarily raise anxiety for learners unaccustomed to such direct intervention (field notes). Adam's method highlights the perennial balancing act: protect learners' confidence but uphold sufficient correctness to maintain comprehensibility and progress.

Overall, these findings point to the affective dimension of L1 usage and error feedback. Teachers' choices reflect both personal beliefs in fostering a "safe place" (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) and pragmatic adaptations to class conditions and external pressures. Data reveal areas of convergence and dissonance. Even teachers who espouse a tolerant L1 stance sometimes revert to stricter English-only norms under specific circumstances, while those who claim minimal correction occasionally find themselves offering in-the-moment feedback. This variation suggests that error treatment and language policy may serve both linguistic objectives and emotional or motivational considerations (Bremner, 2021).

In examining how the teachers create supportive environments and balance L1 use with error correction, a clearer picture emerges of the complex interplay between teacher cognition, institutional forces, and learner affect. The synergy—or tension—among these factors can

shape learners' oral participation, as supportive approaches appear to ease anxiety yet can also leave advanced students wanting more pointed, individualized correction.

These findings speak directly to the need for professional development sessions that equip teachers to gauge and differentiate their affective strategies according to learner profiles, and to do so under sometimes contradictory institutional demands. Such discussions also set the stage for exploring how teachers reconcile their stated beliefs with classroom realities over time – an issue important to language teacher cognition research (Borg, 2015) and one that interlocks with broader contextual variables, such as high-stakes testing or curriculum mandates, explored in subsequent sections.

Contextual Constraints and Opportunities for Speaking Instruction

Although all four teachers expressed an intention to promote oral skills, the scope of their speaking activities appeared contingent on external assessment structures. This type of pattern is consistent with curriculum-narrowing effects reported at the national level for the UNT (Fleming & Shinjee, 2024).

Exam-Driven Pressures and Teacher Responses

One recurrent theme was the absence of a speaking component in major examinations, which affected instructional priorities. Adam conceded that "we can't realistically grade everyone's speaking individually. There's no oral test in the end-of-term exams or the Unified National Test, so we focus on reading, grammar, and vocabulary" (SRI4). During lessons observed for CO3 and CO4, Adam consistently opted for exam-aligned exercises rather than extended oral tasks, a pattern reflecting the classic washback effect whereby high-stakes tests determine classroom emphases (Dong et al., 2021). This is in line with Borger's (2019) conclusion that skills lacking a quantifiable metric are routinely sidelined in test-oriented settings.

David, likewise, acknowledged parental expectations for superior grammar scores: "Most parents want good grammar scores for the exam; they're less worried about how fluently their kids speak" (POI2). In CO5, he concentrated the entire lesson on grammar drills rather than more interactive speaking tasks – an alignment that indicates how broader societal and familial pressures may reinforce a limited test-driven agenda (Tondeur et al., 2017). A handful of students confided informally that they enjoyed speaking games but recognized grammar mastery as "the real ticket to passing exams," illustrating how learners, too, internalize test-centric norms.

Mary, on the other hand, appeared to express frustration with this assessment framework: "The system doesn't test speaking, but the administration expects us to show good test results. I wish they'd include an oral part" (SRI6). Observations from CO3 confirmed her attempts to integrate short presentations – activities that received no formal scoring but nonetheless aligned with her belief in communicative practice. Such actions mirror Spratt's (2017) argument that a test's

scope or omission of key skills can curb teacher autonomy and hamper skill development, even when teachers value oral competence.

Peter's approach, however, showcased a degree of individual agency, as he introduced unassessed dialogue sessions to "bridge the gap" (SRI3) left by official written tests. For instance, in CO2 students shared spoken summaries after reading a text. Although these tasks did not count toward final marks, several students indicated they found the exercise "useful for practicing pronunciation" (field notes). Peter's initiative underscores the potential for teacher-level innovation despite assessment-induced constraints – a nuance that complicates the notion of washback as purely deterministic. It was notable that students themselves judged these ungraded dialogues as beneficial, suggesting that teacher-initiated work-arounds can create perceived value even when institutional rewards are absent.

Institutional Policies and Professional Development Gaps

Teachers also reported limited institutional backing for speaking-focused strategies and few opportunities for specialized professional development. Mary explained that "the only official policy I keep hearing is 'No L1 use.' There's nothing specific about how to teach speaking or how to improve it" (SRI5). Observations during CO6 reflected this top-down English-only mandate in classroom signage, yet no official guidelines on structuring oral practice were evident. The result, aligning with Ismail et al. (2018), is a policy void that leaves teachers navigating speaking pedagogy largely on their own.

David reinforced this view, remarking that "we have short workshops on grammar testing or standardized assessments, but no real training on how to run speaking lessons" (SRI3). This institutional emphasis on tested components, documented in both interviews and his lesson plans (CO2, CO4), may explain why David defaulted to exam-oriented drills at the expense of extended oral tasks. Even though he had expressed an interest in more interactive techniques, the lack of targeted PD perpetuated a grammar-first paradigm (Johnson & Golombek, 2020).
Adam highlighted another structural hurdle: "I would attend more PD courses, but we're juggling so many lessons. There's no extra time to learn new methods for speaking" (SRI4). The class schedule logs (CO1–CO5) indicated that he taught a heavy load without sufficient breaks, limiting his ability to experiment with or reflect on speaking-based innovations. Student feedback further suggested that Adam's enthusiastic attempts at open discussions often lacked methodical guidance, reflecting a need for training that would blend communicative ideals with systematic scaffolding.

By contrast, Peter's evolution in error-correction techniques after attending an external Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) course abroad (SRI7) demonstrated the transformative potential of specialized development. CO6 showed a more nuanced approach to oral feedback compared to CO2, signaling that teacher cognition can shift meaningfully with the right support (Li, 2020). However, this shift arose from self-motivated professional learning rather than any institutional initiative, underscoring a systemic shortfall in fostering speaking skills at school level.

These patterns indicate that high-stakes assessment policies, combined with a grammar-centric PD culture, seemingly continue to constrain oral skills instruction. Nonetheless, instances of teacher agency such as Mary's short, ungraded presentations and Peter's informal dialogue sessions demonstrate that localized adaptations can partially mitigate washback. These initiatives illustrate Golombek and Johnson's (2021) argument that teacher cognition can develop when educators are willing to negotiate or counteract external pressures.

Recommendations

One of the recurrent patterns in the data is the imbalance between oral-communication goals and grammar-centered instruction. Stimulated-recall interviews indicated that teachers recognized how the absence of an oral component in the end-of-term examinations steers instruction toward reading, grammar, and vocabulary; they also suggested that adding a speaking section could provide a more accurate measure of students' progress in spoken English. Classroom observations supported this pattern: exam-aligned drills frequently replaced extended interaction, illustrating a local washback mechanism in which assessment criteria channel instructional time toward the skills that receive marks. In light of this evidence, a feasible school-level response could be to introduce a modest speaking component into the summative English examination and to monitor its curricular effects. An initial allocation of approximately 10% of the total examination score to a short, rubric-based oral feature can be piloted in one grade before wider adoption. Systematic monitoring of washback can then proceed through scheduled lesson-plan reviews, targeted classroom observations, and teacher reflections collected at the start, midpoint, and end of the academic year. These data have the potential to show whether the altered assessment encourages instructors to increase the frequency and variety of interactional tasks and whether students demonstrate gains in spontaneous speech during regular lessons. Evidence from a recent intervention in Chinese primary schools suggests that the introduction of an oral English test can produce measurable changes in both teaching practices and learner engagement when accompanied by appropriate support structures (Liu & Chen, 2022).

Future research would benefit from broadening the evidential base. A multi-site longitudinal design that follows teachers through curriculum or assessment reform could capture changes in cognition and practice that a single-school study cannot (Wu, 2023). Parallel data from students, especially on anxiety and perceived utility of oral work, would help refine understanding of the affective calculus that shapes class participation (Al-Khotaba et al., 2020). Future studies could also correlate specific patterns of instructional diversification with pre- and post-measures of students' spoken accuracy, fluency, and complexity to determine pedagogical impact.

Conclusion

This study examined how Kazakhstani EFL teachers navigate speaking instruction within an institutional landscape that prioritizes grammar and reading over oral proficiency. The findings reveal distinct patterns related to each research question.

Regarding how teachers conceptualize and operationalize speaking instruction, the four participants—Peter, David, Adam, and Mary—demonstrated a spectrum of approaches ranging from controlled, accuracy-focused activities to more communicative, learner-centered tasks. David consistently favored structured exercises and memorization to build foundational skills, while Adam embraced spontaneous discussions prioritizing fluency over form. Peter and Mary adopted hybrid approaches, balancing explicit instruction with opportunities for authentic communication. These variations reflect different conceptualizations of what constitutes effective speaking instruction, with some viewing accuracy as prerequisite to fluency and others seeing natural communication as the primary learning mechanism.

Concerning contextual factors, high-stakes assessments emerged as an important constraint, with the absence of speaking components in national examinations such as the unified National Test – both a school-leaving and a university entrance exam – limiting time allocated to oral skills. Institutional policies emphasizing grammar and reading proficiency appeared to create pressure to focus on testable content, while class sizes, student proficiency levels, and available resources further influenced instructional choices. Yet within these restrictions, teachers demonstrated agency by creating informal speaking opportunities, localizing content, and strategically incorporating L1 to build student confidence.

In reconciling beliefs with practice, teachers showed varying degrees of alignment. While all four acknowledged the importance of speaking instruction, their classroom enactments revealed tensions between stated beliefs and institutional realities. Adam maintained the strongest consistency between his communicative philosophy and teaching approach, whereas David more readily adapted his practices to meet institutional demands despite expressing interest in more interactive methods. These patterns reflect how contextual factors mediate the extent to which teachers can translate espoused beliefs into classroom reality (Li, 2020), highlighting the complex interplay between teacher cognition, institutional pressures, and pedagogical decision-making.

These findings illustrate how teachers navigate pedagogical decisions within institutional limitations (Borg, 2015; Cook, 2016). This observation has potential implications for teacher education, assessment design, and language policy development in Kazakhstan.

Implications

This study has implications for curriculum reform, teacher education, and language policy in Kazakhstan. An important consideration is the absence of oral assessment in high-stakes examinations, which reinforces grammar and reading over speaking skills. Policymakers might

consider including speaking components in assessment frameworks to encourage oral skills instruction, as adjustments in testing policies could potentially influence pedagogical practices in exam-oriented contexts (Dong et al., 2021). While this case study is grounded in Kazakhstan, similar tensions between teacher cognition and high-stakes assessment have been documented in other systems, notably in New Zealand (East, 2015) and the United States (Fives & Buehl, 2016). This indicates that the insights offered here are transferable to exam-oriented contexts worldwide.

Building on this broader relevance, professional development requires attention as teachers often lack structured support for speaking instruction. Resource-rich training programs should provide systematic strategies for integrating oral skills within curricular constraints, focusing on:

- Scaffolding extended discourse for sustained conversations
- Strategic L1 use as a facilitative tool in early-stage oral production (Macaro et al., 2020)
- Affect-sensitive methodologies to mitigate learner anxiety (Tajik et al., 2023)

Teacher agency plays a notable role in sustaining oral proficiency instruction despite curricular limitations, yet not all teacher-initiated adaptations are structurally sustainable. This underscores the need for institutionalized mechanisms—such as speaking-focused teaching communities and collaboration models – to ensure adaptations become systemic rather than remaining isolated initiatives.

Limitations

Although the four teachers varied in their instructional styles and backgrounds, they all worked in the same secondary school, potentially limiting the transferability of results to other Kazakhstani contexts or beyond. Additionally, the researcher's presence in the classroom may have shaped how teachers conducted lessons (Tarusha & Bushi, 2024), although repeated observations and SRIs sought to reduce these reactivity effects by building rapport and discussing any unusual classroom behaviors. Finally, the ten lessons observed per teacher, while offering valuable depth, still represent only a fraction of their broader teaching routines. Despite these issues, the multiple-case qualitative design, supported by triangulated data and reflexive safeguards, yielded a nuanced view of how EFL teachers navigate diverse pressures to foster oral proficiency within an exam-oriented secondary school environment in Kazakhstan.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In the development and review of the manuscript, I utilized Grammarly as the sole AI-assisted editing tool. No other AI tools were used at any stage of the research or manuscript preparation process. Grammarly was used for proofreading purposes to improve the quality of my writing by checking for grammatical and punctuation errors, identifying redundancies and repetitive phrasing, improving the coherence and flow of text, and enhancing clarity of expression. This usage was primarily concentrated in the abstract, introduction, and literature review sections of my manuscript.

I hereby confirm that the use of AI was strictly limited to language improvement and proofreading functions. AI technology was not used for generating research ideas or questions, collecting or analyzing research data, interpreting findings, drawing conclusions, creating original content or arguments, or analyzing and synthesizing literature. All intellectual contributions, including the conception of the research, methodology design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, and discussion of implications, represent my original work as the author.

References

Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (4th ed., pp. 492–505). Jossey-Bass. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19

Aisyah, M., Setiawan, S., & Mustofa, A. (2023). EFL teachers' perception self-directed professional development toward oral language maintenance. *Loquen: English Studies Journal*, *16*(1), 39–54. https://doi.org/10.32678/loquen.v16i1.8402

Albino, G. (2017). Improving speaking fluency in a task-based language teaching approach: The case of EFL learners at Puniv-Cazenga. *SAGE Open*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017691077

Alharbi, B. S., Alharbi, M. A., & Alharbi, A. S. (2024). Unveiling the pedagogical potential: An in-depth analysis of EFL instructors' perspectives on YouTube for speaking skill enhancement. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, *6*(5), 698–711. https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v6i5.7119

Al-Khotaba, A. H., Alkhataba, E. H. A., Abdul-Hamid, S., & Ibrahim, B. (2020). Foreign language speaking anxiety: A psycholinguistic barrier affecting speaking achievement of Saudi EFL learners. *Arab World English Journal, 11*(4), 338–353. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3512637

Andoh, R. P. K., Mensah, D. Y., & Owusu, E. A. (2022). Trainers' pedagogical competencies and trainees' assimilation of training content. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, *34*(2), 133–149. https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-02-2021-0024

Azir, I. D. A. (2019). Applying peer scaffolding to enhance the EFL vocational students' speaking skills. Ethical Lingua: Journal of Language Teaching and Literature, 6(2), 149–157. https://doi.org/10.30605/25409190.v6.149-157

Bedeker, M., Ospanbek, A., Simons, M., Yessenbekova, A., & Zhalgaspayev, M. (2024). 'I can easily switch to the Kazakh language, also to the Russian language': reimagining Kazakhstani CLIL implementation as a third space. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *37*(2), 121–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2023.2245832

Begimbetova, G., Kassymova, G., & Abduldayev, Y. (2023). Criteria-based assessment model in the education system of Kazakhstan. *Iasaýı Ýnıversıtetiniń Habarshysy, 127*(1), 276–287. https://doi.org/10.47526/2023-1/2664-0686.23

Bhattacharya, U. (2022). "I am a parrot": Literacy ideologies and rote learning. *Journal of Literacy Research, 54*(2), 113–136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X221098065

Borg, S. (2015). *Teacher cognition and language education*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Borg, S. (2017). Teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. In P. Garrett & J. M. Cots (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language awareness* (pp. 75–91). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315676494-5

Borger, L. (2019). Evaluating a high-stakes EFL speaking test: Teachers' practices and views. *Moderna Sprak, 113*(1), 25–57. https://doi.org/10.58221/mosp.v113i1.7621

Bremner, N. (2021). The multiple meanings of "student-centred" or "learner-centred" education, and the case for a more flexible approach to defining it. *Comparative Education, 57*(2), 159–186. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2020.1805863

British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (4th ed.).

Burns, A. (2019). Concepts for teaching speaking in the English language classroom. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network, 12*(1), 1–11.

Byram, M., Porto, M., & Yulita, L. (2023). Beyond teaching languages for communication – Humanistic perspectives and practices. *Languages*, *8*(3), 166. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8030166

Cao, Y., Jeyaraj, J. J., & Razali, A. B. (2024). Challenges in promoting learner autonomy in blended learning: Perspectives from English as a foreign language teachers in China. *International Journal of English Language Education, 12*(2), 122–142. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijele.v12i2.22272

Cheng, L. (2005). *Changing language teaching through language testing: A washback study*. Cambridge University Press.

Ciesielska, M., Boström, K. W., & Öhlander, M. (2018). Observation methods. In M. Ciesielska & D. Jemielniak (Eds.), *Qualitative methodologies in organization studies* (pp. 33–52). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65442-3_2

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2016). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 297–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Cook, V. (2016). *Second language learning and language teaching* (5th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315883113

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications Inc.

Dong, M., Fan, J., & Xu, J. (2021). Differential washback effects of a high-stakes test on students' English learning process: Evidence from a large-scale stratified survey in China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 43*(1), 252–269. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1918057

East, M. (2015). Coming to terms with innovative high-stakes assessment practice: Teachers' viewpoints on assessment reform. *Language Testing, 32*(1), 101–120. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532214544393

Fives, H., & Buehl, M. M. (2016). Teachers' beliefs, in the context of policy reform. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 3*(1), 114–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732215623554

Fleming, K., & Shinjee, B. (2024). English high-stakes testing and constructing the "international" in Kazakhstan and Mongolia. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *15*(4), 1253–1275. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2022-0067

Gaipov, D., Kozhakhmet, S., Kassymova, G., & Tulepova, S. (2024). English medium instruction in the context of internationalisation of universities in Kazakhstan: A systematic review of literature. *Bulletin Series of Pedagogical Sciences*, *82*(2), 256–274. https://doi.org/10.51889/2959-5762.2024.82.2.015

Gass, S. M., & Mackey, A. (2016). *Stimulated recall methodology in applied linguistics and L2 research*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315813349

Golombek, P. R., & Johnson, K. E. (2021). Recurrent restorying through language teacher narrative inquiry. *System*, *102*, 102601. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102601

Greer, T., & Potter, H. (2015). Turn-taking practices in multi-party EFL oral proficiency tests. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice, 5*(3), 297–320. https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v5i3.297

Herrera, D. J. N., Quinto, R. P., Castro, M. D. C. R., Peñafiel, C. G. A., & Moposita, V. M. G. (2024). Enhancing speaking proficiency: Innovative pedagogical approaches for third-year Bachillerato students at Bicentenario 'D7' High School. *Ciencia Latina Revista Científica Multidisciplinar, 8*(4), 10315–10337. https://doi.org/10.37811/cl_rcm.v8i4.12184

Horwitz, E. K. (2020). *Becoming a language teacher: A practical guide to second language learning and teaching* (2nd ed.). Castledown Publishers. https://doi.org/10.29140/9780648184416

Hughes, R., & Reed, B. S. (2016). *Teaching and researching speaking*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692395

Husnaini, H., Syam, A. T., Niken, N., & Soares, A. (2024). Teachers' strategies in teaching speaking at high schools: Obstacles and challenges. *Journal of Foreign Language and Educational Research, 4*(2), 243–262. https://doi.org/10.53696/27753719.42165

Hussein, H. A. A.-K., Ahmed Alkhataba, E. H., Abdul-Hamid, S., & Bashir, I. (2019). Foreign language speaking anxiety: A psycholinguistic barrier affecting speaking achievement of Saudi EFL learners. *Arab World English Journal, 10*(4), 313–329. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no4.23

Iddings, A. C. D. S., Combs, M. C., & Moll, L. (2021). In the arid zone: Drying out educational resources for English language learners through policy and practice. In H. R. Milner & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *Handbook of urban education* (2nd ed., pp. 452–463). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429331435-33

Ismail, K., Tuspekova, A., & Mustaffa, R. (2018). English oral communication in public secondary schools in Kazakhstan: Understanding its practice and challenges. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature, 24*(2), 118–131. https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2018-2402-09

Johnson, K. E., & Golombek, P. R. (2020). Informing and transforming language teacher education pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research, 24*(1), 116–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168818777539

Khassanov, G. K., Utegenova, K. T., Darisheva, T. M., Bozbayeva, A. G., Akhmetova, G., Sarkulova, D. S., & Utegenova, A. (2024). Implementing multilingual education in Kazakhstan: Students' perceptions and attitudes towards the status of English. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *14*(8), 2316–2325. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1408.04

Kılıçkaya, F. (2016). Washback effects of a high-stakes exam on lower secondary school English teachers' practices in the classroom. *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature, 40*(1), 116–134. https://doi.org/10.17951/lsmll.2016.40.1.116

Kisfalvi, V., & Oliver, D. (2015). Creating and maintaining a safe space in experiential learning. *Journal of Management Education, 39*(6), 713–740. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562915574724

Lestari, M., & Margana, M. (2024). Communicative language teaching (CLT) implementation in *Kurikulum Merdeka*: A lesson from English teachers' voices. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching, 12*(4), 1657–1672. https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v12i4.11266

Li, L. (2020). Teacher cognition about teaching and learning. In *Language teacher cognition* (pp. 87–134). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51134-8_4

Liu, Y., & Chen, J. (2022, June). A study of the washback effect of oral English sampling test on primary school English teaching. In *2022 8th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2022)* (pp. 1477–1480). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220504.267

Liu, H., & Jin, J. (2024). Research trends in communicative language teaching: A bibliometric analysis from 2014 to 2023. *English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies, 6*(5), Article 256. https://doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v6n5p256

Macaro, E., Tian, L., & Chu, L. (2020). First and second language use in English medium instruction contexts. *Language Teaching Research*, *24*(3), 382–402. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168818783231

Meyer, K., & Willis, R. (2019). Looking back to move forward: The value of reflexive journaling for novice researchers. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *62*(5), 578–585. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2018.1559906

Meyers, R. (2023). English additional language student teachers' development of oral strategic competence and confidence during lectures. *Journal for Language Teaching, 57*(2), Article 5755. https://doi.org/10.56285/jltvol57iss2a5755

Ministerstvo obrazovaniya i nauki Respubliki Kazakhstan. (2017, 2 maya). *Prikaz Ministra obrazovaniya i nauki Respubliki Kazakhstan № 204 «Ob utverzhdenii Pravil provedeniya Edinogo natsionalnogo testirovaniya i vydachi sertifikata»* [Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 204 "On approval of the Rules for conducting the Unified National Testing and issuing the certificate"]. Ādilet.

Ministerstvo prosveshcheniya Respubliki Kazakhstan. (2022, 3 avgusta). *Prikaz Ministra prosveshcheniya Respubliki Kazakhstan № 348 «Ob utverzhdenii gosudarstvennykh obyazatelnykh standartov obrazovaniya vsekh urovney obrazovaniya»* [Order of the Minister of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 348 "On approval of the State compulsory educational standards for all levels of education"]. Ādilet.

Moriña, A. (2022). Faculty members who engage in inclusive pedagogy: Methodological and affective strategies for teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education, 27*(3), 371–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1724938

Nair, V., & Yunus, M. M. (2021). A systematic review of digital storytelling in improving speaking skills. *Sustainability, 13*(17), Article 9829. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179829

Namaziandost, E., Homayouni, M., & Rahmani, P. (2020). The impact of cooperative learning approach on the development of EFL learners' speaking fluency. *Cogent Arts & Humanities, 7*(1), 1780811. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2020.1780811

Nather, E. H. (2021). An action research study of promoting teachers' confidence and competence in teaching English meaningfully. *Journal of Education and Training, 8*(1), 11-37. https://doi.org/10.5296/jet.v8i1.18336

Newton, J. M., & Nation, I. S. (2020). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429203114

Nisha, P. R. (2024). Communicative language teaching (CLT) in improving speaking skills of tertiary level EFL students of Bangladesh. *FOSTER: Journal of English Language Teaching*, *5*(2), 120–130. https://doi.org/10.24256/foster-jelt.v5i2.174

Noor, F. (2024). Cultural variations affecting English language instruction for EFL learners and teachers. In *Research trends in language, literature & linguistics* (pp. 38–59). Iterative International Publisher. https://doi.org/10.58532/v3bflt6p1ch6

Pakula, H.-M. (2019). Teaching speaking. *Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies*, *13*(1), 95–111. https://doi.org/10.17011/apples/urn.201903011691

Pan, J. (2024). Inquiry into teaching listening and speaking in high school English classes based on an activity perspective. *Academic Journal of Management and Social Sciences, 8*(2), 114–117. https://doi.org/10.54097/0wcm9z22

Panggabean, C. I. T., & Triassanti, R. (2020). The implementation of metacognitive strategy training to enhance EFL students' oral presentation skill. *English Education: Journal of English Teaching and Research, 5*(1), 32–40. https://doi.org/10.29407/jetar.v5i1.14324

Raj JR, K. A., & Baisel, A. (2024). Mobile learning and verbal proficiency: A cross-sectional study investigating English speaking skills enhancement. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *15*(5), 1409–1418. https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1505.03

Renz, S. M., Carrington, J. M., & Badger, T. A. (2018). Two strategies for qualitative content analysis: An intramethod approach to triangulation. *Qualitative Health Research, 28*(5), 824–831. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317753586

Richards, J. C. (2017). Teaching English through English: Proficiency, pedagogy and performance. *RELC Journal, 48*(1), 7–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688217690059

Rozimela, Y., Fatimah, S., Adnan, A., & Tresnadewi, S. (2024). EFL teachers' perceived productive skills for effective teacher professional development program. *Studies in English Language and Education*, *11*(3), 1493–1514. https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v11i3.37277

Salam, M. Y., & Luksfinanto, Y. (2024). A comprehensive review of communicative language teaching (CLT) in modern classrooms. *Lingeduca: Journal of Language and Education Studies, 3*(1), 58–70. https://doi.org/10.70177/lingeduca.v3i1.1338s

Saptiany, S. G., & Prabowo, B. A. (2024). Speaking proficiency among English specific purpose students: A literature review on assessment and pedagogical approaches. *LITERACY: International Scientific Journals of Social, Education, Humanities, 3*(1), 36–48. https://doi.org/10.56910/literacy.v3i1.1392

Sharma, R. L. (2024). Exploring the landscape of challenges and opportunities in teaching speaking skills. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, *4*(3), 74–78. https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049x.2024.4.3.2745

Shin, J. Y., Dixon, L. Q., & Choi, Y. (2020). An updated review on use of L1 in foreign language classrooms. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 41*(5), 406–419. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1684928

Spratt, M. (2017). CLIL implementation in foreign language contexts: Exploring challenges and perspectives. *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning, 8*(1), 44–61.

Stake, R. E. (2013). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford press.

Sun, Q., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). A sociocultural perspective on English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers' cognitions about form-focused instruction. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 593172. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.593172

Tajik, M. A., Namyssova, G., Shamatov, D., Manan, S. A., Zhunussova, G., & Antwi, S. K. (2023). Navigating the potentials and barriers to EMI in the post-Soviet region: Insights from Kazakhstani university students and instructors. *International Journal of Multilingualism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2023.2265428

Tarusha, F., & Bushi, J. (2024). The role of classroom observation and its impact on improving teachers' teaching practices. *European Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences, 2*(2), 718–723. https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2024.2(2).63

Tondeur, J., Van Braak, J., Ertmer, P. A., & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, A. (2017). Understanding the relationship between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and technology use in education: A systematic review of qualitative evidence. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 65*, 555–575. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-016-9481-2

Tran, N. H. N., Amado, C. A. da E. F., & Santos, S. P. dos. (2023). Challenges and success factors of transnational higher education: a systematic review. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(1), 113–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2121813

Tuspekova, A., Mustaffa, R., & Ismail, K. (2020). Understanding English speaking practice in public schools in Kazakhstan: A case study in Almaty. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 26*(1), 171–185. https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2020-2601-12

Vercellotti, M. L. (2017). The development of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in second language performance: A longitudinal study. *Applied Linguistics, 38*(1), 90–111. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amv002

Villada, C., Hidalgo, V., Almela, M., & Salvador, A. (2018). Assessing performance on an evaluated speaking task: The role of self-efficacy, anxiety, and cardiac autonomic reactivity. *Journal of Psychophysiology*, *32*(2), 64–74. https://doi.org/10.1027/0269-8803/a000185

Wei, L., Wan Mustapha, W. Z., & Binti Awang, S. (2024). An experimental study of communicative language teaching (CLT) in university comprehensive English class. *International Journal of Linguistics, 16*(3), 83-97. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v16i3.21844

Willis, D. (2015). Conversational English: Teaching spontaneity. In R. Hughes (Ed.), *Issues in teaching, learning and testing speaking in a second language* (pp. 3–18). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-38339-7_1

Wu, X. (2023). A longitudinal study of EFL teacher agency and sustainable identity development: A positioning theory perspective. *Sustainability, 15*(1), 48. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010048

Xi, J., & Lantolf, J. P. (2021). Scaffolding and the zone of proximal development: A problematic relationship. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 51*(1), 25–48. https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12260

Xuan Mai, L., Ngoc, L. K., & Thao, L. T. (2024). Factors hindering student participation in English-speaking classes: Student and lecturer perceptions. *SAGE Open*, *14*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241266297

Yessenbekova, K. (2024). Understanding the dynamics of English-speaking challenges for students in Kazakhstan. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, *13*(4), 373–385. https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-04-2024-0083

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Zhu, Q., & Carless, D. (2018). Dialogue within peer feedback processes: Clarification and negotiation of meaning. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(4), 883–897. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1446417

Corresponding author: Askat Tleuov
Email: A.Tleuov@kimep.kz

Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading: Insights from EFL Learners at a Science University

Akihiro Saito
Tokyo University of Science, Japan

Abstract

Extensive Reading (ER) is widely recognized as an effective method for improving language proficiency and fostering reading motivation in English as a foreign language contexts. However, the success of ER programs depends on several factors, including student motivation, engagement, and preferences for book selection. This study examines the characteristics of motivation and engagement in an ER program implemented at a science university. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes quantitative data from the MReader platform, such as total words read, quiz performance, and engagement levels. Further, it draws on a qualitative survey on students' preferences for books and their motivations for reading. Group comparisons based on a 100,000-word reading threshold suggest that higher engagement correlates with greater gains in proficiency. A stepwise regression analysis identifies key predictors for improvement in reading proficiency. Content analysis reveals that personal interest, familiarity with the material, and perceived learning value significantly influence book selection. Furthermore, motivations for continuing to read are driven by intrinsic enjoyment, the desire for knowledge acquisition, and the academic benefits associated with reading. Meanwhile, obstacles such as reading fatigue, difficulty of the material, and lack of interest can hinder engagement. The study highlights the importance of providing diverse and engaging reading materials, as well as structured goal-setting strategies, to enhance participation in ER programs. These insights contribute to the optimization of ER initiatives, particularly in science-focused settings.

Keywords: Extensive Reading, motivation, engagement, MReader, genre preferences, EFL

Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading: Insights from STEM Learners

Extensive Reading (ER), also known in modified formats as broad reading, expansive reading, free voluntary reading and sustained silent reading (SSR), has been widely recognized as an effective approach to enhancing reading proficiency and language acquisition in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. By promoting exposure to large volumes of comprehensible and self-selected material, ER fosters motivation and engagement while supporting vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and comprehension development (Nation & Waring, 2019; Zhou, 2024). The idea behind extensive reading is that learners improve their linguistic proficiency by encountering much reading that is easy to understand and interesting. Over time, this recurrent exposure to understandable text helps improve reading rate, increases reading comprehension, and helps with acquisition of vocabulary (Suk, 2017). In this way, reading replaces ample analytic work with meaningful input, which helps meet L2 learning goals.

Despite the well-established benefits, the successful implementation of ER programs depends on multiple factors, including students' motivation, engagement levels, and reading preferences. In structured academic settings where students are assessed through performance-based metrics, understanding how these factors influence reading behavior is essential for optimizing ER instruction.

While previous studies have explored the cognitive and motivational benefits of ER, few have EFL students engaged in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs (Hagley, 2017) or examined how their reading habits are shaped by platform-based metrics alongside brief self-reported reflections. Although teacher guides exist on selecting ER materials (Jacobs, 2014), little attention has been given to how genre and book choices influence sustained engagement, especially among students with limited prior exposure to ER in a second language. This study addressed these gaps by investigating how students studying in STEM majors at a Japanese university engage with ER through both behavioral and reflective data.

The characteristics of motivation and engagement in an ER program at a Japanese science university were the focus of the study under consideration. It examined how first-year undergraduate engineering students engaged with ER and how individual differences, instructional configurations, and reading preferences shaped their reading behaviors. Engineering students in Japan often lack opportunities for language learning beyond test-focused instruction at secondary school, which emphasizes isolated grammar and vocabulary. Their tertiary technical studies further reduce time and incentive for language development. Yet English proficiency is essential in STEM for accessing global research and discourse. Exploring how ER supports this group offers insights for more inclusive instruction in science-focused contexts. Language skills can be enhanced by ER not only by building vocabulary but also by exposing learners to lexical patterns and discourse structures and strengthening core receptive skills for reading and listening. Given that most participants had limited prior experience with ER, the study explored the factors influencing their motivation, reading habits, and genre preferences.

This investigation analyzed students' engagement and reading development by combining reading progress data from MReader (Robb & Waring, 2012) with qualitative responses on book selection criteria, motivations, and demotivators. The book selections in the study referred to English graded readers from a variety of genres, including fiction, nonfiction, and some science-themed topics. These were chosen to match students' English proficiency levels and general EFL learning goals, not specifically technical STEM materials. A stepwise regression analysis further identified key predictors of reading proficiency improvement. By drawing on behavioral metrics and student perceptions, the inquiry offered a nuanced perspective on how motivation and engagement interact in an ER program for STEM EFL students.

Literature Review

Extensive Reading

Widely recognized as an effective approach to second language (L2) acquisition, ER is particularly useful in EFL contexts (Beglar et al., 2012; Nakanishi, 2015; Zhou, 2024). It involves reading large quantities of comprehensible, level-appropriate material for general understanding rather than linguistic analysis (Carrell & Carson, 1997, as cited in Renandya, 2007; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Prior literature has consistently documented ER's benefits in vocabulary development (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Nation & Waring, 2019; Webb & Chang, 2015), grammar acquisition (Ro & Kim, 2022; Song & Sardegna, 2014), reading comprehension and fluency (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Chang, 2010), and learner motivation (Leather & Uden, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2019; Tanaka, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). These findings have positioned broad reading as a highly successful language learning approach.

Despite its benefits, effectual implementation of ER in educational settings remains a challenge. Goal-setting has emerged as a promising means to support engagement (McLean & Poulshock, 2018; Mikami, 2017, 2020), consistent with theories that emphasize the role of clear objectives (Locke & Latham, 2002). Mikami (2020) found that aiming to attain a concrete goal motivates learners to read. However, the extent to which goal-setting translates into sustained commitment across diverse groups, including STEM learners, warrants further investigation.

Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading

Motivation plays a crucial role in the success of ER programs. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) emphasized that intrinsic motivation – reading for pleasure or personal interest – enhances engagement, leading to better comprehension and language development. Later research has similarly shown that intrinsic motivation is a stronger predictor of reading proficiency than extrinsic motivators such as grades, rewards, or institutional requirements (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Yang et al., 2021). While these findings are consistent across different contexts, few studies have examined how motivation manifests in STEM students, who often engage with English for academic or career purposes. The current study explores how intrinsic and extrinsic factors interplay in shaping the students' ER engagement.

Dedicated involvement in ER, which refers to active participation in reading activities, comprises behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). While behavioral measures such as amount of reading are more easily noticed and addressed than emotional or cognitive engagement, Klauda and Guthrie (2015) found that motivation strongly predicts both immediate engagement and its growth over time. However, their findings also indicate that cognitive challenges among struggling readers can weaken this relationship. This highlights the importance of scaffolding and differentiated support, especially in EFL contexts where reading in English can present significant challenges.

Instructional approaches significantly influence students' motivation and engagement. Ro (2016) demonstrated that variations in ER instruction impact students' motivation and reading volume, suggesting that instructional adaptability is key. Freiermuth and Ito (2022) extended this point by showing that indirect teacher interventions – rather than direct instruction – were more effective for motivating young EFL readers. In contrast, Koné (2023) emphasized the role of peer interaction, showing that reading circles foster involvement through group cohesion and shared enjoyment. Taken together, these studies indicate that promoting autonomy, offering structured but flexible guidance, and encouraging collaborative reflection can sustain ER participation. Yet, much of this research centers on general EFL populations, not STEM students who may face challenges that are simultaneously similar to those of other undergraduate EFL students and unique because their interests may lean towards the sciences.

Genre Preferences and Reading Strategies

Book preferences also play a key role in shaping motivation and engagement in ER programs. Research shows that genre selection affects reading behavior and learning outcomes. Bergman Deitcher et al. (2019) found that genre influences vocabulary acquisition in younger learners, though its impact on older students in academic settings remains underexplored. Similarly, Ives et al. (2020) demonstrated that different genres correlate with varying levels of reading motivation and frequency. Notably, biographies and memoirs foster higher autonomous motivation than folktales or myths among elementary students, raising the question of whether similar trends hold for university learners in different cultural contexts.

Studies also suggest that offering reading choices promotes active involvement. Haugsnes (2022) found that most Swedish students preferred self-selected reading. However, students favored texts matching their interests rather than valuing autonomy itself. These findings highlight the need for ER programs to offer a broad range of choices to cultivate and sustain students' motivation, as the continued reliance on extrinsic motivators, such as grades, poses challenges in fostering intrinsic engagement.

Beyond genre preferences, reading strategies are also known to contribute to ER success. Guthrie et al. (2004) introduced the Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) framework, which integrates strategy instruction with content goals. While CORI supports engagement and comprehension, it has been studied primarily in first-language contexts, leaving a gap regarding its applicability in ER programs in tertiary-level EFL settings. In sum, although past research

confirms the importance of genre choice and strategy use, little is known about how these factors operate among EFL learners with even less being identified as critical for EFL learners in STEM fields.

Extensive Reading in Japanese Higher Education

While ER's cognitive and affective benefits are well established, its implementation in Japanese higher education varies due to curriculum constraints, limited instructional time, and resource availability. Studies highlight improvements in reading attitudes, reduced anxiety, fluency, and grammatical accuracy (Nakamura, 2018; Shimono, 2023; Yamashita, 2013) and most focus on general EFL learners rather than EFL learners in STEM programs. Meanwhile, practical barriers remain. In many Japanese universities, English courses meet only once a week, leading to ER being assigned as self-study. Although Mikami (2020) showed that structured goal-setting enhances intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, the sustainability under limited classroom contact is unclear. Likewise, while intrinsic motivation predicts ER engagement (Takase, 2007), L1 reading habits do not necessarily transfer to L2 contexts, suggesting a need for targeted support. Although the availability of engaging and appropriately leveled reading materials is essential (Mikami, 2017), little is known regarding how STEM learners perceive suitable ER materials. Reading volume is another key factor. Studies recommend substantial text exposure, over 200,000 words annually (Beglar et al., 2012), for meaningful fluency and vocabulary gains (Shimono, 2023; McLean & Rouault, 2017). In the current study, a 100,000-word target was set to fit the semester-long, 15-week course in a STEM setting. Addressing these issues, the study examined how STEM students engage with ER in a structured yet self-directed program, aiming to inform effective practices for similar educational contexts.

Research Questions

While ER has been shown to enhance reading fluency, comprehension, and language acquisition, individual differences in reading behavior and external constraints such as course structure and institutional policies can influence students' sustained participation. Given the growing emphasis on fostering independent reading habits in university settings, it is essential to examine how ER can be tailored to better support student engagement and long-term reading development.

Adopting a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2017), this study investigated students' engagement in ER, the motivational factors influencing their participation, and how these aspects related to reading development. By integrating quantitative reading performance data with qualitative reflections, the study aimed to identify key factors that contributed to reading persistence, engagement, and motivation. Moreover, the study explored the role of reading preferences, including genre selection, in shaping STEM students' reading experiences. To achieve these objectives, the study posited the following research questions:

1. Which engagement metrics such as total words read, quizzes taken, and pass rate best predict reading proficiency improvement, and how do these metrics reflect students' motivation?
2. How do students' reading behaviors, as measured by MReader metrics, differ between higher- and lower-engagement groups based on the 100,000-word threshold?
3. What factors influence students' genre and book preferences in ER?
4. What criteria do students use when selecting ER materials?
5. What explicit motivations and barriers do students report for engaging in ER?

Research questions 1 and 2 were advanced on the basis of two tentative hypotheses based on previous ER research (Beglar et al., 2012). The first hypothesis was that higher levels of engagement – using total words read, quizzes passed, and pass rates as a proxy – would be associated with greater gains in reading proficiency; and the second hypothesis suggested that students who read more than 100,000 words would show significantly higher gains than those who read less. These hypotheses provided the basis for using Mann-Whitney U tests and stepwise regression analysis to examine the impact of engagement and motivation on achievement.

By addressing these questions, this study aimed to contribute to the ongoing discussion about ER pedagogy by offering insights into how ER can be effectively integrated into university curricula to foster motivation and engagement among science and engineering students. The findings informed strategies for optimizing ER implementation, ensuring that students could derive meaningful linguistic and cognitive benefits from sustained reading practice.

Method

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data to examine students' engagement, motivation, and reading behaviors within an ER program. This approach was chosen to capture both measurable patterns of engagement and the nuanced experiences that underlie those patterns. Quantitative data from MReader provided objective indicators of students' reading behaviors, while qualitative responses offered insights into their motivations, preferences, and perceived barriers.

Participants

This study was conducted with 34 first-year undergraduate students majoring in electronic and electrical engineering at a science university located on the outskirts of a greater metropolitan area in Japan. The participants were enrolled in the author's 15-week reading and writing course as part of the university's EFL curriculum, which served as the setting for this investigation. Most of the participants had no prior ER experience, as their earlier education had focused primarily on intensive reading practices that emphasized grammar translation and reading comprehension exercises. This lack of prior exposure positioned the study as an

opportunity to examine how students respond to ER practices within a structured university course.

Significantly, the study participants were STEM students, but there was no direct, statistically established connection between their major and the book selection, reading preferences, or the structure of the reading component. The graded books used in the program were not always STEM-related, except where the students happened to choose such titles, and the study did not seek to correlate results to academic major or establish any causative linkage. The mention of STEM learners was based on the student population at the university, not a focus of the research design itself.

Before participating in the study, students received both verbal and written information regarding the synopsis of the research. They were assured that participation was voluntary and that their decision would not impact their course standing. By completing the end-of-term survey, participants provided their informed consent as well as their written responses to survey questions. The survey did not collect any identifying information, and all responses were kept anonymous. The MReader data used for analysis were limited to course-related performance metrics, such as word count and quiz results, which were anonymized prior to analysis. The study posed minimal risk and adhered to ethical guidelines for low-risk educational research, following APA standards (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Course Implementation

At the beginning of the course, students were introduced to the concept of ER and provided with guidelines for book selection, including choosing books that aligned with their proficiency level and personal interests. They were also encouraged to switch books if they found their initial selection unengaging to sustain motivation and enjoyment. The course spanned 15 weeks, during which students engaged in regular reading practice, writing tasks, as well as peer review activities designed to complement their ER goals. The MReader platform (Robb & Waring, 2012) was used continuously throughout the program to track reading progress and assess comprehension via quizzes.

Course Materials

The ER program introduced students to graded readers, selected based on the principle that each page should contain no more than one or two unfamiliar words. All reading materials were physical books available from the university library, ensuring equal access and minimizing distractions. Electronic books were not permitted to promote consistent reading habits. To support progress tracking and comprehension assessment, the program utilized the MReader platform, an online tool that required students to complete 10-item quizzes within five minutes to verify their completion of selected books. Cumulative word counts were automatically tracked within the system, ensuring accountability while allowing flexibility in book selection. These metrics were accessible to students, enabling them to monitor their progress and reflect on their reading achievements.

Course Assessment Framework

Students' performance in the ER component contributed to their overall course assessment, accounting for 40% of the total grade. The remaining 60% was allocated as follows:

- Class contributions and participation: 10%
- Peer review activities: 10%
- Writing assignments and tasks: 40%

This grading distribution reflects the comprehensive evaluation of students' participation, collaboration, and written output, ensuring a balanced assessment of their skills and efforts. The reading score was determined based on the total number of words read. Table 1 illustrates the scoring criteria.

Table 1
Scoring Scale Based on Words Read

Words Read (k)	Points
135–150	90–100 points
105–134.9	80–89 points
75–104.9	70–79 points
50–74.9	60–69 points
Below 50	1–59 points

The score achieved based on word count was divided by 100 and multiplied by 40, contributing a maximum of 40% toward the final grade. By combining flexible book selection with quantifiable performance measures, the assessment framework balanced student autonomy with structured accountability, enabling an evaluation of engagement and comprehension through both quantitative and qualitative data sources.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data

Students' active involvement and performance in ER were automatically recorded through the MReader platform, which tracked cumulative word counts, quizzes taken, quizzes passed, and quizzes failed. These metrics were continuously monitored throughout the course and served as indicators of reading engagement and comprehension.

Qualitative Data

Student reflections on their ER experiences were collected through a Google Form survey at the end of the course. The survey, administered in Japanese and later translated into English

for analysis, included four open-ended items designed to explore students' motivations, preferences, and decision-making in book choice. The translated survey items were as follows:

1. What genres of books did you often choose, and why?
   Fiction, biography, detective stories, science fiction, and other book types are examples. If you don't know the genre name, you can describe it. If you don't have a particular reason, you can say something like "I found myself choosing these kinds of books a lot".
2. Which books did you find interesting, and why? Multiple answers are possible.
3. What criteria did you use when selecting your extensive reading materials? Multiple answers are allowed, aside from the "one or two unfamiliar words per page" rule?
4. What motivated you to read more? Alternatively, what prevented you from reading more?

These open-ended responses provided contextual insights into students' reading behaviors and decision-making processes.

Data Analysis

Following the convergent parallel mixed-methods design described earlier, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately. The quantitative data, collected through the MReader platform, were analyzed using descriptive statistics, regression modeling, and group comparisons to assess engagement levels, reading progress, and overall performance. The qualitative data, obtained from structured survey responses, were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) to explore students' perceptions of ER, reading selection strategies, and underlying motivational factors.

Quantitative Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS Version 29 (IBM Corp. 2022), with the significance level set at $p < .05$ for all statistical tests. The quantitative data collected through the MReader platform included total words read, quizzes taken, quizzes passed, quizzes failed, quiz success rates, and level improvements. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and ranges, were calculated to summarize reading behaviors and performance patterns. Group comparisons were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test (Corder & Foreman, 2014) to examine differences in motivation and engagement variables, with total word count serving as a measure of semester-long effort. In addition, stepwise regression analysis (Field, 2018) was performed to explore potential relationships between reading engagement metrics, including word count, quizzes taken, and pass rate and reading proficiency improvement.

Motivation and active participation were operationalized using key variables obtained from the MReader dataset, which tracked participants' quiz performance and reading activity throughout the study (Table 2). These indicators were interpreted in line with established definitions of motivation as goal-oriented effort and commitment to active participation and

persistence in learning tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004). Motivation was assessed using indicators reflecting participants' goal-setting behaviors and sustained effort. The difference between participants' starting level and current level was calculated, where a positive change indicated progress and suggested sustained motivation to improve English proficiency. The total number of words read during the term served as a proxy for effort invested in reading, with higher word counts reflecting greater dedication, indicative of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Engagement was evaluated based on participants' active participation and persistence in completing quizzes. The number of quizzes taken indicated students' willingness to engage with reading materials, while the number of successfully passed quizzes reflected task-focused effort and comprehension. Patterns of failed quizzes and subsequent successful attempts were analyzed to assess resilience and commitment. Engagement quality was further interpreted using pass rate, where higher rates suggested consistent and focused involvement, while lower rates implied difficulties in maintaining engagement. These variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize reading engagement and performance trends. Group comparisons, based on the 100,000-word threshold, were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test to examine differences in current reading levels, level improvement, and quiz metrics such as quizzes taken, passed, failed, and pass rate. Furthermore, stepwise regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between reading motivation, metrics, and improvements in reading proficiency.

Table 2

Indicators of Motivation and Engagement in Extensive Reading

Variable	Category	Interpretation
Current level – Starting level	Motivation	Measures progress toward proficiency improvement through goal-setting behaviors
Total words read	Motivation	Represents sustained effort and reading investment, reflecting intrinsic or extrinsic motivation
Quizzes taken	Engagement	Indicates active participation and willingness to engage with reading materials
Quizzes passed	Engagement	Measures comprehension and task-focused effort
Quizzes failed	Engagement	Reflects perseverance and resilience in overcoming challenges
Pass rate	Engagement	Assesses consistency and quality of engagement in ER activities

The 100,000-word threshold served as a key criterion for analyzing students' reading engagement and performance. It was used to differentiate higher- and lower-engagement groups, allowing for comparisons of reading outcomes, including proficiency development and quiz performance. This baseline provided a structured measure of reading effort, aligning with the study's focus on examining the relationship between word exposure, motivation, and learning gains.

Since total words read served as the basis for dividing students into two groups (below 100,000 words and 100,000 words or more), the inclusion of total words read in the Mann-Whitney U test was unnecessary. Testing this variable would merely confirm the predefined grouping criterion without providing additional insights. Instead, the analysis focused on other dependent variables, such as current reading levels, level improvement, and quiz metrics, to identify meaningful differences in student performance. Both current reading levels and level improvement were included in the analysis to evaluate differences between groups. Although these variables are closely related, level improvement directly contributes to current reading levels, and their inclusion ensures a comprehensive assessment of the impact of extensive reading volume on proficiency.

A stepwise regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictors of reading proficiency level improvement among participants in the ER program. Candidate predictors were selected based on their conceptual relevance as indicators of motivation and engagement, as presented above. The analysis used level improvement as the dependent variable and included total words read, pass rate, quizzes taken, and quizzes passed as independent variables. In this study, the independent variables used to examine engagement in ER included the following:

- Total words read: the cumulative number of words read by each student, tracked via the MReader platform. This served as a proxy for sustained effort and reading volume.
- Quizzes taken: the total number of MReader quizzes attempted by each student, indicating active engagement with the reading materials.
- Quizzes passed: the number of quizzes successfully passed (score ≥ 60%), used as an indicator of comprehension and task-focused effort.
- Pass rate: the ratio of quizzes passed to quizzes taken, representing the consistency and quality of active involvement over the term.

The dependent variable was reading proficiency improvement, functionalized as the difference between each student's initial and final MReader reading levels over the 15-week course.

The stepwise method identified the strongest predictors by sequentially adding or removing variables based on statistical contribution, with inclusion ($p < .05$) and exclusion ($p > .10$) criteria. Multicollinearity diagnostics, including Variance Inflation Factor, were reviewed, and residual plots were examined to verify assumptions of linearity and independence of errors, ensuring the robustness of the analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

Participants' responses to the survey questions were analyzed using QCA, following the approach outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Each survey item was analyzed individually to maintain clear alignment with the research questions. The survey included four items: (1) reasons for preferred genres, (2) reasons for books found interesting or enjoyable, (3) criteria for selecting ER materials, and (4) motivations or barriers for continuing extensive reading.

Given the small dataset, manual coding was conducted in Excel spreadsheets to identify recurring patterns and themes systematically.

A coding framework was developed using both inductive and deductive approaches. Predefined categories, such as "fiction," "non-fiction," and "biography," were applied where explicitly mentioned by respondents, while emergent themes like "ease of understanding" and "relatability" were identified through an initial review of responses. This dual approach ensured responsiveness to participant input while maintaining consistency with established genre classifications. Responses were coded based on key themes, with descriptive codes assigned to capture essential aspects such as "familiarity," "enjoyment," or "ease of understanding." For instance, a response like "I chose biographies because they were easy to understand" was coded under both "biography" (genre) and "ease of understanding" (reason). To enhance credibility and reliability, responses were coded twice by the author with a one-week interval between coding sessions. This iterative coding process helped resolve discrepancies and refine the framework, ensuring a consistent and transparent analysis.

Following the finalization of the coding process, frequency counts were calculated for each genre, reason, and theme to identify prevalent trends. Genres and subgenres were tallied, and common reasons such as "personal enjoyment" or "knowledge acquisition" were analyzed. Key findings included popular genres and selection reasons, book characteristics participants found engaging, criteria influencing book choices, and motivational factors affecting ER participation.

Results

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Statistics

Key statistics obtained from the MReader website summarized essential metrics such as total words read, quiz performance, and level progression as presented in Table 3. The 34 participants attempted an average of 26.0 quizzes (*SD* = 9.89, range = 3–48) and successfully passed 22.0 quizzes (*SD* = 9.10, range = 2–45), with a mean pass rate of 83.9% (*SD* = 9.64%, range = 63.6%–100%). On average, students failed 4.03 quizzes (*SD* = 3.05, range = 0–14). All students began at Level 2 (*SD* = 0.0), with an average current level of 3.26 (*SD* = 1.08, range = 2–6). Students improved by an average of 1.26 levels (*SD* = 1.08, range = 0–4). The mean number of words read during the term was 138,820 (*SD* = 39,336, range = 5,690–189,280), with the total number of words read across all participants exceeding 4.7 million.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 34)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	*SD*
Start level	2	2	2.00	.000
Current level	2	6	3.26	1.082
Taken quizzes	3	48	26.03	9.889
Passed quizzes	2	45	22.00	9.102
Failed quizzes	0	14	4.03	3.050
Total words this term	5690	189280	138820.35	39336.269

Group Comparisons

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare the performance of students who read fewer than 100,000 words and those who read 100,000 words or more during the ER program. Significant differences were observed in current reading levels and the associated level improvement (U = 19.50, z = −2.29, p = .026, r = .393), both of which demonstrated medium effect sizes. These results indicate that students in the higher-word-count group achieved greater gains in proficiency. The effect size (r = .393) suggests that this difference is not only statistically significant but also meaningful in practical terms, implying that reading volume plays an important role in developing reading proficiency.

No significant differences were found in the number of quizzes taken (U = 36.00, z = −1.287, p = .218, r = .221), quizzes passed (U = 31.50, z = −1.527, p = .131, r = .262), or quizzes failed (U = 57.00, z = −0.163, p = .897, r = .028). These small to negligible effect sizes suggest that quiz engagement metrics were comparable across groups. Similarly, pass rates did not differ significantly between the groups (U = 34.50, z = −1.364, p = .180, r = .234), reflecting a small effect size. These findings highlight that it was the overall volume of reading, rather than isolated quiz metrics, that contributed most meaningfully to students' reading gains.

Regression Analysis

A stepwise regression analysis identified the number of quizzes passed as a significant predictor of students' improvement in reading level (B = 0.079, β = .665, p <.001). This means that for each additional quiz a student passed, their reading level increased by approximately 0.08 points on average. The strength of this relationship was strong, and the model accounted for 44.2% of the variation in level improvement across students (R^2 = .442, F (1,32) = 25.337, p <.001). Other factors such as the total number of words read, pass rate, or number of quizzes taken did not significantly improve the model once quizzes passed was included, suggesting that quiz success is the most direct indicator of reading progress. These results highlight the value of consistent reading and comprehension, as reflected in students' quiz performance, in contributing to measurable gains in proficiency.

While the stepwise regression model explained 44.2% of the variance in level improvement (R^2 = .442), this also indicates that over half of the variance remains unexplained. This suggests

that other unmeasured factors such as reading habits outside of class, prior exposure to English, or individual learner differences may also play a significant role in reading proficiency gains.

Qualitative Results

Reasons for Genre Preferences

The analysis identified three key factors influencing students' genre preferences. The features that were identified more strongly were familiarity and accessibility (n = 10), engagement and enjoyment (n = 4), and educational and informational value (n = 2). While all students indicated their preferred genres, not all provided reasons for their choices. These themes illustrate the cognitive and affective considerations shaping their selection process (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Thematic Map of Students' Genre Preferences and Underlying Reasons

Familiarity and accessibility played a central role, as students favored books that aligned with their prior knowledge or linguistic comfort. Biographies were particularly popular among those acquainted with the subject, making it easier to follow the narrative. One student explained, "I found biographies easier to read when I already knew about the person." Similarly, fiction was chosen for its straightforward language and structure, with one participant noting, "I chose fiction because it had simple English and fewer words." These responses suggest that prior knowledge and ease of comprehension facilitated commitment to participate as directed and reduced cognitive load.

Engagement and enjoyment were also key motivators, particularly for fiction and fantasy. Many students selected books they found immersive and entertaining, with one stating, "I often chose fiction because reading it was fun." Another expressed a long-standing preference for fantasy, sharing, "I have always liked reading fantasy books." These responses indicate that intrinsic enjoyment contributed to sustained involvement.

For some, educational and informational value guided their choices. Non-fiction and biographies were selected for their perceived benefits in expanding knowledge and providing real-world insights. One student remarked, "I read more books about world cities and historical figures because I thought they would be useful in the future." Others viewed history and

geography books as opportunities for intellectual enrichment. These findings suggest that some students approached extensive reading as both a linguistic and educational tool.

Overall, familiarity and accessibility were the most influential factors in students' genre choices, followed by engagement and educational value. While fiction was favored for its entertainment appeal, biographies and non-fiction attracted students seeking intellectual enrichment. Offering a balance of familiar, engaging, and knowledge-enriching materials may enhance motivation and support long-term reading engagement.

Reasons for Book Preferences

The analysis identified four key themes shaping students' book preferences in the extensive reading (ER) program: emotional connection (n = 10), intellectual engagement (n = 12), familiarity and relatability (n = 6), and curiosity and interest (n = 4). Some students cited multiple reasons, while others did not specify their rationale. These themes illustrate the diverse motivations influencing book selection (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Thematic Map of Students' Book Preferences and Underlying Reasons

Emotional connection played a significant role, with students gravitating toward books that evoked strong emotions or personal resonance. Some noted that certain narratives left a lasting impression, such as one student who reflected, "I thought that Sherlock Holmes would solve any case, but there was a story where a woman was better at it, and it left a strong impression on me." Others selected books for their humor or nostalgia, with one student remarking, "Mr. Bean – There were so many jokes that I laughed many times." Sentimental value and aesthetic appeal also influenced choices, as seen in comments like "Peter Pan – Because it reminded me of the heart of a boy and gave me courage." and "The Magic Tree House series – The idea of entering a world of books, a world view in tune with the times and things, stimulated my sensibilities."

Intellectual engagement was another major factor, with many students selecting books to gain knowledge or new insights. Some sought historical awareness, such as one who explained, "John Lennon, I knew his name, but I didn't know what he did, so I gained new knowledge." Others were drawn to books about the natural world, like "I liked all the books about animals.

It was good to learn about the habits of animals I didn't know." Some students selected books that introduced them to cultural or historical phenomena, while fantasy novels attracted those intrigued by alternative world-building, as one participant stated, "The Wizard of Oz – I like fantasy worlds with a medieval, European-like view of the world."

Familiarity and relatability also shaped students' selections. Some preferred books they had previously encountered in other media or had prior knowledge of, such as one who chose "Steve Jobs' biography: I knew quite a lot about him." Another selected a book tied to their movie-watching habits, stating, "The Avengers is one of my favorite films, so it was easy to read." Familiarity reduced the cognitive demands of processing new content, making reading more accessible. Curiosity and interest further motivated book choices, with students selecting titles that explored intriguing topics. One student expressed fascination with scientific discovery, noting, "I thought the biology of the giant squid was interesting." Others gravitated toward books aligned with personal hobbies or interests, such as one who stated, "I've always been interested in myths, so I did some research and found Theseus and the Minotaur quite interesting."

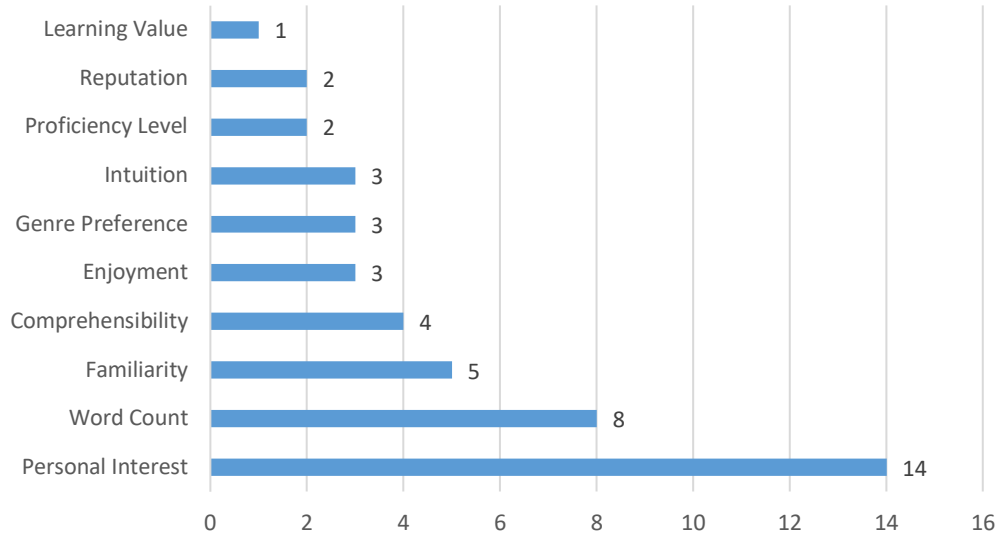
These findings highlight that students' book preferences were shaped by a combination of emotional engagement, intellectual curiosity, familiarity, and personal interests. While some selected books for enjoyment, others prioritized learning, relatability, or curiosity-driven exploration. Providing a broad selection of reading materials that align with these varied motivations may enhance engagement and sustain participation in a broad vocabulary enriching reading program.

Criteria for Selecting ER Materials

The analysis identified ten key factors influencing students' book selection, reflecting a mix of cognitive, affective, and practical considerations (Table 4). Some responses spanned multiple categories, illustrating the complexity of decision-making in extensive reading. The most frequently cited factor was personal interest (n = 14), with students selecting books aligned with their hobbies or curiosity. One student noted, "I chose books that seemed interesting or matched my level," while another explained, "I selected books with topics I was interested in to stay engaged." Some also emphasized the importance of visualizing content, as one shared, "I chose books where I could imagine the story in my head." Word count (n = 8) also played a role, with students balancing readability and reading goals. Some opted for manageable lengths, stating, "I picked books where the total word count was just right," while others preferred longer books to sustain engagement, explaining, "Since I could borrow books for two weeks, I chose longer ones so I wouldn't get bored."

Table 4

Factors Influencing Students' Book Selection



Comprehensibility (n = 4) influenced choices, as some students sought books that were easy to understand, particularly in terms of sentence structure and vocabulary. One participant noted, "I picked books that seemed easy to understand at a glance," while others chose books that, despite challenging expressions, remained largely comprehensible. Familiarity (n = 5) was another key factor, with students gravitating toward books they had previously encountered. One student stated, "I selected books I had read before in Japanese and already knew the content of." Another explained, "I chose biographies of historical figures I was familiar with." This suggests that prior knowledge made reading more accessible and appealing. Enjoyment (n = 3) also guided selections, particularly for narrative-driven books. One student highlighted, "I based my choices on whether the stories were fun and engaging," while another noted, "I picked books I could enjoy without feeling forced to finish them."

Some students considered proficiency level (n = 2) when selecting books, aiming to balance linguistic challenge and readability. One participant shared, "I picked books based on both my level and interest," while another gradually increased difficulty over time. Genre preference (n = 3) also played a role, with students favoring specific genres such as fiction, biographies, or fantasy. A small number of students selected books for learning value (n = 1), seeing ER as an opportunity for knowledge expansion, as one explained, "Books based on historical facts helped me complete my coursework while also increasing my knowledge." Others relied on intuition (n = 3), selecting books based on titles, covers, or first impressions, while some considered reputation (n = 2), opting for widely known or highly regarded books.

All in all, students' book selection was driven by intrinsic motivation, linguistic accessibility, and practical considerations. While personal interest was the most dominant factor, word count, familiarity, and learning value also played significant roles. These findings suggest that

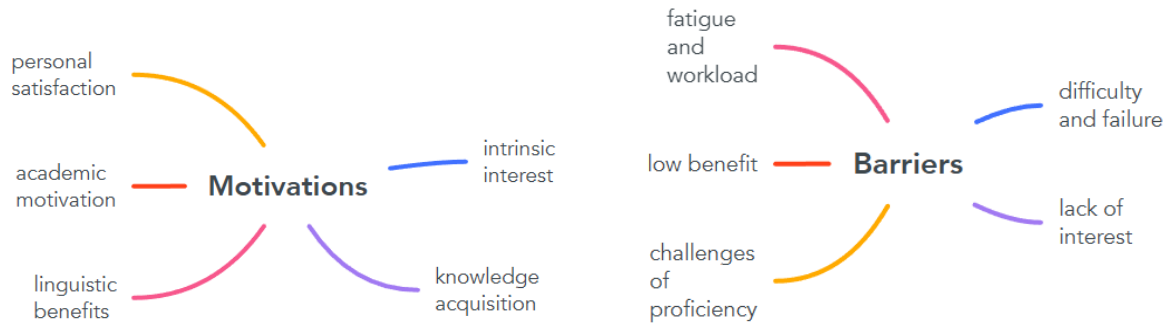
offering diverse, engaging materials while allowing student autonomy can enhance ER motivation and effectiveness.

Motivations or Barriers for Continuing Extensive Reading

Some of students noted the factors that motivated them to remain committed to ER while others mentioned the barriers that hindered their participation. Instances of both positive (n = 24) and negative (n = 12) responses were collected. The analysis identifies key themes across both categories, offering insights into how reading materials and instructional approaches can be optimized to enhance engagement while mitigating obstacles (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Thematic Map of Motivations and Barriers in Extensive Reading



Intrinsic interest in content (n = 5) was a strong motivator, with some students engaging in ER because they found their books genuinely enjoyable. One student expressed, "I wanted to read more when the book was interesting." Others discovered their preferences through the reading process. One participant reflected, "I read several biographies, but I realized that while I admire Newton's theories, I am not very interested in his life." Knowledge acquisition (n = 8) motivated students who saw ER as an opportunity to expand their knowledge beyond the classroom. One student explained, "I wanted to read more to learn new perspectives." Another added, "Biographies were interesting because they provided knowledge about things I didn't know before."

Linguistic benefits (n = 4) also played a role, as some students viewed the expansive reading program as a way to improve their English proficiency, particularly in vocabulary acquisition. One student remarked, "By reading English books, I was able to learn new expressions, idioms, and slang at different difficulty levels, so I want to keep reading regularly." Another student found motivation in comparing English and Japanese versions of stories, stating, "Reading stories I already knew in Japanese in English was fun, so I wanted to read more books." Academic motivation (n = 3) was another factor, particularly for students focused on standardized test preparation. One participant shared, "Since speed reading is also necessary for [Test of English for International Communication] TOEIC, I wanted to keep reading." Another student emphasized grades as an external motivator, stating, "I was able to stay

motivated because I knew it would contribute to my grades." For some, personal satisfaction and accomplishment (n = 4) encouraged continued engagement with ER. One student shared, "I realized I had read quite a lot, and it gave me a sense of satisfaction." Another explained, "I love reading in general, but I usually read contemporary Japanese novels. This was a great opportunity to read foreign classics, and I want to continue."

On the other hand, several barriers were identified. Perceived difficulty and failure (n = 3) discouraged some students from continuing ER. One participant admitted, "I didn't want to read when the difficulty was clearly too high, and I failed." Another expressed frustration, stating, "When I read long texts and then failed the test, the shock was too big, so I didn't want to read long texts anymore." Lack of interest in reading material (n = 3) was another obstacle, with one student stating, "If I don't find the content interesting, I start feeling tired from looking at it for too long, and I don't want to read any further." Another participant criticized graded readers, explaining, "Fiction books designed for English learners are often too simple, so they are not interesting. To enjoy stories in English, I would need to improve my proficiency further."

Reading fatigue and workload perception (n = 2) also played a role, as some students felt overwhelmed by the reading requirements. One participant noted, "I didn't have the habit of reading in English, so while it was fun, I felt the reading quota was too high, and I no longer wanted to read." Low perceived benefit of reading (n = 2) and challenges with English proficiency (n = 2) further demotivated some students. One student explained, "Even if I didn't understand the expressions, I could still follow the story, so I didn't feel like my English was improving." Another shared, "Since I can't read smoothly in English, I sometimes got bored and found it difficult to stay motivated."

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insights into the factors influencing students' motivation, engagement, and reading preferences in an ER program for EFL learners who were enrolled in STEM majors. The analysis highlights how reading behaviors vary based on engagement levels, the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the significance of genre and book selection criteria. These results contribute to the broader discussion on optimizing ER for university students not necessarily in science-focused educational settings.

Participation Metrics and Reading Proficiency Improvement

While total words read and other engagement metrics such as quizzes taken and pass rate did not significantly predict proficiency gains, passing quizzes was associated with greater reading level advancement. These findings confirm earlier research results that point to emphasizing comprehension-focused engagement over sheer reading volume (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; McLean & Rouault, 2017). The results suggest that while setting high reading targets can encourage sustained engagement, comprehension-based success may be a more reliable indicator of proficiency development. Furthermore, the comparison between high- and low-

engagement groups, based on the 100,000-word threshold, also showed that students who read more achieved greater reading level improvements, supporting the recommendation that ER requires substantial text exposure for meaningful development (Beglar et al., 2012; Nation & Waring, 2019). However, the absence of significant differences in quiz-taking behavior between groups suggests that reading volume, rather than quiz frequency, served as the key differentiator of proficiency gains. These findings also indicate that integrating scaffolding strategies, such as structured reading discussions and incremental goal-setting interventions, may help maintain engagement among lower-word-count students (Mikami, 2020; Takase, 2007), particularly in broad reading programs in science-oriented university settings.

Motivations and Barriers in Extensive Reading

The qualitative data identified a range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that influenced students' participation in ER. Intrinsic factors emerged as key motivators. Students who found books personally interesting or informative were more likely to engage with ER over time, supporting the notion that intrinsic motivation is central to reading persistence (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Yang et al., 2021). However, extrinsic motivators such as academic credit and test preparation also played a role. Some students explicitly linked their reading to TOEIC preparation, while others remained engaged because ER contributed to their course grade. Such findings suggest that while intrinsic motivation is critical, external incentives can provide initial reinforcement, particularly for students unfamiliar with ER (Day & Bamford, 1998; Ro, 2016). Programs aiming to promote long-term reading habits may benefit from blending extrinsic motivators with strategies that foster intrinsic incentives.

Barriers to active involvement in the reading program included reading fatigue, difficulty in comprehension, and lack of interest in available materials. Some students expressed frustration when encountering texts that were too challenging or when failing MReader quizzes, leading to disengagement. These responses highlight the importance of providing appropriately leveled texts and structured support mechanisms. Studies have shown that when students struggle with text difficulty, they are more likely to disengage unless scaffolded with strategies such as peer discussion, guided reading, or teacher recommendations (Freiermuth & Ito, 2022; Koné, 2023). Ensuring that students have access to a variety of texts that match their proficiency while allowing for gradual difficulty increases may mitigate these barriers.

Genre and Book Preferences in ER

The analysis of students' reading preferences underscores the role of familiarity, engagement, and educational value in shaping book selection. This finding aligns with research suggesting that familiarity facilitates comprehension and increases reading confidence, making it a crucial factor in sustaining engagement (Ives et al., 2020; Yamashita, 2013). Enjoyment and engagement were also central to book selection, particularly among students who preferred fiction and fantasy genres. Those who found reading pleasurable were more likely to continue, reinforcing the role of intrinsic motivation in ER (Tanaka, 2017). In the meantime, some students prioritized educational and informational value, selecting non-fiction texts to expand

their knowledge. This variation in motivation suggests that offering a diverse selection of reading materials tailored to different interests and goals can enhance ER participation.

Criteria for Selecting ER Materials

Students' book selection was driven by a combination of intrinsic motivation, linguistic accessibility, and practical considerations. Personal interest was the most frequently cited factor, followed by word count, familiarity, and ease of comprehension. These findings support previous studies indicating that self-selection and personal relevance are key drivers of reading engagement (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2019; Haugsnes, 2022). Notably, some students selected books strategically based on perceived difficulty, adjusting their choices as their reading proficiency improved. Others relied on intuitive selection methods, such as picking books based on titles or covers. These behaviors suggest that students employ varied strategies to navigate ER, reinforcing the importance of flexible book access and guidance in material selection.

Recommendations for ER Program Design

The study's findings offer several implications for optimizing ER programs. First, integrating comprehension-based assessments, such as quizzes, can be effective as a reliable measure of proficiency gains and promote sustained engagement. Second, offering a diverse selection of reading materials that balance familiarity, enjoyment, and educational value can accommodate varying student preferences and motivations. Third, implementing targeted interventions, such as goal-setting frameworks and peer-based engagement activities, may enhance motivation among students with lower intrinsic interest in a broad reading program.

Moreover, ensuring access to appropriately leveled materials while encouraging gradual increases in text difficulty can sustain long-term engagement. As some students struggled with comprehension, incorporating guided reading strategies and scaffolding mechanisms may mitigate disengagement and support persistence. Future research could further examine how such strategies influence reading development over long periods in ER programs within science-focused educational settings.

It is significant to note that MReader is a free platform, but an ER program can still be implemented without it. Teachers can let students choose books, preferably graded readers, that they can understand and use reading logs or write short reflections on the books they have read to keep a record of progress. They can track the cumulative number of words read if they use graded readers as they include word counts. This alternative way supports the goal of extensive reading, which helps students read a great deal of easy material, without using MReader.

Curriculum designers are also encouraged to allocate dedicated time within language courses for structured ER activities, rather than relying solely on self-study models. Recognizing ER as a key component for fostering global communication skills would enable more meaningful

integration into STEM curricula. Finally, for students, fostering self-regulated learning strategies, such as goal setting, reflecting on reading choices, and monitoring progress, may empower them to take greater ownership of their language development beyond classroom requirements.

Study Limitations

This study focused on a small group of first-year engineering students at a single Japanese university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The 15-week timeframe also restricts insight into long-term engagement or proficiency gains. In addition, while MReader provided useful engagement metrics, it may not capture the full scope of reading behavior. Finally, the self-reported nature of qualitative data introduces potential response bias.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that quiz success, rather than reading volume or frequency alone, was the strongest predictor of proficiency improvement, underscoring the role of comprehension-focused engagement. Students who read over 100,000 words showed greater gains, reinforcing the importance of sustained reading exposure. Meanwhile, genre familiarity, personal interest, and perceived difficulty significantly shaped book selection and motivation. These findings suggest that aligning ER program design with students' reading behaviors, through diverse material offerings, scaffolded support, and reflective practices, can enhance motivation and outcomes in science-focused university contexts. Future research should examine how integrating instructional interventions and reflective strategies influences sustained ER engagement and long-term language development.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author would like to acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the preparation of this manuscript. ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used for language editing purposes only. All AI-edited text was thoroughly reviewed and revised by the author to ensure accuracy, clarity, and adherence to the accepted standards. No AI tools were used for other purposes, including data analysis, study design, or interpretation of results. The author takes full responsibility for all aspects of the final text.

References

American Psychological Association. (2017). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2002, amended January 1, 2017). Retrieved from https://www.apa.org/ethics/code

Beglar, D., & Hunt, A. (2014). Pleasure reading and reading rate gains. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *26*(1), 29–48.

Beglar, D., Hunt, A., & Kite, Y. (2012). The effect of pleasure reading on Japanese university EFL learners' reading rates. *Language Learning*, *62*(3), 665–703. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00651.x

Bergman Deitcher, D., Johnson, H., & Aram, D. (2019). Does book genre matter? Boys' and girls' word learning from narrative and informational books in the preschool years. *Journal of research in reading*, *42*(1), 193–211. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9817.12266

Carrell, P. L., & Carson, J. G. (1997). Extensive and intensive reading in an EAP setting. *English for Specific Purposes*, *16*(1), 47–60. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(96)00031-2

Chang, A. (2010). The effect of a timed reading activity on EFL learners: Speed, comprehension, and perceptions. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *22*(2), 284–303.

Corder, G. W., & Foreman, D. I. (2014). *Nonparametric statistics: A step-by-step approach* (2nd ed.). Wiley.

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1177/003368829802900211

Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *62*(1), 107–115. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x

Field, A. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, *74*(1), 59–109. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Freiermuth, M. R., & Ito, M. (2022). Battling with books: The gamification of an EFL extensive reading class. *Simulation & Gaming, 53*(1), 22–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/10468781211061858

Grabe, W. P., & Stoller, F. L. (2011). *Teaching and researching reading*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1174

Guthrie, J. T., & Wigfield, A. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), Handbook of reading research (3rd ed., pp. 403–422). Longman.

Guthrie, J. T., Wigfield, A., Barbosa, P., Perencevich, K. C., Taboada, A., Davis, M. H., & Tonks, S. (2004). Increasing reading comprehension and engagement through concept-oriented reading instruction. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 96*(3), 403–423. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.96.3.403

Hagley, E. (2017). Extensive graded reading with engineering students: Effects and outcomes. *Reading in a foreign language*, *29*(2), 203−217.

Haugsnes, E. (2022). *Student attitudes towards extensive reading: A mixed-methods study of Swedish upper secondary school students' attitudes and perceptions of extensive reading in English* [Essay, Örebro University]. Örebro, Sweden.

IBM Corp. (2022). *IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows*, *Version 29.0*. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.

Ives, S. T., Parsons, S. A., Parsons, A. W., Robertson, D. A., Daoud, N., Young, C., & Polk, L. (2020). Elementary students' motivation to read and genre preferences. *Reading Psychology, 41*(7), 660–679. https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2020.1783143

Jacobs, G. M. (2014). Selecting extensive reading materials. *Beyond Words*, *2*(1), 116−131.

Klauda, S. L., & Guthrie, J. T. (2015). Comparing relations of motivation, engagement, and achievement among struggling and advanced adolescent readers. *Reading & writing*, *28*(2), 239-269. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-014-9523-2

Koné, K. (2023). Reading circles: Triggers for increased engagement of EFL learners in extensive reading. *TESL-EJ, 27*(3), 1. https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.27107a2

Leather, S., & Uden, J. (2021). Extensive Reading: The role of motivation. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367815844

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *The American Psychologist, 57*(9), 705–717. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.57.9.705

McLean, S., & Poulshock, J. (2018). Increasing reading self-efficacy and reading amount in EFL learners with word-targets. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *30*(1), 76.

McLean, S., & Rouault, G. (2017). The effectiveness and efficiency of extensive reading at developing reading rates. *System, 70*, 92–106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.09.003

Mikami, Y. (2017). Relationships between goal setting, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy in extensive reading. *JACET Journal, 61*, 41–56. https://doi.org/10.32234/jacetjournal.61.0_41

Mikami, Y. (2020). Goal setting and learners' motivation for extensive reading: Forming a virtuous cycle. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *32*(1), 28.

Nakamura, S. (2018). Effects and impact of extensive reading in Japanese university English for general purpose classes. *Sisal Journal, 9*(1), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.37237/090102

Nakanishi, T. (2015). A meta-analysis of extensive reading research. *TESOL Quarterly, 49*(1), 6–37. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.157

Nation, I. S. P., & Waring, R. (Eds.). (2019). *Teaching extensive reading in another language.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367809256

Pigada, M., & Schmitt, N. (2006). Vocabulary acquisition from extensive reading: A case study. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *18*(1), 1–28.

Renandya, W. A. (2007). The power of extensive reading. *RELC Journal*, *38*(2), 133–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688207079578

Ro, E. (2016). Exploring teachers' practices and students' perceptions of the extensive reading approach in EAP reading classes. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 22*, 32–41. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2016.01.006

Ro, E., & Kim, H. (2022). The effects of extensive reading on young Korean students' construction development. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 60*(4), 957–981. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2019-0076

Robb, T., & Waring, R. (2012). Announcing MoodleReader version 2. *Extensive Reading World Congress Proceedings*, *1*, 168–171.

Shimono, T. R. (2023). The effects of extensive reading, timed reading, and repeated oral reading on Japanese university L2 English learners' reading rates and comprehension over one academic year. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 35*(2), 190.

Song, J., & Sardegna, V. G. (2014). EFL learners' incidental acquisition of English prepositions through enhanced extensive reading instruction. *RELC Journal, 45*(1), 67–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688214522623

Suk, N. (2017). The effects of extensive reading on reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *52*(1), 73–89. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.152

Takase, A. (2007). Japanese high school students' motivation for extensive L2 reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *19*(1), 1–18.

Tanaka, M. (2017). Factors affecting motivation for short in-class extensive reading. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, *14*(1), 98–113. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2017.14.1.7.98

Webb, S., & Chang, A. C. S. (2015). How does prior word knowledge affect vocabulary learning progress in an extensive reading program? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 37*(4), 651–675. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263114000606

Yamashita, J. (2013). Effects of extensive reading on reading attitudes in a foreign language. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *25*(2), 248.

Yang, Y.-H., Chu, H.-C., & Tseng, W.-T. (2021). Text difficulty in extensive reading: Reading comprehension and reading motivation. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *33*(1), 78–102.

Zhou, J. (2024). *Extensive reading*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009474153

Corresponding author: Akihiro Saito
Email: akihiro.saito@gmail.com

Fostering Learner Autonomy Through a Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project in English for Specific Purposes Classrooms

Napat Jitpaisarnwattana
Silpakorn University, Thailand

Abstract

This study explores the extent to which learner autonomy can be cultivated through a digital storytelling (DST) project within a collaborative learning environment. Additionally, it examines students' attitudes towards the DST project. The research was conducted with 90 nursing students enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, who engaged in a five-week DST project. Data were collected using three instruments: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and weekly reflective journals. The findings indicate that the DST project significantly enhanced students' autonomous learning practices, particularly by fostering independent learning and heightened awareness of their learning processes. Moreover, participants expressed predominantly positive attitudes toward the DST project, emphasizing its benefits for language development, motivation, and perceived usefulness. The findings suggest that a DST project can serve as a learner-centered pedagogical approach. Also, despite its inherent emphasis on independent learning, learner autonomy can be effectively fostered through working together with peers. Given these insights, future research employing a quasi-experimental design is recommended to examine the causal effects of DST on language development.

Keywords: collaborative learning, digital storytelling, English for Specific Purposes, English for Nursing, learner autonomy

Defined as "a form of storytelling that is conducted using digital technology as the medium or method of expression" (Shin & Park, 2008, p. 418), digital storytelling (DST) has become a popular way to communicate and express ideas in many fields of education. According to Mannion and Liontas (2024) storytelling incorporates several aspects of educational pedagogy, such as fostering student engagement, encouraging deep learning through reflection, and supporting project-based learning. These elements are fundamental to the learning process and are likely areas that teachers aim to emphasise and encourage. In language learning, DST allows students to bring different experiences to the class and engage in resourceful discussion with their peers (Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018b; Reinders, 2018). Studies have documented benefits of DST for language learners including improvement of macro language skills, digital and multimodal literacy, intercultural competence, as well as opportunities for them to express their voices on various topics (Mannion & Liontas, 2024; Robin, 2016; Yang et al., 2022).

Learner autonomy, often described as the learners' ability to take control over their own learning, is widely regarded as a key goal in language education (Benson, 2011). As such, there has been a growing focus on learner autonomy, accompanied by ongoing discussions about effective strategies to nurture and support it. Technology can support various dimensions of autonomous learning as it enables access to diverse language learning resources, supports learner agency through personalized choices, and offers an extensive array of technology-driven opportunities (Reinders, 2018). In particular, participating in DST activities holds potential to foster self-directed learning practices in various ways as it involves making decisions about the choices learners have and reflecting on their own progress and products. Autonomous learning is frequently misunderstood as being limited to independent, out-of-class learning where students are entirely responsible for managing every aspect of their learning process (Hafner & Miller, 2011). However, learner autonomy can also emerge within structured learning environments and often incorporates significant collaborative components (Hafner & Miller, 2011). While the majority of studies looking at the relationship between technology and autonomy tend to focus on learners' independent use of digital resources (Lim et al., 2022), there is limited research examining how autonomy can be promoted in cooperative learning situations. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the extent to which learner autonomy could be fostered through a DST project in a collaborative learning environment. In essence, this study describes and evaluates the implementation of a collaborative DST in an ESP class for nursing students, focusing on the ways in which implementation can support autonomy in language learning, as well as learners' attitudes towards such implementation. The study is guided by two research questions:

1. To what extent does participation in a digital storytelling project foster the development of learner autonomy in an ESP classroom?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards the collaborative digital storytelling project?

Literature Review

Digital Storytelling and Language Learning

Because of its multimodal nature, digital storytelling offers extensive opportunities for learners to develop all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Mannion & Liontas, 2024). For example, learners may be able to practice and develop their reading and writing skills through drafting their scripts for narration in their digital stories (Batsila & Tsihouridis, 2016). In collaborative learning scenarios, they would have the opportunity to review their peers' storyboards or narration transcripts, resulting in extensive reading practice. As for writing, learners would be able to practice through writing and revising the narration scripts as well as on-screen texts and subtitles. Speaking practice arises as learners record the narration for their digital stories, while the process of re-recording to enhance its quality offers even more opportunities for practice (Yang et al., 2022). Moreover, as learners review their own digital stories or engage with those created by their peers, they are afforded opportunities to participate in listening practice.

In addition to these perceived conceptual benefits, empirical studies have shown that DST is an effective tool to improve all macro language skills including listening (Tanrıkulu, 2020), speaking (Alley-Young, 2017), reading (Sapan, 2024), and writing (Girmen & Kaya, 2019). For example, Tanrıkulu (2020) examined the effects of DST as a product input in listening lessons on listening skills of university students. Findings showed that DST had a positive effect on the development of listening skills, especially in comparison with listening lessons taught with traditional voice recordings. Yang et al., (2022) investigated the effectiveness of DST on English speaking proficiency and creative thinking among school students in Taiwan. Results indicated that DST was capable of facilitating the students' development of becoming proficient English speakers and creative thinkers, largely due to the authentic meaningful learning opportunities that DST afforded. As for writing, Chiang (2020) carried out a case study investigating the effect of Storybird, a Web 2.0 collaborative writing tool, on college students' writing skills. The results indicated a positive impact of DST on students' writing abilities and digital literacy. However, the writing development reported in this study was inferred from learners' self-reported data and no actual language improvement was measured.

Essentially, DST offers learners prospects to practice producing extended oral and written discourse beyond the sentence level (Mannion & Liontas, 2024). With appropriate instructional support, learners can explore and practice constructing a range of textual genres including narrative and recount forms (Alemi et al., 2022) as well as expository and argumentative essays (Brisk, 2015). Besides its benefits for developing general language proficiency, DST has also been shown to enable learning in ESP classes, despite being much less studied and documented. Sevilla-Pavón et al. (2012) integrated a DST project into an ESP course for aerospace engineers. The findings revealed that participating in the DST project facilitated the development of numerous skills including language, research, presentation, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Moreover, Lestari and Nirmala (2020) incorporated DST activities into an English for advertising course. It was found that DST was an effective pedagogical

approach for enhancing both non-linguistic competencies such as multimodal literacy and critical thinking and productive linguistic abilities. It should be noted, however, that DST activities in this study were writing-oriented and the collaboration between learners was mainly conducted in written form.

Digital Storytelling and Learner Autonomy

For a long time, it has been assumed that technology is useful in fostering learner autonomy by offering learners access to various resources, tools, and learning environments beyond the traditional classroom setting (Benson, 2011; Reinders & White 2016). As for DST, the process of creating digital stories can encourage independent learning practice. Stanley (2018) suggests that learners are encouraged to organise their ideas and express them individually and meaningfully as they develop their digital stories. Storytelling can be used as self-study / self-practice resources for learners, enabling them to develop skills and build their confidence. A DST task can also facilitate learners' construction of their own understanding of newly acquired knowledge by enabling them to systematically organize self-access learning resources through technological means (Kim, 2014). Such tasks play a pivotal role in promoting greater learner autonomy by fostering independent engagement with learning materials.

Empirical evidence reveals that DST, when pedagogically designed, can be an effective tool to support development of learner autonomy (Hafner & Miller, 2011; Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018a; Kim, 2014). Jitpaisarnwattana (2018a) explored the potential of a digital storytelling project in fostering learner autonomy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students. The study used *Zimmertwins*, a website developed for young children to create and share their stories. The findings revealed that participating in the project encouraged learners to exercise their autonomy both individually and collaboratively. Opportunities for independent learning and self-reflection, as well as peer teaching and learning were cited as the main supporting factors. Kim (2014) used digital storytelling tasks to develop learner autonomy for oral proficiency among English language learners in the United States. Learners were asked to record their stories on various topics using storytelling websites including *Vocaroo, vozMe,* and *VoiceThread* over a 9-week period. It was found that utilizing self-study materials facilitated the development of speaking skills while significantly enhancing learners' self-confidence. Learners also reported that digital storytelling tasks could adopt a learner-centered approach, promoting greater autonomy in developing oral proficiency.

While learners in Jitpaisarnwattana (2018a) and Kim (2014) were provided with collaborative learning experiences through peer and instructor feedback, the DST activity was designed as an individual project, meaning the process of engaging with digital storytelling tasks was individual. Learner autonomy, however, can emerge within collaborative learning environments where students work together to create a learning artifact (Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018a; Treesattayanmunee & Baharudin, 2024). Halfner and Miller (2011) designed an English for Science and Technology (EST) syllabus and implemented it through a collaborative digital storytelling project. The syllabus incorporated project-based learning with the principles of a "pedagogy for multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996), emphasizing the development of

strong learner autonomy. Different from the two aforementioned studies, learners in this study were tasked to work in groups of three throughout the process of creating the digital stories. The findings indicated that the implementation of a digital video project created opportunities for autonomous language learning. Opportunities for self-reflection, independent learning and managing the learning process were cited as primary factors encouraging learners to exercise their autonomy.

It is apparent that digital storytelling projects possess several characteristics that contribute to fostering language learner autonomy, especially in the ESP classroom. Such projects enabled learners to engage with one another and explore various digital video technologies, facilitating the creation of personally meaningful multimodal artifacts. However, there are only a handful of studies investigating how digital storytelling projects can foster learner autonomy in ESP classrooms and even less in a collaborative environment, the gaps this paper aimed to explore.

Methodology

Research Design and Instruments

Adopting a sequential mixed-method research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), two sets of data, quantitative and qualitative, were collected through three instruments: questionnaire, interview and learners' reflections. The questionnaire consisted of 27 five-point Likert scale (Clark and Watson, 2019) items in two main categories: autonomous learning practice and attitudes towards the digital storytelling project. Four open-ended questions were also included to gain more insights into the questions being asked. The autonomy scale was developed based on the scale used in Hafner and Miller (2011) and Jitpaisarnwattana (2018a). The attitude scale was developed based on empirical evidence of the potential of DST on language learning, namely language improvement, motivation, usefulness and relevance of the project and collaboration. To ensure the content validity of the questionnaire, it was subjected to an item objective congruence (IOC) evaluation by three experts specialising in computer-assisted language learning. The analysis produced an IOC value of 0.935, indicating a satisfactory level of validity.

Seven learners were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. The selection criteria were guided by learners' questionnaire responses, aiming to include individuals with diverse viewpoints – both favorable and critical – regarding the digital storytelling project, as well as those exhibiting varying levels of autonomy. The interviews were conducted online and facilitated in the Thai language. The learners were also asked to record their learning experience during the project through their weekly online reflections (in Thai) through a shared Google Doc. The researcher transcribed and translated the interview data and the learners' reflections. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts underwent a back-translation process conducted by a separate lecturer from the nursing college.

Participants and Research Context

The participants were from a cohort of third-year students at a nursing college in Thailand who were studying a compulsory ESP course called *English for Nursing Professionals.* The course ran for one semester (15 weeks). There were 90 students in the cohort and all of them agreed to take part in the study. The demographic data showed that 78 of the learners were female and 12 were male. Their age ranged from 20-22 years old. The majority of the learners had been learning English for more than 10 years prior to taking the course. As for their English language proficiency, 20 students were A1 or beginning level, 47 were A2, which is elementary level, and 23 were B1, intermediate level, based on the internal English proficiency test used across nursing colleges in Thailand (See table 1)

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Learners

Age	F	%	Gender	F	%	English Language Proficiency	F	%
20	53	58.89	Male	12	13,33	A1	22	22.22
21	32	35.56	Female	78	86.67	A2	45	52.22
22	5	5.55				B1	23	25.56

English for Nursing Professionals is a mandatory course for all third-year students at the college. It is the final English subject taken by the students in the curriculum, preceded by two general English courses in the first year and an academic English course in the second year. The course offers a total of 4 hours of class time per week over a 15-week period. It is structured into two components, lecture for 2 hours and self-study practice for an additional 2 hours. The content was developed by the instructor using materials curated from online resources, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OER), and commercial ESP textbooks. The course covers essential vocabulary and grammatical structure learners were expected to encounter in various situations including monitoring the patient, asking about symptoms, describing diseases, and talking about accidents and emergencies, to name just a few. The collaborative digital storytelling project was integrated into the syllabus as a group project assignment for the learners.

Implementation of the Digital Storytelling Project

The DST project was integrated as part of the course syllabus and implemented for the last five weeks of the course (Week 11-15). Learners were allocated into groups of four, totaling 22 groups. The distribution was made randomly based on their language proficiency. This means that each group had one B1 learner, two A2 learners and one A1 learner. However, there were two groups that had 5 learners, one with one extra B1 learner and the other with one extra A2 learner. In the first week, the course instructor introduced the project to the learners, explaining participation requirements and the concept of digital storytelling. Learners were also given freedom to select any topics they were interested in given that the topics were related to nursing

contexts such as postpartum care, healthy eating practices, how to wash your hands properly, and how to perform CPR.

In the second week, learners were asked to submit the topics and the plan for creating the digital storytelling videos to the course instructor who approved the topics and provided feedback on the plan. In the third week, learners were asked to submit a draft of the video scripts to the course instructor who provided feedback on the scripts both in terms of content and language accuracy. In weeks 4 and 5, learners created and edited their digital storytelling videos before submitting them in the class learning management system at the end of week 5. Learners were then asked to watch their peers' digital storytelling videos and provided feedback on at least 2 videos. Throughout the project, learners wrote weekly reflections, recording their learning experience and challenges they faced every week. The project implementation is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Implementation of the Digital Storytelling Project

Week	Actions by learners	Actions by teachers
Week 0 (Pre-project)	N/A	Allocate learners into groups based on their proficiency
Week 1	• Attend the introductory session • Select the topics • Write weekly reflections	• Introduce the DST project and DST concept • Explain participation requirements
Week 2	• Submit the topics for approval • Submit the plan • Write weekly reflections	• Approve the topics • Provide feedback on the plan
Week 3	• Submit the scripts • Write weekly reflections	Provide feedback on the scripts (both content and language)
Week 4	• Work on creating and editing videos • Write weekly reflections	Provide any technical or language support
Week 5	• Work on creating and editing videos • Submit the DST videos • Write weekly reflections • Provide feedback to peers' videos	Provide feedback on the DST videos

Data Collection and Analysis

The learner autonomy questionnaire was sent to the learners at the end of the project via Google Form. All 90 learners responded to the questionnaire. Seven learners were recruited for the interviews with the researcher via Zoom based on their responses to the questionnaire. Learners' reflections were collected throughout the project. Data gathered from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency, mean scores and standard deviations). The data from the open-ended questions, interview scripts, and learners' reflections were coded using thematic content analysis. The coded data were used primarily to support the analysis of the questionnaire data, as well as extracting any emerging themes related to autonomous learning practices. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, two individuals independently coded the responses, the researcher and another English lecturer at the nursing college.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee at Silpakorn University prior to the commencement of data collection. Additionally, learners were provided with a consent form and a participant information sheet before engaging with the DST project. The participant information sheet indicates that their learning data and performance in the DST project would be used for research purposes only. Learners were also informed that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they retained the right to withdraw from the research at any stage, even after initial participation.

Results

Potential of the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project for Learner Autonomy

This section analyses the potential of the collaborative DST project for fostering learner autonomy. The data were analysed according to three categories: autonomous learning, collaboration, and feedback.

Table 3
Digital Storytelling Project and Autonomous Learning

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q1	F	0	1	13	35	41	4.29	.753
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	14.4	38.9	45.6		
Q2	F	0	1	12	37	40	4.29	.738
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	13.3	41.1	44.4		
Q3	F	0	1	10	45	34	4.24	.692
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	11.1	50.0	37.8		
Q4	F	0	2	12	35	41	4.28	.779
	Percentage	0.0	2.2	13.3	38.9	45.6		
Q5	F	0	1	16	26	47	4.32	.805
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	17.8	28.9	52.2		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.
Q1: Doing the digital storytelling project allowed me to have more freedom and control over my learning.
Q2: Writing and editing scripts for the digital storytelling videos made me more aware of my language use.
Q3: When I had questions regarding making digital storytelling videos, I tried to find an answer in online resources.
Q4: I enjoyed the flexibility of the digital storytelling project.
Q5: I developed my research skills as part of the digital storytelling project

Five questionnaire items explored the potential of a collaborative DST project to support autonomous learning practices. As shown in Table 3, the learners generally agreed that participating in the DST project allowed them to exercise their autonomy. Most of the learners (84.5%) thought that they had more freedom and control over their learning when doing the DST project and that they enjoyed the learning flexibility the project offered. Learners also reported being able to develop research skills and independently using online resources through their participation in the DST project, as evident by a high level of agreement at 81.1% and 87.8. %, respectively. In addition, most of the learners (85.5%) felt that the process of writing and editing digital story scripts encouraged them to be more aware of their language use. The qualitative data lent support to the quantitative data, in that learners had more freedom and flexibility in their learning as Learners 9 and 38 mentioned,

> "A self-study project like this allows me to have freedom to learn in the pace and manner I am most comfortable with. I also liked that I could manage my own time in completing the project" (Open-ended answer, Learner 9).

> "The digital storytelling project provided me with the opportunity to create content based on my interests, encouraging me to have the freedom to choose my own learning methods and express myself in a way that suited me best" (Interview, Learner 38)

In addition, many learners also said that the self-directed nature of the project allowed them to engage with online resources independently. For example, Learner 10 stated in the open-ended answer that,

> "There is more freedom in learning because it is self-directed, allowing me to research information through online resources and when I could not do something, I used online resources and tutorials videos to guide me" (Open-ended answer, Learner 10).

Table 4

Digital Storytelling Project and Collaboration

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q6	F	0	1	20	31	38	4.18	.815
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	22.2	34.4	42.2		
Q7	F	0	1	15	39	35	4.20	.753
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	16.7	43.3	38.9		
Q8	F	0	2	11	39	38	4.26	.758
	Percentage	0.0	2.2	12.2	43.3	42.2		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.
Q6: When I had questions regarding making digital storytelling videos, I consulted my peers.
Q7: Working with my peers helped me gain different perspectives on how to create digital storytelling videos.
Q8: I gained English knowledge and communication skills through working with my peers.

Three items in the autonomy questionnaire looked at how the collaborative aspects of the DST project could support autonomous learning. According to the descriptive statistics, nearly 80% of the learners mentioned that they sought help from their peers when they had questions in the process of creating DST videos. Moreover, many of the learners agreed that they gained new perspectives and developed their English knowledge and communication skills through working collaboratively with their peers, at 82.8% and 85.6% respectively.

As for the qualitative data, several learners felt that the collaborative aspects of the DST project allowed them to gain new perspectives and develop new skills from working with their peers. Learners 8 and 38 mentioned that,

> "I liked working in a group as it allowed for the exchange of opinions from multiple perspectives, providing a broader view. It also helped develop teamwork skills and planning abilities" (Open-ended answer, Learner 8).

> "I believed that working in a group really helped in a self-directed project like this. I was not sure if I would be able to complete the project If I were to do this alone. We split the work and worked independently, but when I had questions, I could ask my peers to help. So, working in a group supported my independent learning" (Interview, Learner 38).

Table 5

Digital Storytelling Project and Feedback

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q9	F	0	1	13	49	27	4.13	.690
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	14.4	54.4	30.0		
Q10	F	0	1	13	30	46	4.34	.767
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	14.4	33.3	51.1		
Q11	F	0	1	11	36	42	4.32	.732
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	12.2	40.0	46.7		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.

Q9: The teacher's feedback on my scripts help me monitor my learning progress.

Q10: The teacher's feedback on my scripts made me more aware of what needed to be improved.

Q11: I used feedback from my teacher to improve my digital storytelling videos.

Three questionnaire items probed into understanding how the feedback from the teacher supported autonomous learning practices in the DST project. Most of the learners (84.5%) agreed that the feedback they received about their scripts allowed them to better monitor their learning progress. A similar percentage of learners also felt that they became more aware of the improvements they needed because of the teacher's feedback. A slightly higher proportion of the learners (86.7%) reported using the feedback from their teacher to improve their videos.

In the qualitative data, many learners reflected that they were able to use the feedback from the teacher to improve their DST videos and knew what they needed to work on. For example, Learner 20 wrote in her weekly reflections that,

> "This week, our group got feedback on our scripts from our teacher. There were a lot of grammatical mistakes in our scripts so our teacher helped correct the mistakes. I also learned that we needed to be consistent with tenses in narrating the story of the video" (Weekly Reflections, Learner 20).

In conclusion, the learners thought that their engagement in the DST project could help foster their learner autonomy. The project provided them with greater flexibility and control over their learning decisions. Additionally, its collaborative structure facilitated the exchange of diverse perspectives and the acquisition of new skills through peer interaction. Finally, feedback they received from their teacher was seen as useful not only for their language development, but also for enhancing the quality of their DST videos.

Learners' Attitudes towards the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project

The students' attitudes toward the collaborative DST project were analysed according to four categories. Included in the groupings were language skills, motivation, usefulness and relevance of the project and collaboration.

Table 6

Students' Attitudes About the DST Project and Language Skills

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q1	F	0	1	14	40	35	4.21	.742
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	15.6	44.4	38.9		
Q2	F	1	2	14	50	24	4.07	.716
	Percentage	0.8	2.2	15.6	45.6	26.7		
Q3	F	0	1	11	52	26	4.14	.613
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	12.2	57.8	28.9		
Q4	F	0	2	16	35	37	4.19	.806
	Percentage	0.0	2.2	17.8	38.9	41.1		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.

Q1: The digital storytelling project helped me improve my speaking skill.

Q2: The digital storytelling project helped me improve my writing skill.

Q3: The digital storytelling project helped me improve my vocabulary.

Q4: The digital storytelling project helped me improve my grammar and structure.

The questionnaire included four items designed to assess learners' perceptions of the collaborative DST project concerning various language skills. A significant proportion of participants reported that engagement in the DST project contributed positively to their language development, particularly in speaking (83.3%) and writing (82.2%). Regarding vocabulary, 86,7% of the learners felt that the DST project facilitated their English vocabulary acquisition. While the majority also acknowledged improvements in grammar and sentence structure, the percentage was slightly lower at 80%.

The qualitative data from the open-ended questions and interviews also suggested that learners felt that their language skills were improved as a result of working on the project, as stated by Learner 7 in the interview,

> "I think I am now more confident when I speak English related to the topic of my DST video because I had to rehearse the scripts many times and remember all of the vocabulary related to the topic. I think I know more words about this topic and can use them effectively now" (Interview, Learner 7).

In addition, many learners thought that the process of writing and editing the scripts greatly improved their writing skills and grammar, as shown in the interview scripts of Learner 12.

> "I wrote seven or eight drafts of the video scripts and every time I revised them, I felt that I learned new language points. The feedback from my teacher was so useful in pinpointing the mistakes I made and how to best correct them. I am now more aware of the structure I should use in writing the scripts. Although my writing is still not perfect, I am getting better at it" (Interview, Learner 12).

Table 7

Students' Attitudes About the DST Project and Motivation

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q5	F	1	1	17	42	29	4.08	.810
	Percentage	1.1	1.1	18.9	46.7	32.2		
Q6	F	0	1	13	22	54	4.43	.780
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	14.4	24.4	60.0		
Q7	F	0	1.1	15	45	29	4.13	.722
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	16.7	50.0	32.2		
Q8	F	0	1	13	31	45	4.33	.764
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	14.4	34.4	50.0		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.

Q5: The digital storytelling project aroused my curiosity, even if it was difficult to complete.

Q6: The digital storytelling project was challenging.

Q7: The topics of the digital storytelling project made it interesting.

Q8: Digital storytelling was a motivational tool for me to learn English.

Four questionnaire items were designed to examine learners' attitudes towards the DST project and its impact on their motivation. Approximately 80% of respondents acknowledged that, despite the challenges associated with completing the DST project, it stimulated their curiosity. A comparable proportion (84.4%) perceived the project as both challenging and an effective motivational tool for learning English. Additionally, 82.2% of learners reported that the opportunity to select their own topics enhanced their engagement and made the project more interesting.

In the interviews, Learners 7 and 38 specifically mentioned that they liked the challenge the DST project offered and that they felt motivated to complete the project as best as they could.

> "I got to explore the topics I was interested in. Although the project was not easy to complete as I had never made a video before, it was a fun experience. As I searched for more information about the topics and how to make a DST video, I learned so many things along the way. If possible, I want to keep making videos for fun" (Interview, Learner 7).

> "Working with my friends in the DST project was very fun. We also got to choose the topics we really wanted to do by ourselves. Both aspects kept us working hard during the project. As all of our friends were going to see the video at the end of the project, we were really motivated to do it well" (Interview, Learner 38).

Table 8

Students' Attitudes About the DST Project and Usefulness and Relevance of the Project

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q9	F	0	1	10	29	50	4.42	.734
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	11.1	32.2	55.6		
Q10	F	0	1	10	44	35	4.26	.696
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	11.1	48.9	38.9		
Q11	F	0	1	11	26	52	4.43	.750
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	12.2	28.9	57.8		
Q12	F	0	1	12	46	31	4.19	.701
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	13.3	51.1	34.4		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.

Q9: Because the topics are related to my future work, the project is relevant to me.

Q10: The planning and script writing were useful for learning vocabulary related to nursing practice.

Q11: The planning and script writing were useful for developing my writing skills.

Q12: Rehearsing and recording the digital storytelling videos were beneficial for developing my speaking skills.

Four items in the questionnaire looked at the learners' attitudes towards the usefulness and relevance of the DST project. Almost 90% of the learners indicated that the project was relevant to them, as its topics were closely aligned with their future professional roles. A comparable percentage of learners perceived digital story planning and scriptwriting as beneficial, not only for acquiring nursing-related vocabulary (87.8%) but also for enhancing their overall writing proficiency (86.7%). Most of them (85.5%) also agreed that the opportunity to rehearse and record their DST videos played a supportive role in developing their speaking skills.

As for the qualitative data, many learners indicated that the DST project was useful not only for their current study, but also their future career, as mentioned by Learner 28,

> "The project was very useful for me and my friends to develop our vocabulary bank. We already knew some of these words in Thai but never cared to learn them in English before. So, participating in this project forced me and my friends to study nursing words related to our topic and we can still remember them now. I may get to use these words in my future as well" (Open-ended answer, Learner 28).

Moreover, many students liked the fact they could select the topics related to nursing practices based on their interests. Learner 12 mentioned in the interview that,

> "I think the fact that we could choose the topics that we were interested in was very useful and relevant for our future career. Of course, it was more difficult than creating a video on a topic about daily life, but I and my group members felt that participating in this project could be beneficial for our future. You know, we will have to take an English test for nursing professionals and use English in hospitals in the future" (Interview, Learner 12).

Table 9

Students' Attitudes About the DST Project and Collaboration

		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Q13	F	0	2	12	47	29	4.14	.728
	Percentage	0.0	2.1	13.3	52.2	32.2		
Q14	F	0	2	9	27	52	4.43	.765
	Percentage	0.0	2.2	10,0	30.0	57.8		
Q15	F	0	3	16	23	48	4.29	.877
	Percentage	0.0	3,3	17.8	25.6	53.3		
Q16	F	0	1	15	40	34	4.19	.748
	Percentage	0.0	1.1	16.7	44.4	37.8		

Notes: F = frequency, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree, STD = standard deviation.
Q13: I enjoyed working with my peers in the digital storytelling project.
Q14: I learned new things from working together with my peers in this project.
Q15: Collaborating with my peers motivated me to keep working on this project.
Q16: When I was unsure of certain language points, peers could help clarify them.

Four questions in the questionnaire asked the learners about the DST project and its collaborative aspects. The majority of the learners enjoyed working with their peers on the project and felt that they learned new things through working collaboratively with others in the project at 84.4% and 87.8% respectively. Additionally, 78.9% reported that peer collaboration served as a motivational factor in sustaining their engagement with the project. Furthermore, 82.2% of learners indicated that working alongside peers provided valuable opportunities to seek assistance and clarification, particularly when encountering language-related uncertainties.

The qualitative data lent support to the quantitative data, in that working in a group with their peers kept them motivated until the end of the project and that they gained new perspectives from their peers. One learner mentioned these in the interview that

> "It was not easy to work on a project like this when you also had assignments from other courses, but working in a group did help manage the workload and kept us going until the end of the project. Working with my peers was also very exciting as we exchanged a lot of ideas in the planning process and I learned a lot of things I had not known before" (Interview, Learner 7).

In the weekly reflections, several learners wrote that working with more proficient peers really helped them improve their language. For example, Learner 21, who was classified as A1 level, wrote that

> "I struggled a bit this week as we had to work on the scripts of the DST videos, but my English was not good at all. It's good that we had (name of a learner) in the group. She was very good at writing the scripts. She also helped correct the mistakes

> in my part of the scripts as well. I learned a lot from her" (Weekly reflections, Learner 21).

All things considered, learners perceived the DST project as an effective platform for enhancing their English proficiency, particularly in writing and speaking. While they acknowledged the project as intellectually demanding, they viewed this challenge as a motivating factor that sustained their engagement in the learning process. Notably, they recognized the value of participating in the project, as it enabled them to explore topics closely aligned with both their current nursing practices and future professional aspirations. Furthermore, collaborative engagement with peers was perceived as advantageous, not only in fostering language development but also in broadening their perspectives through diverse insights shared within the group.

Discussion

The learners' engagement and perceptions indicate that the DST project facilitated conditions conducive to autonomous language learning, providing opportunities for learners to take initiative in their linguistic development. Learners experienced an increased sense of autonomy and agency in their learning process. In particular, the project enabled them to independently navigate online resources and develop research skills during the project. This can be attributed to the project's inherently learner-centered approach, allowing learners to research relevant topics, utilize digital resources for project planning, scriptwriting, and video creation, thereby fostering self-directed learning. The results were in line with previous research indicating that DST, when pedagogically designed, can give learners more control over their learning and support independent learning practices (Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018a; Hafner & Miller, 2011).

In addition, the collaborative aspect of the DST project encouraged learners to work together and develop their skills through working with their peers. Having a more linguistically able learner in the group allowed a less self-directed learner to seek peer support when they encountered challenges while working independently. The collaborative nature of group work fostered a socially interactive environment, providing a platform for knowledge exchange. This setting enabled students to engage in peer teaching, facilitating discussions on both linguistic challenges and technological aspects. This collaborative dimension is considered instrumental in promoting learner autonomy, as highlighted in previous research (Benson, 2011; Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018a; Hafner & Miller, 2011). Such findings lend support to previous studies that learner autonomy can be developed cooperatively through group work because a cooperative approach can increase individual willingness to create stories (Liu et al. 2018).

Furthermore, the teacher's role in providing feedback and offering both linguistic and technical support throughout the project facilitated learners' recognition of their errors, thereby enhancing their language awareness. The structured, step-by-step teacher's involvement, including topic selection, video planning, and scriptwriting encouraged learners to systematically monitor their progress, fostering metacognitive awareness of both their language development and project execution. This underscores the critical role of teacher

support in fostering learner autonomy. Essentially, engaging in various stages of the DST project heightened learners' awareness of their linguistic development and overall learning progress. This increased awareness, coupled with greater control over their own learning, contributed to fostering an autonomous learning mindset.

Regarding learners' attitudes, the learners generally reported positive attitudes towards the DST project. They believed that the DST project could help them develop their language skills, especially writing and speaking. This can be attributed to the fact that they had to work on multiple drafts of the scripts (both by themselves and with feedback from the teacher), which might lead to improved sentence structure and grammatical knowledge. As for speaking, the opportunity to rehearse their video narration might have contributed to the perceived speaking benefits. They can listen to their recorded videos and make necessary adjustments. This finding aligns with Kim (2014), who highlighted the role of DST tools in facilitating language learners' self-assessment of oral performance and monitoring of their learning progress.

As for motivation, learners perceived the DST project as both challenging and engaging, which contributed to its effectiveness as a motivational tool for enhancing their English language learning. This is, perhaps, due to the nature of the DST task and the design of the project. DST tasks often allow learners to create dramatic presentations of their ideas using different voices, music, and multimedia materials, which might foster their imaginative engagement (Wu et al., 2015). Additionally, the design of the DST project that allowed learners to select the topics relevant to their future professional work in nursing and opportunity to work with their peers could encourage learners to put more effort into the project. Together with their view that the DST project helped improve their English, this would potentially embolden learners to become more intrinsically motivated, which is believed to bring more success in language learning (Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018b). Related to this is their attitudes towards the usefulness and relevance of the DST project. The learners clearly saw their participation in the project as useful and relevant to both their immediate English language development and future work. The process of scriptwriting and rehearsing videos was seen as extremely useful for developing their writing and speaking skills. In particular, many learners mentioned learning new English nursing vocabulary that could be useful for their future career. Despite not being investigated in the current study, DST was found to be more effective in increasing both short- and long-term vocabulary retention, compared to rote memorization (Ge, 2015).

Finally, the learners perceived working in collaboration with their peers as beneficial. Not only did they consider working with peers to be facilitative for developing their language proficiency, but they also enjoyed working in a group and felt more motivated to keep working on the DST project because of their peers. Regarding language development, as the group was designed to have mixed levels of proficiency, A1-B1, less-proficient learners might have benefited from having a more proficient learner, from whom they could seek language help, within the group. Moreover, learners working cooperatively might have felt more secure and motivated to participate and work on their DST. These findings align with previous research, which suggests that group work provides learners with a sense of security and reduces concerns about negative peer evaluation (Liu et al., 2018). Additionally, they support the notion that a

cooperative approach can enhance individual willingness to engage in story creation (Liu et al., 2018). From a cultural perspective, group work can mitigate significant cultural barriers to learning, such as the fear of losing face – an issue particularly relevant in Thailand and other East Asian contexts. This collaborative approach fosters a more supportive learning environment, reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation.

Recommendations

Given the relatively small scale of this study (N = 90), it is recommended that a larger-scale study in a different context be conducted. However, implementing DST on a large scale – across multiple classrooms or courses – may not be optimal, as its effectiveness is likely maximised at the classroom level. Moreover, future research should consider conducting longitudinal studies to investigate both the changes in autonomy levels and language proficiency over a long period of time, perhaps over a semester. Finally, a quasi-experimental study using pre-/post-tests should be conducted to systematically examine the actual effects of DST on language development.

Conclusion

The positive results from this study provide important insights into the integration of DST within course design to promote autonomous learning practices, particularly in ESP contexts and beyond. Some important pedagogical implications should be noted. First, DST, as a concept, is inherently flexible and can be adapted to support a wide range of pedagogical goals. Therefore, if language teachers are interested in using DST to promote learner autonomy, they need to make sure that it is based on appropriate pedagogical design, and they need to make ongoing contributions via feedback during the process. Second, DST can be a useful tool for learners to develop their language skills, especially speaking, writing and vocabulary, but the teachers will need to take into consideration the level of the learners, the course objectives, whether for ESP, English for Academic Purposes, or EFL, when designing DST activities. Third, the positive attitudes towards this collaborative DST project begs the question as to whether DST tasks should be done individually or cooperatively. While the majority of DST tasks for language learning in the literature were predominantly individual based, the findings from this study have demonstrated that collaborative DST projects can be successfully implemented. It is suggested that teachers contextualise the design by considering the cultural background of the learners, the nature of the course and the level of learners' language proficiency to determine which would be the most pedagogical and practical approach.

Finally, there are some limitations in this study that should be noted. Firstly, given the moderately small scale of this study (N = 90) and its focus on a localized cohort consisting exclusively of Thai learners, the findings may have limited generalisability to other populations and contexts. Secondly. the DST project was carried out for only five weeks, which might not be pedagogically adequate for any language improvement to take place or learner autonomy to be developed. Finally, while the study revealed consistently positive attitudes across all

measured variables, the findings remain at an attitudinal level and the actual effect of DST on language improvement requires further experimental studies to substantiate the findings.

In conclusion, the findings from this study offer the language teaching community a pedagogical design for the implementation of DST that can be easily adopted. Essentially, when integrating technology to foster learner autonomy and enhance language development in ESP settings, it is important to consider the affordances of different technological tools and learners' digital literacies to ensure their effective implementation.

References

Alemi, M., Givi, S. S., & Rezanejad, A. (2022). The role of digital storytelling in EFL students' writing skill and motivation. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly, 32*, 16–35. https://doi. org/10.32038/ltrq.2022.32.02

Alley-Young, G. (2017). Creating digital videos in an ESL learning community to develop communication skills and content area knowledge. *Unplugging the Classroom*, 13–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102035-7.00002-3

Batsila, M., & Tsihouridis, C. (2016). "Once upon a Time there was..." A digital world for junior high school learners. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning, 11*(3), 42. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v11i03.5370

Benson, P. (2011). Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning. Longman.

Brisk, M. E. (2015). Engaging students in academic literacies: Genre-based pedagogy for K–5 classrooms. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781317816164

Chiang, M. (2020). Exploring the effects of digital storytelling: A case study of adult L2 writers in Taiwan. *IAFOR Journal of Education, 8*(1), 65–82. https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.8.1.04

Clark, L. A., and Watson, D. (2019). Constructing validity: New developments in creating objective measuring instruments. *Psychol. Assess. 31*(12), 1412–1427. https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000626

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Sage.

Ge, G. (2015). Enhancing vocabulary retention by embedding L2 target words in L1 stories: An experiment with Chinese adult e-learners. *Educational Technology & Society*, *18*(3), 254–265.

Girmen, P. & Kaya, M. F. (2019). Using the flipped classroom model in the development of basic language skills and enriching activities: Digital stories and games. *International Journal of Instruction*, *12*(1), 555–572. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2019.12136a

Hafner, C. A. & Miller, L. (2011). Fostering learner autonomy in English for Science: A collaborative digital video project in a technological learning environment. *Language Learning & Technology, 15*(3), 68-86. http://dx.doi.org/10125/44263

Jitpaisarnwattana, N. (2018a) Fostering learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: A digital storytelling project. J*ournal for Foreign Language Education and Technology, 3* (*2*), 136–160.

Jitpaisarnwattana, N. (2018b) Students' attitudes towards the use of digital storytelling in foreign language classroom. rEFLections, *25* (2), 59–75. https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v25i2.165359

Kim, S. (2014). Developing autonomous learning for oral proficiency using digital storytelling. *Language Learning & Technology*, *18(*2), 20–35. http://dx.doi.org/10125/44364

Lestari, R. P., & Nirmala, D. (2020). Digital storytelling of English advertisement in ESP teaching in Indonesia. EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature and Culture, *5*(1), 66–77. https://doi.org/10.30659/e.5.1.66-77.

Lim, N. Z. L., Zakaria, A., & Aryadoust, V. (2022). A systematic review of digital storytelling in language learning in adolescents and adults. *Education and Information Technologies,* 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10861-0

Liu, MC., Huang, YM. & Xu, YH. (2018) Effects of individual versus group work on learner autonomy and emotion in digital storytelling. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 66*, 1009–1028. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-018-9601-2

Mannion, P. & Liontas, J.I. (2024). Digital storytelling in language education. In: L. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp.1–6). Wiley.https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt1040

New London Group (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*, 60–92. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u

Reinders, H. (2018). Autonomy and technology. In: L. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1–6). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0433

Reinders, H. & White, C. (2016). Twenty years of autonomy and technology: How far have we come and where to next? *Language Learning & Technology, 20*(2), 143–154. http://dx.doi.org/10125/44466

Robin, B. R. (2016). The power of digital storytelling to support teaching and learning. *Digital Education Review, 30*, 17–29. Retrieved from http://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/der/article/ view/16104/pdf

Sapan, N. S. (2024). Exploring the impact of digital storytelling on reading and critical thinking: A preliminary study. *International Journal of Modern Education, 6* (23), 50–63. https://doi.org/10.35631/IJMOE.623005

Stanley, N. (2018). Digital storytelling. In: L. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1–7). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0403

Sevilla-Pavón, A.; Serra-Cámara, B. & Gimeno-Sanz, A. (2012). The use of digital storytelling for ESP in a technical English course for aerospace engineers. *The Eurocall Review, 20*(2), 68–79. https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2012.11379

Shin, J. & Park, S. (2008). The effect of digital storytelling type on the learner's fun and comprehension in virtual reality. *Journal of The Korean Association of Information Education*, *12*(4), 417–425.

Tanrıkulu, F. (2020). Students' perceptions about the effects of collaborative digital storytelling on writing skills. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *35*(5–6), 1090–1105. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2020.1774611

Treesattayanmunee, P., & Baharudin, S. M. (2024). Learner autonomy and interaction in English language learning among Thai EFL undergraduate students. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, *17*(1), 393–415.

Wu, W.-C. V., Wang, R.-J., & Chen, N.-S. (2015). Instructional design using an in-house built teaching assistant robot to enhance elementary school English-as-a-foreign-language learning. *Interactive Learning Environments, 23*(6), 696–714. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2013.792844.

Yang, Y.-T. C., Chen, Y.-C., & Hung, H.-T. (2022). Digital storytelling as an interdisciplinary project to improve students' English speaking and creative thinking. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 35*(4), 840–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2020.1750431

Corresponding Author: Napat Jitpaisarnwattana
Email: napat.jit@gmail.com

The Invisible Struggle: Impact of COVID-19 and Digital Inequality on Students' Mental Well-Being

Henry Sevilla-Morales
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
Universidad de Costa Rica, Costa Rica

Lindsay Chaves-Fernández
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica

Abstract

This phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of socially disadvantaged students from the Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica, who faced digital inequality during emergency remote education amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their challenges vis-à-vis the transition to in-person classes in 2022. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured and focus-group interviews with five EFL students from two TESOL programs. The data analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) model, a multi-step process that includes extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing them into categories and themes, and validating results through member checks. Findings assist an understanding of the complex impact of digital inequality on the mental health of socially disadvantaged students and the transition back to in-person classes. The research proves not only significant but also vital since it sheds light on the lived experiences of learners amidst an event whose psychological toll is yet to be fully comprehended.

Keywords: disparities, CT, ERE, obstacles, phenomenology, transition

The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed a surge of scholarly attention on the complexities of teaching during and after the crisis, with extensive literature examining various educational levels (e.g., Alibudbud, 2021; Benítez & Guzzo, 2022; Borda et al., 2022). Such expanding research efforts highlight the overwhelming impact of the pandemic on educational systems worldwide. In Costa Rica, numerous initiatives were launched to address the sudden shift to emergency remote education (ERE) starting in March 2020. Despite these efforts, students, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in rural areas, reported significant connectivity issues and overall digital inequalities. This often included limited or inconsistent access to digital resources such as internet connectivity, digital devices, and online learning platform), revealing a striking mismatch between policy and practice: While remote learning was mandated, many learners lacked the necessary digital infrastructure to meet basic academic obligations. This issue further intensified for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who depend on sustained interaction and regular language exposure.

By 2022, most higher education institutions in Costa Rica, including the Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica (UNA), had resumed in-person classes. However, the pandemic's aftermath left a lasting emotional and economic toll, with students struggling to readjust to face-to-face learning after two years of isolation and loss. Although university authorities implemented measures to support mental health across academic settings, the real-life challenges faced during and after the pandemic remain underexplored. Over three years post-lockdown, in Costa Rica there is an absence of phenomenological research investigating the "lived experiences" of students coping with digital inequality and mental health in the subsequent transition back to in-person classes. The study thus proves not only theoretically relevant but also practically vital as it provides evidence for classroom decision making, institutional policy planning, and reflection on the psychological and academic impact left by a phenomenon that will continue to affect educational actors beyond the classroom boundaries.

Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological research design and a complexity theory (CT) framework, this study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of five socially disadvantaged students from UNA who encountered barriers to technology access during remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital inequality, in this context, is defined as "constrained access to the internet and internet-connecting devices" (Katz et al., 2021, p. 1) and is linked to "income, education, and […] geography" (Walker, 2019, p. 440). Specifically, this study addresses four research questions: (1) How did students from socially disadvantaged contexts experience technological disparities during mandatory-attendance English language classes at UNA during remote learning? (2) How did the participants learn to cope with various instances of digital inequality? (3) What additional obstacles did they face with the transition to in-person classes? and (4) How can these experiences inform institutional policy planning to bridge the connectivity access divide?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review

Digital Inequality and Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The link between digital inequality and mental health as derived from COVID-19 has attracted unprecedented attention in scholarly research and has yielded relevant results for several disciplines. Application scopes range anywhere from healthcare, education, and employment (Borda et al., 2022) to psychology (Chen et al., 2022), psychiatry (Su et al., 2022), bioscience (Bashir et al., 2021), banking (Toyon, 2023), medicine and dentistry (Humayun et al., 2023), education (Alibudbud, 2021; Benítez & Guzzo, 2022; Ding et al., 2023; Zamfir, 2020), and many others.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing digital inequalities, which in turn had significant implications for mental health across various populations (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). Alibudbud (2021) explored the impact of online learning on mental health among lower-socioeconomic-locality students in the Philippines, highlighting increased stress and anxiety due to inadequate access to digital resources. Likewise**,** Benítez and Guzzo (2022) examined digital inequalities in Argentina, focusing on disparities in access, skills, and engagement with digital technologies during the pandemic. In both studies digital inequalities posited obstacles for the continuity of education and increased mental health struggles among students, most notably increased stress and anxiety, often linked to limited access to digital technology and socioeconomic asymmetries.

Along the same thematic lines, Borda et al. (2022) provide evidence illustrating how connectivity divide affected the broader population during the first and second waves of the pandemic in 2020. Their findings indicate that "the strongest relationship between the number of COVID-19 cases and digital inequality is related to Internet use rather than digital skills" (p. 1), They also suggest that limited access to technological tools and the internet was associated with increased feelings of isolation and anxiety. In line with this, Gouseti (2021) discussed the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers in primary and secondary education during ERE in Greece and England, noting that impediments to technology access not only affected students but also imposed significant stress on educators. Using qualitative research methods, the author also discussed the context of teaching models adopted, the role of parental involvement, and the digital divide during ERE in the two countries. Together, these studies showcase the pervasiveness of digital inequality and its wide-ranging consequences.

Obstacles posed by digital inequity are evident across seemingly detached educational environments. Katz et al. (2021) surveyed 2,913 undergraduates from 30 U.S. universities between March and April 2020. The study explored the connection between students' previous and present experiences regarding digital inequality and ERE. Data suggests that obstacles with internet and internet-connecting devices negatively influenced remote learning proficiency (RLP) and communication with faculty, while prior experience with online education

positively influenced RLP. Under-connected learners, the authors argue, may be at a greater disadvantage in remote learning environments as digital access is essential to guarantee support from assistants and instructors, all of which can cause disengagement and hinder vital skills development over time. Korzycka et al. (2021) conducted a nationwide demographic analysis from students' perspective in Poland, revealing that adolescents faced numerous challenges related to remote education, particularly stemming from the poor organization of remote instruction. All this produced detachment from remote classes, decreased motivation, and increased feelings of anxiety, stress, depression, isolation and loneliness, much of which parallels the observations made by Katz et al. (2021).

The psychological effects of the pandemic extended to both students and teachers grappling with ERE. Lischer et al. (2022) used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the mental health of students engaged in remote learning during the pandemic at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Switzerland. This paper did not find correlations between the sociodemographic characteristics of sex and nationality and anxiety scores; however, it did trace a link between gender and migration background and anxiety. Although participants reported handling the situation pragmatically, evidence also indicates that the physical conditions played a role in the transition to the new normal of having limited structural conditions to study. Seyahi et al. (2022) compared the social and psychiatric effects of the pandemic on 565 high school students in Turkey and 92 study participants in Denmark. Data indicates that mental health issues exacerbated in both contexts, manifesting in feelings of loneliness, boredom, and anxiety towards the future. In addition, collateral effects such as reduced physical exercise, sleep deprivation, domestic abuse, and eating disorders became evident. This cross-country comparison contrasts with the relatively milder effects of the pandemic reported by Lischer et al., as it highlights the universal impact of socioeconomic inequalities on the worsening of students' mental health across various global contexts. Shaaban (2022) has reflected on the use of Google Classroom in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in basic schools. The author notes that TEFL teachers most commonly struggled with limited e-learning skills, inadequate infrastructure, large class sizes, overly dense textbooks, and the negative psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Combined, these factors highlight how infrastructural and emotional stressors affected both teachers and students.

On a more theoretical vein, some studies looked at the risks and vulnerabilities faced by students through broader frameworks. Karakose (2021) reviewed literature on the incidence of the pandemic in socially vulnerable students as a roadmap for further research and practical educational application. The study highlights the potential risks for socioeconomically disadvantaged learners in higher education, emphasizing that these students experienced greater difficulties adapting to ERE, leading to adverse mental health outcomes. These theoretical findings generally align with those by Huarcaya-Victoria et al. (2021), who conducted a multicenter study of eight medical schools in Peru, identifying factors associated with mental health among medical students during the pandemic. Huarcaya-Victoria et al.'s (2021) study does not deal with digital inequality specifically, but it sheds light on the devastating effects of the pandemic beyond the digital divide (Bambra et al., 2020), with

evidence that depression, anxiety, and distress can be linked to a host of variables such as economic instability, gender, and status in study programs, among others. While not empirical in nature, these studies illustrate the structural and mental complexities underlying the COVID-19 pandemic across diverse educational settings.

Mental Health Struggles After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Post-pandemic, a host of technological inequalities continued to influence mental health outcomes. Akingbade et al. (2023) reviewed the reported impacts of COVID-19 on child health, stressing that inequality took several forms, of which the digital divide remains a significant factor in ongoing mental health challenges, a theme that persists in many post-pandemic studies. Worthy of note is the authors' assertion that while children's education suffered worldwide, the impact was especially severe in in low- and middle-income regions where online instruction was underdeveloped. Bashir et al. (2021) have discussed adaptations in higher education, noting that shifts towards online and hybrid learning models have persisted, and digital inequality continues to affect student mental well-being, particularly those from underprivileged households. A full grasp of post-pandemic inequalities is yet to be compiled.

As part of these efforts, Ding et al. (2023) used a mixed-methods approach to examine United States (US) university students' perspectives and experiences resuming in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their perceptions of its effects on both mental and overall health. While the study does not focus on digital inequality, it offers a broader picture of the mental health symptoms experienced during the pandemic, consisting of depression, anxiety, and stress and the ensuing worries from forcefully returning to classes when the pandemic was not yet over in 2020. The researchers find it imperative to reflect on coping strategies to mitigate the mental health toll of COVID-19 because increased amounts of mental stress can have a less than positive effect on demonstrated educational success for college learners (p. 3). Similarly, Dombo et al. (2021) emphasized the need for sustained support for children, families, and schools during and after the pandemic, noting that inequalities of many sorts including the digital divide still play a role in the educational enterprise.

Along the same lines, Humayun et al. (2023) explored factors affecting student mental health in students from Liaquat University of Medical & Health Sciences in Pakistan after the pandemic, finding that a host of factors contribute to deteriorating mental health: the isolation that is part of the rural experience, dealing with a low income, a lack of access to adequate healthcare, or the stigma of knowing an individual who was previously ill with the COVID-19 virus (p. 7). Li and Glecia (2023) examined the impact of social isolation and the digital divide on patients with mental health disorders, indicating that social isolation significantly worsens mental health symptoms, with the lack of technology hindering social connections through technology. Their recommendation was that nurses should collaborate with communities and policymakers to create strategies addressing health disparities' social determinants during and beyond the pandemic.

With the benefits and drawbacks of remote education better identified post-pandemic, recent studies have also suggested possible roadmaps for improved pedagogical practices. Jaratthanaworapat (2024), for example, discussed strategies for teaching English in the post-COVID-19 era, acknowledging the central role of online education, but also warning about its downsides in terms of digital inequality, decreased social interaction, lack of concentration, and mental health challenges. Paras and Ferranco (2023) described the Kumustahan Project, an initiative aimed at bridging educational gaps among university students. They did so by examining the experiences of students attending Far Eastern University, located in the Philippines, during the first two years of online classes amid the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting, among other factors, technology-related issues such as poor connectivity and lack of computers and gadgets, as boosters of mental health problems. Their focus group discussion reveals that some educational gaps, including increased use of technology, collaboration networks, and balance between academic and personal life have been bridged, while others continue to hinder mental health recovery post-pandemic. These insights echo much of what the professional literature has indicated on the link between educational inequalities and mental well-being in the wake of COVID-19.

Taken together, the studies in this literature review highlight the significant impact of the divide on mental health across diverse populations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. From educational challenges due to limited digital access to broader global disparities, the investigations underscore how these issues heighten mental health struggles. Spanning disciplines from healthcare to psychology, education, and many others, this review synthesizes critical insights into the complex relationship between digital access and mental well-being in the post-pandemic era. Despite these advancements, no phenomenological studies dealing with digital inequality and mental health in EFL students were located for Costa Rica or other countries.

Theoretical Framework: A Rationale

To explore the interplay between the technological gap and mental health among socially disadvantaged students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, complexity theory (CT) was employed as a theoretical framework because it helps understand the non-linear, multifaceted variables that come into play in complex phenomena such as the one under study. According to Cohen et al. (2018), central to CT are the concepts of *feedback,* or information exchange that regulates or amplifies changes, *recursion*, comprising processes that repeat at different levels or scales, *emergence* of new patterns arising from interactions within the system, *connectedness*, or the interrelatedness of elements within a system, and *self-organization* which involves internal generation of order without external control. In addition, as articulated by Haggis (2008), Mason (2008), and Kuhn (2008), CT posits that educational phenomena are context-bound, dynamic, and non-linear, and that they emerge from interactions within and across various systems. CT also helps understand education at the edge of chaos, defined by Lemke and Sabelli (2008, p. 117), as a state where the system is neither too rigid but not too chaotic, allowing for creativity, adaptability, flexibility, and innovation. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding digital inequality, as it encompasses multi-layered

interactions between socio-economic status, access to technology, institutional policies, and individual experiences.

In this regard, Mason (2008) conceives CT as a framework for examining how patterns and structures emerge from the interactions of smaller components within a system: "It concerns itself with environments, organisations, or systems that are complex in the sense that very large numbers of constituent elements or agents are connected to and interacting with each other in many different ways" (p. 33). Similarly, Lemke and Sabelli (2008) argue that educational change can be better understood through the lens of complex systems, where small changes in one part of the system can lead to significant transformations in another. The authors introduce the concept of "drivers of change" (p. 116), that is, ways in which educational systems deal with newly introduced phenomena, such as evolving technology and emerging demands of an educational reform, which is exactly what happened during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Central to CT is also the concept of multifaceted truths. Radford (2008), while acknowledging the need for a concept of truth in scientific endeavors, challenges the traditional idea of absolute truth. Drawing from Bridges (1995) and Pring (2000a), Radford rejects the expectation of "a 'monolithic concept' of truth (Bridges, 1999, p. 597), a notion of absolute and potentially attainable certainty" (p. 138). CT thus helps uncover the nuanced truths within educational research, always analyzing phenomena from a contextual and multilayered stance. Soleimani and Alaee (2014) discuss the application of CT and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in English as a foreign and second language (EFL/ESL) learning, emphasizing the need for adaptable and responsive educational systems and highlighting CT's potential to explain, rarely to predict, educational events. In general, CT aligns with the nature of this study as it helps explain the lived experiences of students, recognizing that their encounters with digital inequality are shaped by a myriad of interconnected and complex factors.

Methodology

Research Design

Based on phenomenology, this study explored the lived experiences of five undergraduate students from two TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) programs at UNA's Omar Dengo Campus who faced obstacles to internet access and digital tools during remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their challenges in transitioning back to in-person classes in 2022. Phenomenology, as a broad theoretical lens rooted in philosophy (Emiliussen et al., 2021), seeks to interpret individuals' experiences from their personal perspectives, focusing on the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (VanLeeuwen et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). Often applied in educational contexts (Stolz, 2023), phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the experiences of people in the face of life-changing events. Concretely, the current research employs a hermeneutic phenomenological design, which integrates both etic (outsider) and emic (insider) perspectives. Drawing on the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962, as cited in Kafle, 2011), Wa-Mbaleka (2012), Lichtman (2013), and Brinkmann and Friesen (2018), this design focuses on "the phenomena of lived experience,

with the goal to describe its disclosed/apprehended essence, in the meaning structures of the studied experience" (Folgueiras-Bertomeu & Sandín-Esteban, 2023, p. 1452). Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that participants' subjective experiences and understandings cannot and should not be ignored, making it particularly suited for examining how students perceived and made sense of technological inequities during remote learning and the subsequent transition to in-person classes. As understood by Al-Issa et al. (2016), hermeneutic phenomenology uncovers rich narratives that elucidate the complexities of participants' experiences, aligning with the research objective of understanding the nuanced challenges faced by socially disadvantaged students.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was employed, allowing researchers to hand-pick cases based on their judgment regarding the typicality or specific characteristics desired (Cohen et al., 2018). This technique is utilized to achieve representativeness, enable comparisons, and focus on unique issues. Selection criteria included the following:

1. Current enrollment in any of the three English majors within the School of Literature and Language Sciences at UNA.
2. Social disadvantage in terms of family income, access to scholarships, and availability of internet and internet-connected devices.
3. Experience of severe digital inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Experience of obstacles transitioning back to in-person classes in 2022.

Informants and Instruments

Data were collected from five female Costa Rican informants, aged 18-23 at the start of the ERE and 20-25 during the transition back to face-to-face classes. They were enrolled in two undergraduate TESOL programs at UNA: the BA in English Teaching for Secondary Education and the BA in English Teaching for Elementary Education. All experienced digital inequality at various points during the pandemic and came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. They were in their freshman year when the pandemic struck. As Spanish is the official language in Costa Rica, English is learned as a foreign language, with limited opportunities for authentic practice which were further constrained by the COVID disruptions.

Two data collection instruments were utilized, consisting of individual face-to-face interviews and a single focus group meeting. The face-to-face interviews were completed with each participant to elicit detailed accounts of students' experiences with technological disparities during ERE. Conducted via Zoom, the interview comprised five baseline questions that explored their overall experience, coping strategies, adjustment to face-to-face classes, and suggestions for future institutional responses. The flexible nature of the semi-structured format allowed for in-depth exploration of topics based on participants' responses. To conform to the bottom-up nature of phenomenological research, baseline questions were used and emerging questions allowed. The baseline questions were as follows:

1. In general, how would you describe your experience dealing with digital accessibility to English language classes at UNA during remote learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What strategies did you use to deal with digital obstacles during English language classes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Now that emergency remote teaching is over, have you experienced any obstacles adjusting to face-to-face classes? If so, which ones? If not, say why.
4. If a situation like the one derived from the COVID-19 pandemic were to happen again, how could instructors and institutional authorities handle this differently?
5. Are there any instructional and/or institutional measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic that you believe were effective? If so, which ones?

The questions were devised by the researchers based on various interview procedures and principles. The procedures included the following:

- Explaining the purpose and type of study. Detailing the flexible nature of the interview as a semi-structured interview. The approximate duration of the session was clearly noted.
- Opening a space for any potential questions on the Participants' Informed Consent & Conflict of Interest Statement, signed prior to the interview.
- Indicating the possibility of conducting the interview in the language with which participants felt more comfortable, either English or Spanish.
- Reminding the informants that the interview would be recorded, and that their explicit consent was necessary to do so.

The principles were taken from Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2016), as follows:

- Listen more; talk less. Listening is the most important part of interviewing.
- Don't interrupt.
- Learn how to wait.
- Tolerate silence. It means the participant is thinking.
- Avoid leading questions; ask open-ended questions.
- Keep participants focused and ask for concrete details.
- Follow up on what participants say and ask questions when you don't understand.
- Don't be judgmental about participants' views or beliefs; keep a neutral demeanor. The purpose is to learn about others' perspectives, whether you agree with them or not.
- Don't debate with participants over their responses. You are a recorder, not a debater. (p. 387)

The questions were validated by the authors, who profited from prior experience conducting and publishing qualitative research. Before devising the questions, the researchers conducted calibration sessions to ensure these aligned with the research goal and questions, the professional literature, and the nature of the inquiry, among other relevant aspects.

The second data collection tool entailed a single focus group meeting convened with the five informants to validate and cross-check responses provided during individual interviews. Conducted in person, this session aimed to deepen the understanding of various obstacles faced during the pandemic, the psychological fallout from transitioning back to in-person classes, and overall mental well-being. The session was structured to encourage open dialogue among participants, ensuring a comprehensive examination of shared and unique experiences.

Quality Control

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the study, the following quality control measures were implemented: (a) member checks or informant feedback to validate findings with participants; (b) triangulation at two levels: data triangulation of the semi-structured and focus group interviews and researcher triangulation through collaboration between two researchers; (d) leaving an audit trail by maintaining a record of the research process; (e) using rich and thick descriptions; and (f) weighing the evidence to ensure that appropriate attention is given to the most consequential information (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, consent forms were employed to safeguard informants' confidentiality and data saturation was reached to ensure no new information or themes were being observed (Guest et al., 2006; Mwita, 2022) and participants had provided the maximum of relevant data. Given the topic's sensitive nature, informants' well-being was guaranteed by creating a supportive, non-threatening environment before, during, and after the data collection process.

Data Analysis Model

Data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis, which according to Morrow et al. (2015) involves the following steps:

1. Read and reread each transcript.
2. Extract significant statements.
3. Formulate meanings from these statements.
4. Integrate findings into a description of the phenomenon.
5. Describe the central structure of the phenomenon.
6. Conduct member checks for validation.
7. Sort the meanings into categories, and then into themes.

Data Analysis

To preserve informants' integrity and anonymity, the following citing nomenclature will be used when citing direct informant excerpts in this analysis:

Table 1
Citing Nomenclature for Direct Informant Excerpts

Instrument	Citing Nomenclature
Semi-Structured Interview	SSI P01-05
Focus-Group Interview	FGI P01-05

Source: Researchers' design

To exemplify the above, raw data coming from informant 1's semi-structured interview will be cited as SSI P01; quoted excerpts from the same participant's focus-group interview will be cited as FGI P01; and so on.

The data from the two instruments were coded by the researchers using Saldana's (2016) approach, where each code represents a noticeable, essence-capturing phrase that summarizes key ideas from the data. Based on this procedure, three major themes emerged: (1) material obstacles during the pandemic, (2) the psychological toll of the pandemic while transitioning to in-person classes, and (3) the quest for mental health during and after the pandemic.

Theme 1: Material Obstacles During the Pandemic

As evident from both interviews, material obstacles ranged from internet accessibility issues to lack of computer equipment, general distractions, and insufficient family income to meet academic obligations. Students struggled due to a lack of necessary materials to continue studying, with some resorting to strategies like using a relative's internet service to avoid dropping out of university. They also sought help from classmates, even though they had only known each other for three weeks before the lockdown. Additionally, both students and instructors faced methodological challenges. Some professors struggled to adapt their classes to ERE, while others did not realize that students lacked technological skills and needed thorough guidance. As P03 stated in the semi-structured interview, "(…) the professor said next week you won't come to class because there is a virus going on. I didn't know about Zoom; neither did the professor. We all had to adapt suddenly. We just had one month of class. It was an awful experience." Learners complained that some professors would have them connect to Zoom classes just to check book exercises, for example, and tried to administer assessments that resembled the ones done during face-to-face classes. As a result, students felt there was a lack of flexibility and proper methodology use during their online classes, which only added to the hurdles posed by the material obstacles, "Some of the professors are not ready to be professors; teaching is about adapting to your students. They should take more courses to learn how to teach. (…) It's not fair that they don't like teaching" (SSI P02). The three categories that stemmed from the material obstacles students faced during the pandemic included connectivity challenges, insufficient equipment and economic hardships, and environmental distractions.

Category 1: Connectivity Challenges

The inability to access reliable internet services was a recurring challenge, exacerbated by sharing limited internet bandwidth among multiple family members, which often led to connectivity disruptions and hindered learners' ability to participate effectively in online classes. As one participant expressed, "I had to share my internet connection with all the family, and I didn't have a computer. It was really frustrating" (FGI P03). Some resorted to desperate measures such as climbing trees to gain better internet access: "I had lots of internet issues, so I was scared that some professors wouldn't believe me. So, I sent them lots of messages and screenshots. Sometimes I had to climb a tree so I could get a bit of internet access" (FGI P04). Others left their home to access the internet and spent long hours at their relatives' house to attend online classes and complete assignments. Living in rural areas, they often faced dangerous situations during their commute. For example, in the semi-structured interview, P01 commented, "Those conditions in the morning were not great, because it was 5 or 6 in the morning. There is this *planta de yuca,* a cassava processing plant, (…); there's these people I would consider dangerous there, so I would either have to go with my mom or with my dad." Due to the long hours spent at their relatives' homes, learners also reported feeling uncomfortable, especially regarding food, as they struggled to make themselves at home. P01 reported that while at her aunt's, she had to wait for food and had a hard time being ready for class if hungry (SSI). Connectivity issues also forced them to leave their home and nuclear families, relocating to the metropolitan area with relatives. This situation heightened the feelings of loneliness and intensified various signs of depression (SSI P05).

Category 2: Insufficient Computer Equipment and Economic Hardships

The lack of adequate computer equipment posed another major challenge. Many students had to share outdated devices with siblings, resulting in time constraints and technical difficulties during classes and assignments. In the focus group interview, P01's experience with an old computer and financial constraints exemplified these barriers: "My computer was 10 years old. I had problems with the keyboard. I got frustrated because I had to complete essays or fill out Google forms." During the semi-structured interview, another informant added, "A relative bought a laptop computer. We had to switch computers with my brother or sister; it was three family members in need for a computer" (P03). On the other hand, financial constraints compounded these issues, with families unable to afford new equipment or pay for stable internet connections, further hindering academic progress (FGI P01, SSI P03, SSI P02). These economic hardships intensified when, in some cases, parents lost their jobs: "My father got jobless because he is an entrepreneur. My mother was scared about being fired" (SSI P02, sic).

Category 3: Environmental Distractions

Students also grappled with distractions at home, ranging from noisy family members to pets and external noises such as animals and vehicles. These distractions often disrupted their focus during online classes and study sessions. Informants P01, P02, and P04 noted: "I had issues with noise: dogs, cars, motorcycles, cows, and also my family. They were always talking" (SSI

P04); "I had a noisy family. I had a noisy puppy. It was all stressful" (FGI P02); and "The problem was my younger sister. We had to turn on [the] camera and microphone. My sister would come over and interrupt me; she would say things like *'¿pero quién es esa profe tan necia?'* [But, who's that annoying professor?]" (FGI P01). Students also emphasized the struggle with lack of private spaces at home, which impacted their concentration during classes and exams: "One day I had an oral presentation about fast fashion. I was in my living room. My family was outside. They were laughing, talking, playing with the dogs. They would ask me something. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to pay attention to" (SSI P04). Another student added, "One day my dad had to mow the lawn, and the dogs were barking, and it was difficult" (FGI P01).

Theme 2: Psychological Impact of the Pandemic

The pandemic also affected the mental health and academic experiences of university students. They faced isolation, uncertainty about the future, and disruptions to their academic and social lives. These stressors contributed to widespread mental health struggles.

Category 1: Mental Health Struggles During the Pandemic

The shift to online learning and the uncertainties brought by the pandemic took a toll on students' mental health. Many reported increased anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation. P02's experience with depression and academic stress reflects the emotional challenges students faced: "I started to deal with depression; I was always stressed; I was always exhausted" (SSI). P01's struggles with anxiety over academic performance underscore the psychological impact suffered: "We had to survive, complete assignments, not die, and graduate, all of that at the same time." (FGI). P05 also shared feelings of anxiety and isolation, intensified by the sudden shift to online learning: "I was depressed for three months when I lived in Heredia because I couldn't see my family. My boyfriend and I felt the same. We come from distant places, and we missed our family" (SSI). Other students stressed the fact that not all professors showed empathy for the challenges faced by learners living in rural areas. P02 stated, "Knowing that the next professor wouldn't be as nice was heavy" (SSI), and P04 confirmed:

> On some occasions I had to upload a test that was oral (…) I only had one minute to record myself and I had to send it in one minute. Then, if I didn't do it, the professor wouldn't receive my test. I was anxious, running around my house trying to catch some connection. My professor told me I had to climb a tree to catch connectivity and send the audio. (SSI)

Category 2: Challenges Upon Returning to In-Person Classes

Returning to face-to-face classes, the situation did not improve as everyone thought. Both students and professors experienced academic shock adapting to the new reality and class methodology: "Some professors weren't that flexible. They didn't want to mix digital tools

within the classroom. They were saying 'now we are back.' Then I would think, maybe we could do some things virtually, but they didn't want to do it" (FGI P05). Issues such as social anxiety, fear of contagion, and difficulties adjusting to traditional classroom settings were prevalent, with learners finding it challenging to readjust to face-to-face interactions and academic expectations: "I personally did face problems with social interaction. We were wearing masks, so it was hard to enunciate, and we needed to do that because we take English classes" (FGI P01). Some of them even recall mockery from classmates when speaking, which made them feel insecure, as they believed those comments and jiggles were directed at their speaking style: "(…) speaking in front of others was hard, (…) and I felt my classmates had good English, so I didn't feel at the same level. It was frustrating" (FGI P03). In the focus group interview, P04 expressed concerns about the safety protocols and the fear of contracting COVID-19 while attending in-person classes: "(…) I like to be close to people, but we came back, and we couldn't be close to anyone. I had to restrain myself; I had to change my personality." Learners also voiced self-image insecurities, which were exacerbated upon removing the mask; P01 stated, "I was also anxious because, once I removed my mask, I was self-conscious of my acne. I didn't want my classmates to see my face" (FGI). For other learners, household income became an issue because they failed courses during the pandemic and, upon returning, they had to work to continue their studies: "I was working, trying to save money to pay for university fees. I failed some courses during the pandemic, so I lost my scholarship. I had to work and save money for the year. It was crazy" (FGI P02).

Theme 3: Seeking Mental Health Support During and After the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a significant shift in the perception and accessibility of mental health support for university students. As individuals contended with heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression during this tumultuous period, many began to recognize the importance of seeking professional help. The stigma surrounding mental health had gradually diminished, leading to increased use of counseling services and online support resources. Furthermore, the pandemic underscored disparities in access to mental health care, prompting universities to adapt their support systems to better meet the evolving needs of their students.

Category 1: Coping Strategies During the Pandemic

In the face of these challenges, students employed various coping strategies to manage their mental health. These included seeking support from family, classmates, and professors, adjusting study schedules, and finding moments of respite amid academic pressures. In the semi-structured interview, P05 explained, "I talked to my mom. (…) I felt very well when I was talking to her, because I trust her. (…) I didn't want to look for advice on the internet, because I was very mad. I would get really mad when I read advice like 'You should do this; you should go for a walk.' (…), so I talked to my mom, and that made me feel better." P04 also shared, "When I didn't understand something, I would send her [a friend] a message, and she would reply to me saying I was doing the right thing asking. She would explain what to do for me" (SSI). P03's experience highlights the importance that family and religion played for some people: "As a family, we talked about our situation. We also used to go to a *finca lechera* [*dairy*

farm]; (…) we would go there and drink coffee, get out of our houses and release stress; (…) we would also do small *cultos* [*family prayers*]; we would gather together to pray and sing" (SSI).

Category 2: Long-term Mental Health Impacts

Even after the initial crisis of the pandemic, students continued to deal with lingering mental health issues. Challenges such as ongoing anxiety, difficulty in trusting others, and resentment towards academic pressures and professors persisted. Informants shared their journey towards mental health recovery and the challenges they still face in post-pandemic life:

> We did our best, but some professors treated us like we were trash. I have to work to forgive one professor. I see him, and I don't want to see his face. He asked me to forgive him, but it was too late. During the course he didn't show empathy for me, why would I forgive him? (…) Maybe nobody understands that. We suffered abuse. I understand that he had the conditions to give the class: he had internet and all. (…) Now I just can't say hi to him. It's a type of hate we have now. (FGI P04)

P02 adds, "For some people empathy went away when the pandemic ended. Even some professors here ask, 'Why do you need a curricular adaptation?' They think it's just anxiety. It's frustrating to deal with people who don't understand your case" (SSI P02). P01 also expressed concerns about the long-term effects of isolation and anxiety on her mental well-being, affecting her confidence in social situations (FGI P01).

Discussion of Findings

As stated previously, this hermeneutic phenomenological study was led by four research questions: (1) how students from socially disadvantaged contexts at UNA experienced digital disparities during mandatory-attendance English language classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) how they coped with these inequalities, (3) what additional obstacles they faced during the transition back to in-person classes in 2022, and (4) how these experiences could inform institutional policy to bridge the digital divide. The findings reveal several critical insights.

Summary of Findings

1. ***Digital Inequality During Remote Learning*:** Socially disadvantaged students at UNA faced significant challenges due to limited access to Technological tools, inadequate internet connectivity, and lack of necessary skills to navigate online learning platforms. These issues intensified their stress and anxiety levels, hindering their academic performance and overall well-being.
2. ***Coping Mechanisms*:** Students employed various strategies to cope with the connectivity gap, including seeking help from peers and family members, using public

internet facilities, and negotiating deadlines with instructors. Despite these efforts, many still struggled to keep up with their coursework and maintain their mental health.

3. ***Transition to In-Person Classes*:** The return to in-person classes introduced new obstacles, such as adjusting to fully in-person models and dealing with the lingering psychological effects of prolonged isolation. Students faced social challenges including insecurity, difficulties with social distancing, interpreting body language, stage fright, concerns about physical appearance, and feelings of neglect from professors who did not consider their mental health. Additionally, they had to readjust to being on their own after having adapted to ERE. Methodologically, students expected hybrid learning models, but instead encountered rigid face-to-face teaching models that felt like little technological progress had been attained after two lockdown years.
4. ***Policy Implications*:** These experiences underscore the need for institutional policies that address digital inequality by providing better access to ERE resources, supporting culturally responsive pedagogies, ensuring an emotionally supportive environment, improving internet connectivity, and offering training programs to enhance digital literacy for all parties involved. Although a global emergency such as COVID-19 was hardly an event teachers and institutional authorities were prepared for, it is vital to learn from the experience so that material and psychological obstacles can be anticipated and dealt with.

Findings in Comparison with the Literature Review

The findings generally align with and extend the insights from previous studies on digital inequity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Alibudbud (2021) and Benítez and Guzzo (2022) highlighted increased stress and anxiety among socially vulnerable students due to inadequate access to digital resources. Similarly, Borda et al. (2022) noted that limited access to digital tools was associated with increased feelings of isolation and anxiety during the beginning of the pandemic. The findings from this study confirm that digital inequality significantly impacted UNA students' mental health, paralleling the experiences documented in these studies.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with the challenges outlined by Korzycka et al. (2021) and Seyahi et al. (2022), who reported that obstacles with internet access and poor organization of remote instruction led to disengagement (Katz et al., 2021), decreased motivation, and increased anxiety and stress among students. The current study extends these observations by highlighting the specific coping mechanisms UNA students employed, such as seeking external help and negotiating with instructors, which were not prominently discussed in the previous literature.

In the post-pandemic context, findings can be linked to those reported by previous literature on technological disparities and mental well-being. Akingbade et al. (2023) and Bashir et al. (2021) emphasized the persistent effects of digital inequality on student mental health. Similarly, Ding et al. (2023) noted increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among U.S. university students returning to in-person classes. Dombo et al. (2021) highlighted the

need for sustained support, all of which suggests that digital and other inequalities continue to influence education. Our results also parallel those by Humayun et al. (2023), who associate factors such as socioeconomic status and living conditions with deteriorating mental health among students in Pakistan. They also correspond with those by Li and Glecia (2023), who underscored the increase of mental health symptoms due to social isolation and the digital divide, as well as with the ones by Paras and Ferranco (2023), who noted that technology-related issues significantly impacted mental health in the Philippines.

Theoretical Implications

The findings can be interpreted through the lens of CT, which posits that educational phenomena are context-bound, dynamic, non-linear, recursive, interconnected, and self-organizing – emerging from interactions within and across various systems (Cohen et al., 2018; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Mason, 2008; Radford, 2008). During the pandemic the connectivity gap created a complex web of challenges for socially underprivileged students, influenced by socio-economic disparities, institutional policies, and individual coping mechanisms. From a CT perspective, the diverse coping mechanisms employed by students reflect the dynamic and adaptive nature of complex systems. The fact that students sought help from peers and family members, used public internet facilities, and negotiated deadlines indicates that they navigated their challenges through interactions within their immediate environment, reaffirming the *non-linear*, *adaptive*, and *emergent* properties of complex systems.

The results well deserve revisiting Lemke and Sabelli's (2008) concept of "drivers of change," as digital inequality and its associated challenges acted as catalysts for significant transformations in students' educational experiences and mental well-being. As can be seen, however, the conditions to deal with such drivers of change were far from ideal and students had to contend with multiple complexities in the traumatizing context of the global pandemic. While CT offers a valuable framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of the technological disparities' impact on mental health, it is crucial to acknowledge the elusive characteristics of such phenomena. Core elements of CT – *nonlinearity* (Morrison, 2008), and *systems at the edge of chaos* (Lemke & Sabelli, 2008) – suggest that mental well-being cannot be attributed to digital inequality alone.

Since CT warns us against simplistic cause-effect explanations, "the ability to predict, control and manipulate, to apply reductive techniques to research" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 27), a comprehensive CT analysis must consider additional factors influencing mental health. Educational systems are networks of interconnected components (Mason, 2008; Cohen et al., 2018) that evolve continuously; thus, changes in one area can ripple throughout the system. For example, national policies enforcing social isolation led to the rapid implementation of ERE, prompting instructors to shift teaching methodologies and requiring students to adapt quickly to meet academic demands. *Recursion* is also evident here, as students repeatedly adjusted their approaches, learning from each cycle of adaptation to improve their strategies over time. Additionally, Morrison's (2008) and Cohen et al.'s (2018) principle of *nonlinearity* indicates that small changes can have disproportionately large effects. Therefore, to avoid

simplistic cause-and-effect conclusions, it is essential to consider various factors that may impact mental health, including access to technology, socioeconomic status, learning disruptions, social isolation, intersecting inequalities (gender, age, access, material support, emotional stability), support networks, teacher feedback, household environments, and institutional responses to the pandemic, among others.

Finally, Lemke and Sabelli's (2008) insights on systems at the edge of chaos are useful for interpreting findings that defy expectations, particularly regarding coping mechanisms that enabled students to navigate the material and emotional challenges posed by the pandemic. Their assertion that "even if such system models are not predictive in any detailed way, they can still be useful in identifying possible alternatives, potential problems, and overall qualitative features of the change process" (p. 117) underscores the complexity inherent in educational systems. In this study, the observation that some students effectively coped with digital inequality by leveraging community resources reflects the resilience and adaptability of individuals within complex systems, aligning with CT's emphasis on multifaceted truths and, though at a high cost, self-organization – internal generation of order without external control (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 28). The notion of feedback is also relevant, as the interactions within the system, including peer and family support, created feedback loops that helped students adapt their strategies over time, leading to emergent patterns of coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the complex impact of digital inequity on the mental health of socially disadvantaged students at UNA vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition back to in-person classes. By investigating their lived experiences with remote learning, coping mechanisms, and the obstacles returning to in-person sessions, the research provides insights into the enduring effects of digital inequality and the psychological toll of the pandemic in two TESOL programs from Costa Rica. The results are significant on at least two levels. Theoretically, they assist the understanding of the current phenomenon through a CT lens, stressing its multilayered and evolving nature. On the practical side, they represent a first step towards research-based classroom decision making, more responsive curricular planning, and continuous pedagogical reflection. The findings generally support existing literature, highlighting that digital inequality remains a significant barrier to student well-being and academic success particularly when the language of instruction is different from the home language. To address these challenges, it is imperative for educational institutions to implement policies that ensure equitable access to digital resources the necessary instruction to use such resources and provide robust support systems for students. This includes creating concrete strategies to enhance digital infrastructure on and off campus and offering comprehensive digital literacy training customized to students' diverse needs. Further steps should include creating an emotionally supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses students' mental health and adopting hybrid learning models, adaptable to evolving student circumstances, thereby fostering resilience in the face of future disruptions. Expanding access to professional mental health services should become a central part of these endeavors. All

these interventions should be sustained beyond crisis periods and officialized to guarantee long-term support for socially disadvantaged learners.

Addressing digital inequality is not simply a matter of providing technological resources in an equitable manner but also of creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment that appreciates the different levels of technological knowledge and access possessed by diverse students. By doing so, educational institutions can mitigate the negative impact of digital inequality on mental health and academic performance, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contribution and pioneering effect in phenomenological research in Costa Rica, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The findings are context-specific to UNA and may not be generalizable to other institutions or regions albeit they contribute to theory building. The sample size and socio-economic characteristics of the participants also limit the ability to extrapolate the results to a broader population. Additionally, the sample included only the students' perspectives, excluding crucial viewpoints of teachers who significantly impact the educational experience. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should incorporate the viewpoints of educators. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Lastly, this study was cross-sectional, capturing the phenomenon at a specific point in time – leaving out outliers in the coding process, such as students being attacked by aggressive roosters and dogs, or the death of a loved one. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of digital inequality and to track changes in student experiences over time. By addressing these limitations, future research can provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between digital inequality and mental health in educational contexts.

The study can potentially serve as a roadmap for further research, enhanced pedagogical reflection while offering insight into the invisible struggles faced by students amid the chaotic effects of digital inequality and deteriorating mental health. The lasting effects of COVID-19 – whose full repercussions are yet to be fully assessed – add another layer of complexity to these challenges.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

No AI tools were used in the development and/or review of the manuscript.

References

Akingbade, O., Akinokun, R. T., Eniola, O., Marindoti, D. C., Ogunlowo, B. C., Alabi, P. O., & Olubiyi, S. K. (2023). Inequalities in the reported impacts of COVID-19 on child health: A narrative review. *International Health Trends & Perspectives*, *3*(3), 308–315. https://doi.org/10.32920/ihtp.v3i3.1850

Al-Issa, A., Al-Bulushi, A. H., & Al-Zadjali, R. (2016). Arab English language teaching candidates climbing the IELTS mountain: A qualitatively driven hermeneutic phenomenology study. *The Qualitative Report*, *21*(5), 848–863. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2367

Alibudbud, R. (2021). On online learning and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from the Philippines. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, *66*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2021.102867

Bambra, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J., & Matthews, F. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, *74*(11), 964–968. https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-214401

Bashir, A., Bashir, S., Rana, K., Lambert, P., & Vernallis, A. (2021). Post-COVID-19 adaptations: The shifts towards online learning, hybrid course delivery and the implications for biosciences courses in the higher education setting. *Frontiers in Education, 6*(711619), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.711619

Benítez, S., & Guzzo, M. del R. (2022). Desigualdades digitales y continuidad pedagógica en Argentina: Accesos, habilidades y vínculos en torno a la apropiación de tecnologías digitales durante la pandemia. *Cuestiones de Sociología*, *26*(e135), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.24215/23468904e135

Borda, M., Grishchenko, N., & Kowalczyk-Rólczyńska, P. (2022). Impact of digital inequality on the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from European Union countries. *Sustainability, 14*(5: 2850), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14052850

Brinkmann, M., & Friesen, N. (2018). Phenomenology and education. In Smeyers, P. (Ed.), *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (pp. 591–608). Springer International Handbooks of Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72761-5_46

Chen B., Zhao C., Li X., & Liu, J. (2022). COVID-19 pandemic and adolescent mental health in China: Micro evidence and socioeconomic mechanisms. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*(1041376). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1041376

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Ding, Q., Ward, M. D., Edwards, N., Wu, E. A., Kersey, S., & Funk, M. (2023). A mixed-methods approach to understand university students' perceived impact of returning to class during COVID-19 on their mental and general health. *PLOS ONE, 18*(1: e0279813), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279813

Dombo, E. A., Villareal, L., & Sabatino, C. (2021). When a crisis becomes the new normal: Supporting children, families, and schools during and after COVID-19. *Children & Schools*, *43*(2), 67–69. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab004

Emiliussen, J., Engelsen, S., Christiansen, R., & Klausen, S. H. (2021). We are all in it! Phenomenological Qualitative Research and Embeddedness. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921995304

Folgueiras-Bertomeu, P., & Sandín-Esteban, M. (2023). The research question in hermeneutic phenomenology and grounded theory research. *The Qualitative Report*, *28*(5), 1452–1472. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5715

Gouseti, A. (2021). 'We'd never had to set up a virtual school before': Opportunities and challenges for primary and secondary teachers during emergency remote education. *Review of Education*, *9*(3), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3305

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Haggis, T. (2008). 'Knowledge must be contextual': Some possible implications of complexity and dynamic systems theories for educational research. In Mason, M. (Ed.), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 150–168). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00403.x

Huarcaya-Victoria, J., Elera-Fitzcarrald, C., Crisol-Deza, D., Villanueva-Zúniga, L., Pacherres, A., Torres, A., Huertas, G., Calderón, D., Noriega-Baellai, C., Astonitas, E., & Salvador-Carrillo, J. (2021). Factors associated with mental health in Peruvian medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A multicentre quantitative study. *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatria*, *52*(3), 236–244. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcp.2021.06.002

Humayun, A., Nawi, MABA., & Sidiqui, MI. (2023). Breaking the stigma: Determining factors affecting the mental health of students after COVID-19 pandemic. *Medical Science*, *27*(139: e356ms3127), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.54905/disssi.v27i139.e356ms3127

Jaratthanaworapat, A. (2024). Ways to teach English after the COVID-19 era. *Community and Social Development Journal*, *25*(1), 121-136. https://doi.org/10.57260/rcmrj.2024.264499

Kafle, N. P. (2013). Hermeneutic phenomenological research method simplified. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *5*(1), 181-200. https://doi.org/10.3126/bodhi.v5i1.8053

Karakose, T. (2021). Emergency remote teaching due to COVID-19 pandemic and potential risks for socioeconomically disadvantaged students in higher education. *Educational Process: International Journal*, *10*(3), 53–61. https://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2021.103.4

Katz, V. S., Jordan, A. B., & Ognyanova, K. (2021). Digital inequality, faculty communication, and remote learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic: A survey of U.S. undergraduates. *PLOS ONE, 16*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246641

Korzycka, M., Bójko, M., Radiukiewicz, K., Dzielska, A., Nałęcz, H., Kleszczewska, D., Małkowska-Szkutnik, A., & Fijałkowska, A. (2021). Demographic analysis of difficulties related to remote education in Poland from the perspective of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Annals of Agricultural and Environmental Medicine, 28*(1), 149–157. https://doi.org/10.26444/aaem/133100

Kuhn, L. (2008). Complexity and educational research: A critical reflection. In Mason, M. (Ed.), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 169–180). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00398.x

Lemke, J. L. & Sabelli, N. H. (2008). Complex systems and educational change: Towards a new research agenda. In Mason, M. (Ed.), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 112–123). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00401.x

Li, H., & Glecia, A. (2023). Impact of social isolation and digital divide on mental health and wellbeing in patients with mental health disorders during COVID-19: A multiple case study. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, *44*(4), 313–320. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2023.2189957

Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Lischer, S., Safi, N., & Dickson, C. (2022). Remote learning and students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: A mixed-method enquiry. *Prospects*, *51*, 589–599. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09530-w

Mason, M. (2008). What is complexity theory and what are its implications for educational change? In Mason, M. (Ed.), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 32–45). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00413.x

Mason, M. (Ed.). (2008), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 1–15). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00412.x

Morrison, K. (2008). Educational philosophy and the challenge of complexity theory. In Mason, M. (Ed.), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 16–31). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00394.x

Morrow, R., Rodriguez, A., & King, N. (2015). Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. *The Psychologist*, *28*(8), 643–644.

Mwita, K. (2022). Factors influencing data saturation in qualitative studies. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478)*, *11*(4), 414–420. https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i4.1776

Paras, P. S., & Ferranco, A. A. (2023). Bridging educational gaps among university students during the new normal through the Kumustahan Project: A focus group discussion initiative for higher education. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Science (IJRIAS), 8*(7), 191–203. https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2023.8722

Radford, M. (2008). Complexity and truth in educational research. In Mason, M. (Ed.), *Complexity theory and the philosophy of education* (pp. 137–149). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00396.x

Rotas, E. E., & Cahapay, M. B. (2020). Difficulties in remote learning: Voices of Philippine university students in the wake of COVID-19 crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, *15*(2), 147–158. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4299835

Saldana, J. (2016). The coding manual for qualitative researchers (3rd ed.): Sage.

Seyahi, L. S., Ozcan, S. G., Sut, N., Mayer, A., & Poyraz, B. C. (2022). Social and psychiatric effects of COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning on high school students: A cross-sectional web-based survey comparing Turkey and Denmark. *African Educational Research Journal*, *10*(4), 369–381. https://doi.org/10.30918/AERJ.104.21.123

Shaaban, S. S. A. (2022). Google Classroom in TEFL for basic school students amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Teachers' reflections. *International Education Studies*, *15*(5), 13–20. https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v15n5p13

Soleimani, H., & Alaee, F. F. (2014). Complexity theory and CALL Curriculum in Foreign Language Learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, *3*(3), 19-25. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.3p.19

Stolz, S. A. (2023). The practice of phenomenology in educational research. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *55*(7), 822–834. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2138745

Su, J., Conroy, I., Trevino, A., Zheng, Y., & Kuo, S. I. (2022). COVID-19 related stressors, parent-child relationship, and alcohol use and mental health profiles among white and hispanic/latinx first-year college students. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development: An International Journal*, *54*, 1287–1296. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-022-01337-4

Toyon, M. A. S. (2023). Navigating digital inequality: Examining factors affecting rural customers' internet banking adoption in post-COVID Bangladesh. *International Journal of Business and Technology Management*, *5*(1), 501–513. https://doi.org/10.55057/ijbtm.2023.5.1.38

VanLeeuwen, C. A., Veletsianos, G., Johnson, N., & Belikov, O. (2021). Never-ending repetitiveness, sadness, loss, and "juggling with a blindfold on:" Lived experiences of Canadian college and university faculty members during the COVID-19 pandemic. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *52*(4), 1306–1322. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13065

Wa-Mbaleka, S. (2012). Teaching in extreme conditions: A study of refugee teachers in Central Africa. *International Forum Journal*, *15*(1), 59–73. https://doi.org/10.63201/RTIR8193

Walker, J. (2019). Adding to the list of rural inequalities—Digital technology exclusion. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health, 27*(5), 440–441. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12585

Williams, H. (2021). The meaning of "Phenomenology": Qualitative and philosophical phenomenological research methods. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(2), 366-385. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4587

Zamfir, A. M. (2020). Educational resilience in pandemic times and potential impacts on inequalities: The case of Romania. *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, *12*(2 Sup. 1), 182–187. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.2Sup1/305

Corresponding author: Henry Sevilla-Morales
Email: henry.sevilla.morales@una.ac.cr or henry.sevillamorales@ucr.ac.cr

Turning Conflict Experiences of Some into Resilience for All: An Impossible Task?

Corine Philippart
University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg

Abstract

Learning, and especially the broader learning process, requires an intellectual and emotional effort. Such emotional effort can come with greater risks for some learner profiles than others, and this is particularly true for refugee/ forcibly displaced learners. To provide adequate support for these students from conflict-affected contexts, reflective educational practices and emotional support are recommended. However, in higher education, educators are often unaware of the circumstances and backgrounds of learners in their classes. This can lead to a lack of dedicated approaches, thus jeopardizing the benefits of educational programs, notably language education, which are essential for integration. The present study sought to address these concerns, questioning whether language courses designed for other foreign learners adequately meet the needs of more vulnerable individuals. More specifically, it analyzed the language learning needs of refugees/ forcibly displaced individuals and well-recognized larger groups, namely first-generation immigrants and incoming learners. The use of a collaborative mixed-method approach allowed for the integration of identified needs from various stakeholders, sources and methods as well as the discussion of actionable teaching practices. The needs analysis shows that refugee/ forcibly displaced learners are more at risk of encountering teaching practices that are less, or perhaps, the least, beneficial for them. However, it also concludes that refugees/ forcibly displaced individuals, first-generation immigrants, and incoming learners have overlapping views of what makes a language course effective and engaging, which are two significant criteria for long-term information retention and skill development. Implications for future research and adult language education practice are discussed.

Keywords: collaborative mixed method, effectiveness, language teaching/learning, migration, motivation

> "Language learning encompasses sensitive questions related to diversity, identity and culture. In a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual world, this contention becomes all the more important." (Majhanovich & Deyrich, 2017, p. 440)

A foreign language is not just another communication tool (Peguero, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). Language proficiency, even with the advent of AI and the automation of text translation and generation, is a prerequisite for democratic participation, economic opportunity, access to health care and socio-cultural integration (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Bradley et al., 2025; Peguero, 2024). From this perspective, providing access to locally relevant language education is an important support for any citizen, but a vital aid for any newcomer to a receiving community (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Çelik, 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

Nevertheless, there is still little research on the intersection of the migration of formally educated adults and their language learning needs. Building on Luxembourg's highly international and multilingual context (Hawkey & Horner, 2022; Scuto, 2023), the present study contributes to closing this gap by comparing the attributes of three adult learner groups in migration situations, guided by the research question below.

What needs are expressed by refugee/ forcibly displaced, immigrant and incoming learners participating in language classes organized by the Language Centre of the University of Luxembourg?

The inquiry had two underlying objectives. First, it sought to understand the learning needs of a multitude of diverse language earners. Focusing on learners' needs aligns with sociocultural approaches favored in European language education (Council of Europe, 2001). It also highlights the requirement for teachers to embrace the plurilingual and pluricultural diversity present in their courses, by dedicating space for its valorization and recognition (Council of Europe, 2020).

As the scope of language education widens, understanding language learning needs stemming from diversity has become a necessary condition for pedagogical conceptualization (Council of Europe, 2020), thereby leading to the second objective. The study additionally explored how teachers can best meet these learners' needs without inadvertently putting the most vulnerable ones, such as the refugee and forcibly displaced learners, in harm's way.

To prevent harm and in turn, promote student well-being, learners' perceptions were chosen to guide the analysis (Broek et al., 2023), which was performed through a mixed collaborative method (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Two criteria were used to reflect language learners' experience, drawing on interrelated cognitive, behavioral, and motivational dimensions (Phan & Ngu, 2021). Those are the perceived effectiveness, positive self-concept, and enthusiasm towards learning that language learners would experience if the identified needs were actively targeted by teachers in the classroom.

Literature Review

Migration movements growingly shape modern societies, setting a new defining phenomenon called superdiversity in motion (Vertovec, 2022). Luxembourg closely follows the same societal trend. According to Eurostat (2024), almost half of the population living in Luxembourg in 2023 (47.4%) did not have the Luxembourgish nationality. When compared with the European norm of 9.2%, Luxembourg appears as singular. Through this special position in the European migration landscape, Luxembourg can be conceptualized as a magnifying glass for migration phenomena and the accompanying superdiversity.

The effects of these phenomena are palpable in Luxembourg's education contexts (Luxembourg Centre for Educational Testing [LUCET] & Service de Coordination de la Recherche et de l'Innocation pédagogiques et technologiques [SCRIPT], 2025). As the learners become more diverse, new variables are affecting the teaching and learning processes. Some of these can revive a sensitive and critically important educational debate in a multilingual country like Luxembourg. Such is the case of the linguistic variable.

In addition to being a country of immigration (Scuto, 2023), Luxembourg is known for its "extensive individual and societal multilingualism (…) [in which] the national language of Luxembourgish is used alongside French and German" (Hawkey & Horner, 2022, p. 196). Consequently, Luxembourg has a unique linguistic configuration: unlike other multilingual societies around the world, it operates on the principle of contextual multilingualism. This type of multilingualism is characterized by the fact that geographic region is not a determining factor in the choice of the preferred language of communication (Hawkey & Horner, 2022).

Aligned with the national context, the traditional Luxembourgish education system seeks to develop individual plurilingualism among its population. At a later stage in the education system, the University of Luxembourg (hereafter, University) continues to show consideration for multilingual education. Since its foundation in 2003, the country's only public university has adopted a multilingual policy: Luxembourg's degree programs offer courses taught in French and/or German and/or English and/or – albeit to a lesser extent – Luxembourgish. As a result, in Luxembourg higher education, the ability to master several languages is a prerequisite for orientation and academic success (LUCET & SCRIPT, 2025).

In such a multilingual and international academic context, language learning and teaching has become an inevitable response to migration flows (UNESCO, 2025). In Luxembourg, a wide range of language training offers are available in response to these circumstances. The present study in particular was situated in the context of the language courses organized by the Language Centre of the University (hereafter, Language Centre). These free courses are open only to students and, depending on the study program, are integrated into the students' training. As such, the language courses provide learning opportunities for everyone, especially for more vulnerable students who lack the financial resources to build language competence elsewhere. However, unlike other contexts, where training programs tailored for refugee and forcibly displaced (RFD) learners have demonstrated their worth (Peguero, 2024), RFD students at the

University do not benefit from dedicated language courses that take their migration background into account. Relative to larger groups such as incoming students in international mobility programs and first-generation immigrant students RFD language learners thus account for a small proportion of learners in the classroom, which may explain the lack of dedicated institutional and pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, poor information exchange between the teaching, support and administrative staff is an aggravating factor (Baker et al., 2018), preventing the identification and consideration of the specific needs of the learners concerned.

The superdiversity era brings its own set of challenges. From a pedagogical point of view, the conjunction of social, cultural, economic, educational, gender, or age-based variables, to name but a few (LUCET & SCRIPT, 2025; Vertovec, 2022), results in the coexistence of multidirectional and sometimes contradictory imperatives in the same learning space. Confronted with these complex considerations, teachers face a paradox: they must design their teaching of a cohort (LUCET & SCRIPT, 2021) and at the same time, they have to adapt it to the various objectives, priorities, perceptions, desires and experiences that each learner in such an increasingly heterogeneous group might have (Council of Europe, 2001 and its companion volume, Council of Europe, 2020).

Maximizing a Learner's Competence Through Effective Learning

Regardless of the students' background or experience, one of the poignant questions that occupies teachers is how to "encourage and foster students' educational experiences" (Phan & Ngu, 2021, p. 14). This question, which is not new, shows the intentionality of teachers to choose the most effective teaching practices for their cohort and the various individualities within it (Council of Europe, 2001; Trinidad et al., 2020). However, there are no straightforward answers (Hattie, 2008) to what would secure learning opportunities for a wide range of learners. Superdiversity and migration flows aside, this open-endedness is nurtured by the fact that the objectives of instruction, along with the resources and relationships among the teacher, the learner, the subject matter, and the institution, have been evolving over time, crystallizing into diverse habitus or approaches (Puren, 2022).

Given that teaching practices are not uniformly ideal for all learners in every context and at all times, research in this area is critical, and identifying and exploring teaching practices that effectively enhance learning has been a key focus for several decades. Although the definition of effective learning and its constitutive elements may vary among scholars, some principles achieve a broad consensus.

The teacher's efforts in providing pedagogical expertise, fostering human connection, and facilitating a safe learning environment are among these recurring principles (Cummins, 2001; Hattie, 2008; Xu et al., 2023). These efforts provide pedagogical, social and emotional support to the learners, which significantly contributes to addressing their identity (Cummins, 2001) and psychological needs (Phan & Ngu, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). Among such fundamental needs, the student's agency and need for autonomy are consistently considered of great importance for effectiveness (Cummins, 2001; Phan & Ngu, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). Hattie (2008) further

underscores this aspect, asserting that learners ultimately determine what knowledge they retain. Because coercive and transmissive teaching methods lack alignment to learners' interests (Hattie, 2008), it is imperative for the teacher to understand how their learners function. Consequently, the teacher should investigate how learners conceptualize the world and the learning process, thereby adapting their approach to provide content of interest to them (Hattie, 2008).

If possessing interest and more broadly, sustained motivation are essential to learn effectively (Hattie, 2008; Phan & Ngu, 2021; Xu et al., 2023), successful practice necessitates both the learners' motivation to learn and their capacity to engage in the learning process. However, the strong mediation exerted by intrinsic motivation on engagement (Phan & Ngu, 2021; Xu et al., 2023) has led some scholars to treat these constructs jointly. This is the case of Trinidad et al. (2020), who use engaging and decidedly motivating synonymously. Despite this distinction or lack thereof, a predictive or direct causal relationship between motivation/ engagement and effective learning is not self-evident (Phan & Ngu, 2021; Trinidad et al., 2020). Assuming that a learner who engages with enjoyable and motivating teaching will automatically learn could be misleading for educators (Trinidad et al., 2020).

To work towards a better understanding of learners by their teachers (Hattie, 2008), the present study aimed to make learners' "internalised frames of reference" (Broek et al., 2023, p. 627) more visible. Continuing the discussion initiated by Trinidad et al. (2020), two decision-making criteria were selected for their ability to foster an educational environment that "can affect information retention and skill acquisition" (Trinidad et al., 2020, p. 168), including the learners' assessment of how well teaching practices support their functioning and their motivation to engage in learning. Here, effective functioning is defined as the learner's intention and personal desire to facilitate personal achievement in a capable fashion through organized thinking and ordered behavior (Phan & Ngu, 2021, p. 4). Motivation towards learning, on the other hand, adds another layer to the cognitive and behavioral aspects explored with effective functioning. It helps to define the learner's perceived state of motivation, by conveying information about the intrinsic or extrinsic drive to engage in learning (Phan & Ngu, 2021, p. 5).

Considering the Learner's Experience of Conflict

Ineffective and tedious language education may have adverse effects on learning. However, for those in more vulnerable situations, such as RFD learners, the repercussions can be even more severe. For them, language learning intersects a prerequisite for survival, resilience and integration into the community of arrival (Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Bradley et al., 2025).

These circumstances heighten the educational stakes for RFD learners. They also demonstrate why the conditions for effective learning for these students extend beyond the immediate educational environment (Bradley et al., 2025; Lebreton, 2017), as RFD learners need to allocate time and energy to navigating acculturative stress. Stressors inherent to their resettlement within a new community include, but are not limited to, economic (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Bradley et al., 2025), political (Aleghfeli et al., 2024;

Bradley et al., 2025; Hawkey & Horner, 2022), professional (Finnigan et al., 2023; Lam, 2019), and digital aspects (Bradley et al., 2025).

These contexts, which imply substantial personal involvement and emotional effort to be in a condition conducive to learning (Larrotta & Ture, 2025), also underline the responsibilities that institutions and teachers have towards populations from conflict-affected settings (Ab Rashid et al., 2025; Kester, 2024) and explain why the needs of even a minority of learners must not be left unattended. However, the work initiated here does not promote an "abyssal deficit-orientation that renders students from conflict-affected contexts as behind or in need of being saved" (Kester, 2024; p. 629; see also Lam, 2019). Rather, exploring these students' needs aims to recognize their unique experiences (Larrotta & Ture, 2025), which a learner-centered, culturally relevant pedagogy would include. Focusing on RFD learners is also justified, as they often express regret over the lack of training or curricula that address their needs (Larrotta & Ture, 2025; Lebreton, 2017).

For RFD learners, providing an inclusive learning environment is key to success (Aleghfeli et al., 2024). Inclusive practices include, among others, avoiding exclusion based on alternate views (Lam, 2019; Murdoch et al., 2020), or psychological needs arising from a learner's traumatic past (Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Lam, 2019).

Considering a traumatic past also requires ensuring safety in both everyday life (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Larrotta & Ture, 2025) and the educational setting. Outside the educational environment, RFD learners may face the pressures of adverse treatment, including devaluing discourses linked to their new migrant identity, which may lead to a weakening of self-esteem. Establishing a standard of compassionate and respectful exchanges in the classroom would prove beneficial (Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Kester, 2024; Larrotta & Ture, 2025; Murdoch et al., 2020). Aleghfeli et al. (2024, p. 11) recommend "the cultivation of pedagogical love", wherein teachers are encouraged to see, listen to, and tailor their approaches to learners, while being mindful that learners may be adults as well (Larrotta & Ture, 2025).

Such an approach highlights the importance for RFD learners of belonging to an open, supportive community (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Murdoch et al., 2020; Larrotta & Ture, 2025), with peers as the most immediate contacts, followed by the language teacher and, ultimately, the institutional staff (Baker et al., 2018). The openness of this network exceeds facilitating acculturation (Finnigan et al., 2023; Larrotta & Ture, 2025; Majhanovich & Deyrich, 2017) or acknowledging RFD learners' heritage language, indigenous knowledge, and identity (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Kester, 2024; Peguero, 2024). It also involves recognizing that learners in migration situations, notably women, often face increased responsibilities outside the classroom, such as family obligations (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Finnigan et al., 2023; Kester, 2024; Lam, 2019).

Fulfilling requirements for either inclusion, safety or belonging is not enough for RFD learners. As multiple circumstantial urgencies compete (Lebreton, 2017), education for learners with

conflict experiences should ideally be based on a more holistic approach (Ab Rashid et al., 2025; Kester, 2024).

Conflict-sensitive pedagogy aligns with this approach since it emphasizes quality education based on inclusion, social justice and a peacebuilding dynamic (United Nations, 2024: SDG 4, SDG 16). From the teacher's point of view, this definition can be rephrased following three key principles (Ab Rashid et al., 2025, p. 4): (1) the Do-not-harm paradigm, which is designed to alleviate tensions and moderate sensitivities; (2) the Resilience and Empathy Paradigm, which is designed to support learners in managing and adapting to change and its sometimes traumatic consequences; and (3) the Inclusion and Social Cohesion paradigm, which is designed to foster integration and acceptance in a supportive community.

Accordingly, conflict-sensitive pedagogy makes it possible to conceptualize education for language learners arriving from both conflict and post-conflict zones. By doing so, it reveals a potential for education in conflict prevention (The Hague Institute for Global Justice, 2023) and for education in peace zones receiving students from conflict-affected contexts. Considering this study falls into the latter category, the premise of conflict-sensitive pedagogy must be to sensitize teachers not to "[assume] students should naturally assimilate into the dominant local/global culture without regard for the conflicts and histories from which they originate" (Kester, 2024, p. 628). As such, it aimed to include the subjective beliefs and experiences of a diversity of learners, while nurturing a social learning context that mitigates classroom tension (Ab Rashid et al., 2025; Phan & Ngu, 2021).

Methodology

The study design relied on a mixed collaborative methodology, called Group Concept Mapping (GCM). Originating from social sciences, GCM aims to materialize through visual representations or maps how a group of heterogeneous stakeholders conceptualize an idea or issue (Kane & Trochim, 2007; McBeath et al., 2021).

Group Concept Mapping as a Collaborative/Participatory Paradigm

To foster conceptualization, GCM includes a collaborative process that is also described as participatory by some scholars (Kane & Trochim, 2007), and interested key stakeholders engage at various stages of the study via group work and interpretation sessions. Such partnership with the communities of interest serves as a decolonizing approach (McBeath et al., 2021), which is valuable to the research process, as it guides the reflection and final interpretation of the data, thereby minimizing researcher bias (Nicoras et al., 2022).

The collaborative/participatory paradigm and its advantages explain why GCM is highly regarded as a means of accessing the experiences of minority, vulnerable, geographically dispersed groups or, more generally, hard-to-reach communities (Finnigan et al., 2023). In this manner, GCM seeks to empower migration-related groups and ensure that their voices are equally heard "regardless of power or relationship dynamics" (McBeath et al., 2021, p. 143).

RFD students who are already a minority in their study environment are the most sensitive group, whereas immigrant and incoming students are respectively less at risk (Peguero, 2024).

Refugee students are considered most vulnerable due to their status and forced migration experience. Based on the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951), the term refugee refers to "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (p. 3). In Luxembourg, refugee students are therefore individuals who were granted international protection by the Ministry responsible for asylum, allowing them to enroll at the university. Forcibly displaced students, on the other hand, share a similar migration experience with refugee students, but have not applied for protection status. Given the similarities in their forced migration histories, RFD students are considered jointly in this study.[1]

Neither the amended Law of 29 August 2008[2], which is Luxembourg's immigration law, nor international law (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2019) provide a legal definition of the term immigrant. This study therefore relies on a locally relevant definition which is provided by the European Migration Network. Its glossary (European Migration Network [EMN], 2018) defines an immigrant as "a person [in the EU context] who establishes their usual residence in the territory of an EU Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months, having previously been usually resident in another EU Member State or a third country" (p. 203). Tailored to the Luxembourgish context, first-generation immigrant students are approached as non-Luxembourgish students who willingly left their country of origin with the explicit intention to establish a long-term residence in Luxembourg and have already resided there for more than 12 months.

However, students participating in an international mobility program, also known as incoming students, are not required to have resided in Luxembourg previously (University of Luxembourg, 2024). In this study, incoming students are those with at least one foreign nationality who are enrolled at universities other than the University of Luxembourg. Additionally, they reside in Luxembourg solely for the purpose of their studies, typically for less than 12 months, and have expressed a clear intention of short-term settlement.

Alongside the three student groups discussed above, identified by criteria like reported student status, migration experience and intention, and place and duration of residence, the present research project brings together other voices with greater institutional power. These are program directors responsible for programs with a larger number of RFD students, members of the administrative staff, language teachers and a student-tutor from the Language Centre.

[1] Please note that students, who were previously under international or temporary protection and have since been naturalized, are included in this group, given the forced migration experience they went through. Only one student was found to be in this configuration.

[2] Referenced in French as "Loi modifiée du 29 août 2008".

Group Concept Mapping Steps

While the collaboration with multiple communities, each featuring varying degrees of vulnerability and institutional influence, qualitatively contributes to the study, the methodology's final yields take the shape of statistical maps. Unlike hand-crafted concept maps, GCM processes qualitative data quantitatively, thus a mixed methodology. Six steps typically build GCM methodology. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of participation in the stages where stakeholders' input is usually anticipated by the methodology.

Step 1: Preparing GCM

GCM's preparation step, also known as the "brainstorming" phase, aligns with the initial phases of a non-collaborative research approach. The researchers aim to understand the field, identify the key knowledge-holding participants without whom the research should not progress, and formulate the research question(s) (Kane & Trochim, 2007).

Stage 1 is also the stage during which GCM's focus prompt was designed. While the research question drove the rationale, the focus prompt grounded the research objectives and was used to interact with participants. This study's focus prompt was the following: "to learn a foreign language, the learner in a situation of migration, whether chosen or forced, needs to …".

In GCM, the preparation phase only collects qualitative data and may take many forms. This study's data collection involved three sources. Initial responses to the focus prompt were developed from a survey entitled Linguistic and Cultural Skills of non-Luxembourgish Students. The survey that was partly funded by a European project (SERAFIN 2022-2025: 2022-1-BE01-KA220-HED-000085227)[3] targeted foreign students at the University during the 2023-2024 winter semester. With its 442 anonymous responses, 156 RFD, immigrant or incoming learners were identified based on the definitions provided earlier for these student groups (see table 1). A second data source took the form of 24 semi-structured interviews. Participants for the semi-structured interviews were selected based on their survey responses, which were compared to the definitions discussed earlier, and their willingness to participate further. The survey therefore also served as a contact database for the identification, selection and recruitment of students interested in continuing their contribution to the study. The decision to conduct semi-structured interviews and the topics to be covered in the process also followed the guidelines of the aforementioned European project. However, the interview guides were slightly adapted to better fit the local context and the profile of each participant. These adaptations were necessary to address the difference in position and expertise between the interviewees (Gerson & Damaske, 2020).

Among the interviewees, there were 12 students, 7 male and 5 female, from 7 different fields of study and 12 countries of origin (see Appendix A). These students were regarded as experts

[3] The survey underwent internal review and minor revisions prior to distribution, ensuring its clarity for participants. As it was designed for exploratory purposes, extensive validation procedures were not pursued.

in their own learning processes. The other half consisted of 12 domain experts with various expertise, including 5 pedagogical experts who were language teachers with experience working in higher education with RFD, immigrant and/or incoming students; 2 contextual experts, serving as administrative staff in charge of guest or special needs students; and 5 institutional experts, represented by program directors whose programs are regularly attended by refugee learners (see Appendix B). These 24 interviewees shared among others what they consider should be prescribed or favored in learning/teaching with migrant audiences. In addition to interviews, an unrecorded focus group was also part of the data collection. It took place in a French language course organized by the teacher-researcher, in part developed within the European project activities.

Table 1

Study Participation and Overlap

GCM steps / Participant	Preparing GCM			Generating the statements	Sorting & Rating	Interpreting maps	Total overlap between steps
	Interviews	Focus Group	Survey				
Administrative staff	2	/	/	/	/	/	/
Incoming student	5	1	21	/	10	1	4
Immigrant student	3	2	115	/	10	2	3
Language teacher	5	/	/	/	/	1	1
Program director	5	/	/	/	/	/	/
Refugee/ forcibly displaced student	4	2	20	/	10	2	6
Student-tutor	/	/	/	1	/	/	/
Total	24	5	156	1	30	6	14

Step 2: Generating the Statements

Step 2 aimed to develop a list of unique and clear ideas that could be reused with the focus prompt in subsequent steps of the methodology. The development of these ideas, or statements, followed the process detailed by Kane and Trochim (2007), key figures in the development and application of GCM.

In this case, the individual statements were extracted verbatim from the transcribed interviews, the survey responses and the learners' traces in the focus group. In total, 296 statements were identified. These statements were then reviewed and edited in an excel file to ensure a clear completion of the focus prompt and correct grammar and spelling mistakes.

To reduce the statement set from 296 to 100 or fewer, as recommended by Kane and Trochim (2007), a collaboration was established with a Luxembourgish student-tutor who had been working for approximately 1 year in the field of language remediation with foreign students at the Language Centre. Initially, independent assessments were conducted to evaluate the fidelity

of the rewording and edition of each statement in relation to the anonymized quotation(s). Following codes mentioned by other researchers, such as Finnigan et al. (2023), and Stack-Cutler et al. (2017), each statement was autonomously coded to identify "unique", "unclear", "repeated" concepts, but also, "compounds" and statements that "do not respond to the focus prompt".

Subsequently, the assessments were reconciled and discussed in a face-to-face session. Due to time constraints and more specifically, the fact that the student's contract with the Language Centre was coming to an end, the consolidation stage and the final list of 100 language learning needs were independently finalized by the researcher, although the student-tutor remained available to answer questions.

Step 3: Sorting and Rating the Statements

It was during the sorting and rating stage that the qualitative data was transformed into quantitative data. Through the sorting activity, participants were asked to sort a paper deck of statement cards into groups in a style that was comprehensible to them (Trochim & McLinden, 2017, p. 168). The rating activity required participants to give a grade to each statement on one or more criteria using a 5-point Likert scale (Trochim & McLinden, 2017).

In this study, two assessment criteria were chosen to assess the qualitative data, formatted as a list of 100 statements. To support participants, the assessment of a statement's perceived effectiveness was guided by the question "Personally, will I make progress if I can + statement?", while the question "Personally, would I want to learn if I could + statement?" was designed to guide engagement assessment (see also Phan & Ngu, 2021; Phan et al., 2018). These criteria provided access to one's learning perceptions, which explains why only language learners were invited to take part in step 3 (see table 1 above). Moreover, stage 3 participants systematically carried out the sorting activity followed by the rating activity, which corresponded on average to 1.5 to 2 hours of individual work. In order to mitigate the cognitive effort, participants were informed that they were at all times free to rest for a few moments or to take a break by physically leaving the room. Each sorting and rating session concluded with an unrecorded exchange on the research process between the participant and researcher.

Out of a total of 30 students, 10 incoming, 10 immigrant and 10 RFD students engaged in the sorting and rating activities. Although this sample size per learner group may seem limited, it followed the standard validity and reliability requirements for GCM. More participants can be included, but the decision depends on the research specificities and factors such as management capacity and the gain/ participant effort dimension. Furthermore, GCM is not typically concerned with issues of random or proportional selection as in other social science research. The importance in this type of research exists in assuring that minority perspectives (...) in any context will be included (Trochim & McLinden, 2017, p. 168). Similarly, it is not necessary for the same stakeholders to be involved at every stage of the research. In this study, and more specifically for stage 3, the sample size took into account the representation of RFD learners in the institution, with only 20 identified during the 2023-2024 university-wide survey, and

ensured balanced sample sizes given the objective of testing rating consensus between the three groups.

Step 4: Computing Maps

During step 4, the quantitative data developed through the sorting and rating activities was entered into software for analysis. The current study used the open-source software R-Cmap, supplemented by excel. R-Cmap is a software that was specially developed to facilitate GCM work for researchers with no R-related coding skills (Bar, 2022; Bar & Mentch, 2017). It builds an interface that allows the user to make technical, conceptual and statistical choices, and also provides a sorter/rater analysis.

Unlike digital sorting/rating which could be programmed to require one answer per statement, students worked on paper handouts. Unexpectedly, some participants either circled several values per statement or did not select any values on several occasions. Consequently, a total of 57 ratings were excluded, with 32 for perceived effectiveness and 25 for engagement, representing an acceptable error margin of 0.95% (< 5%).

Step 5: Interpreting Maps

Step 5 was the most collaborative phase of the study. Two interpretation sessions of approximately 1h45 took place with 4 and 2 participants. The first session included one language teacher, one incoming and two immigrant students, while the second was attended by two RFD students. During these sessions, the researcher moderated and guided work groups' analysis of selected GCM map(s). In this case, the results of the sorting phase were discussed by analyzing a foundational map called cluster map. The analysis of the cluster map was an important starting point, as it guided final data interpretation and informed more advanced GCM visualizations. Results of the rating phase allowed through greater analysis a more advanced visualization known as the Go-zone plot.

Step 6: Utilizing Maps

Step 6 involved testing the external reliability of the maps and interpretations developed as part of GCM. The final step of the research lead to putting the results into perspective through existing literature.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the vulnerability of the communities of interest, the research was conducted after obtaining approval from the University's Ethics Review Panel. Measures have also been taken with the University's Data Protection Office. These exchanges with the Ethics Review Panel and Data Protection Office aimed to ensure the physical and emotional safety of participants, enhance the transparency of the research process to strengthen trustworthiness, and collaborate

with participants by enabling them to exercise their right of choice and autonomy (Reicherter et al., 2022).

Special arrangements for semi-structured interviews with RFD students reinforced the commitment to participants' emotional safety (Reicherter et al., 2022). The planned semi-structured interviews revolved around the participants' background and experiences, which had the potential to lead to psychological harm and retraumatization (Reicherter et al., 2022). In collaboration with the University's psychological support team, meetings with RFD students were scheduled within the institution at appropriate times to ensure immediate psychological support could be provided in case of emergencies. As university staff, the researcher could also freely call on the psychological support team in the event of secondary traumatization (Reicherter et al., 2022).

Moreover, information and consent sheets corresponding to the various data collections were developed and explained to the participants to ensure they understood the use of their data and could provide informed consent. Each participant had the right of withdrawal: they could choose not to answer a question, cease their participation at any time, or request the deletion of their data during or after the data collection. Voluntary participation was the sole method of recruitment for this research.

Finally, to preserve the privacy of the participants, particularly given their belonging to sensitive or even vulnerable communities, reported data were anonymized. The prevailing method of de-identification involved replacing data identifiers with anonymous values, using a combination of letters and/or numbers.

Findings

Operating a Go-zone Plot

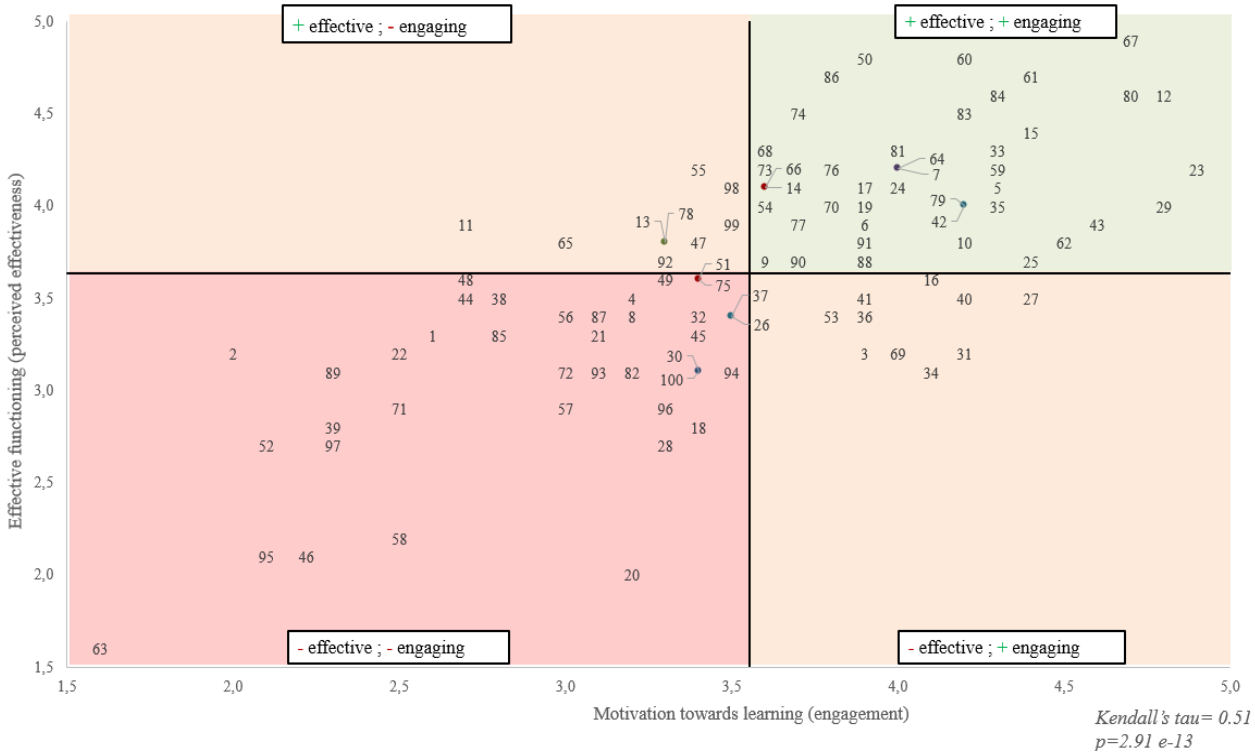
Developing specific goals and actions can be informed in GCM through bivariant plots called Go-zone plots (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Here, these plots visually displayed the 100 language learning needs identified in steps 1 and 2, through a relative scale of perceived effectiveness and engagement, developed in steps 3 and 4 (see Figure 1 below). In practice, the position of a statement corresponded to the x-coordinate and the y-coordinate, which were obtained by averaging the engagement and the perceived effectiveness scores for that statement, respectively. The x and y axes, calculated by taking the average of all statement scores for each criterion, then classified the statements into meaning-making quadrants.

The upper-right quadrant stands for the needs that are most likely to ensure the most effective and engaging language learning experiences. It is referred to as the Go-zone. On the opposite side, the lower-left quadrant groups the lowest-ranking statements, which are perceived as least effective and engaging. Needs located in the remaining two quadrants have a certain effect on language learning, but it varies. The upper-left quadrant indicates highly effective but less

engaging statements, whereas the lower-right quadrant includes highly engaging but less effective ones.

Figure 1

Go-zone Plot: Incoming Learners



The validity and reliability of the sample size made it possible to conceptualize a Go-zone plot for each adult language learner group (see Figure 1 and Appendices C and D). The positions of the needs on the quadrants of the three Go-zones were then compared. Out of the 100 needs discussed though this study, 12 could not be reconciled. A partial alignment was found for 45 needs between two student groups, while the remaining 43 received an identical assessment across the three learner profiles.

Implications for Teachers

Embracing Diversity in Experience: Towards a More Effective Language Education for All

Findings from the research project revealed that the RFD, immigrant and incoming student participants had a shared understanding of 43 needs. The Go-zone included 22 needs, whereas 21 others were identified as least effective and engaging. There was no consensus on the assessment of needs in terms of effective but not engaging and engaging but not effective properties. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the 43 needs for which RFD, immigrant and incoming students reached a consensus.

These 43 needs can be grouped thematically into actionable teaching practices. Statements 10, 23, 25, 29, 64, 79, 83 located in the Go-zone and statements 49, 58 in the opposite quadrant point towards the student-teacher relationship. Such hints can be identified through the concepts of trust, attentiveness, appreciation, student boundaries, closeness and room for freedom of expression. Particularly for migrant learners, these statements show a yearning for a relationship of trust with a teacher that is emotionally available.

In addition to a close interpersonal relationship with the teacher, targeted disciplinary support is key to learning. More precisely, language learning is believed to be enhanced by detailed feedback, in which the teacher, as opposed to a fellow classmate (38), seeks to elicit the learner's understanding (73). Teacher feedback and language teaching, in general, should not anticipate mastery of technical jargon specific to language education (93).

Table 2

Needs Jointly Assessed as Most Effective and Engaging

Statement number	Statement completing the focus prompt "to learn a foreign language, the learner in a situation of migration, whether chosen or forced, needs to…"
5	Have access to free or low-cost language classes (and the tools/resources needed for them)
6	Have access to themed summary sheets containing key local and linguistic information and recap exercises
7	Have access to an appropriate study space
10	Trust their teacher
12	Have personal reasons for learning that go beyond professional or academic obligations (e.g. a desire to discover new subjects, etc.)
15	Have useful contact people (friends, mentor, tandem partner, peer tutor, classmate, etc.) to help them learn the language outside class (a learning community)
23	Have a teacher who is approachable and easy to talk to
25	Have an attentive teacher who observes and takes into account the learner's behaviour, reactions and feelings
29	Have a teacher who is driven and enthusiastic about teaching
33	Have a teacher who prepares each lesson carefully
43	Be kind to themselves, because learning a language is a process that requires time and mistakes
54	Have their level tested before or at the beginning of a course
60	Participate in class to develop their speaking skills
62	Be able to choose from a wide range of language courses depending on their profile and needs (academic vs general language, focus on oral vs written skills, specialised language skills, intensive courses, etc.)
64	Be able to express their opinion in class in a respectful, open way (management of freedom of expression)
67	Practise the language in real-life situations outside class, for example by going on language trips or having telephone conversations in the target language (linguistic risk-taking)

73	Receive detailed explanations about their mistakes in all feedback from the teacher so they understand where they went wrong
Statement number	**Statement completing the focus prompt "to learn a foreign language, the learner in a situation of migration, whether chosen or forced, needs to…"**
79	Feel that the teacher values their efforts to learn
81	Immerse themselves in the new language outside class by using multimedia content
83	Take a course with a small number of participants
84	Take a language course in person
88	Take a course in which the content is presented clearly and gradually so that the learner can take things on board progressively

Table 3

Needs Jointly Assessed as Least Effective and Engaging

Statement number	Statement completing the focus prompt "to learn a foreign language, the learner in a situation of migration, whether chosen or forced, needs to…"
4	Have access to multilingual teaching materials
18	Be free to choose whether or not to register for a language course
20	Have the opportunity to talk about difficult topics like death or violence so as to gain a better understanding of cultural differences and integrate more easily
30	Have a multilingual teacher who speaks the learners' languages, or failing that English, as well as the target language
38	Be given the opportunity to assess the work of other learners
39	Compare the target language with a language the learner speaks (vocabulary, writing system, etc.)
46	Be assessed without the usual formal mechanisms (e.g. no marks, no formal framework, no prior warning of tests, etc.)
49	Be encouraged by the teacher to overcome hesitations and preferences for certain teaching methods (e.g. working alone vs in a group, optional vs compulsory homework, action-oriented vs audiovisual approach, etc.)
51	Be selected when activities are distributed or learners are chosen to participate in class
52	Avoid using tools based on artificial intelligence (e.g. DeepL or ChatGPT) when reading and writing in the target language
58	Maintain a professional distance with the teacher (a teacher is not a friend)
63	Be able to read exam questions in different languages (for example in English for a French course)
71	Engage in online practice exercises
82	Take a course with learners from a similar environment with similar expectations
85	Take a language course that combines in-person sessions and independent online activities
89	Take a pre-university programme explaining methodological strategies and local academic expectations
93	Work on content without having to master the technical jargon associated with language teaching

95	Use fictional scenarios to avoid negative emotions associated with sharing their own story and personal challenges
Statement number	**Statement completing the focus prompt "to learn a foreign language, the learner in a situation of migration, whether chosen or forced, needs to…"**
96	Use artificial intelligence (e.g. ChatGPT or Duolingo) to practise the language outside class
97	Mainly use paper-based teaching materials
100	Visit the infrastructures and campus(es) where they will be learning

At the same time, language education should not overprioritize multilingual approaches. Effective and engaging teaching practices do not require the teacher to have a strong multilingual repertoire (30), to adopt a contrastive teaching approach (39) or to provide multilingual materials for in-class or exam use (4; 63). Predictability is the quality that is most sought after by migrant learners. Course content (88) and assessment modalities (46) should be clearly communicated to the learners throughout the course. Learners also appreciate being selected to participate in class on a voluntary basis (51) and attending courses following a gradual approach, rather than a patchwork of unrelated recycled activities (33; 88).

While course content, progress and assessment need to be structured, the format of teaching activities should vary to maximize learning (97). In the digital era, multimedia resources (81) and AI tools (52) are appreciated, provided that two conditions are met. Digital activities should neither translate into online practice exercises (71) nor into out-of-class activities that favor autonomous work over immersion (81; 85; 96).

Time spent out of the classroom is regarded as better invested if it is used to connect with the wider target language community (67) or to build an out-of-class learning community (15; 96). The latter is however also true in the classroom, as learners value human interaction (84), that would support their language learning journey.

Although exchanges with these communities increase learning opportunities, learners feel that they must be the driving force behind their learning. The most relevant reasons for learning a language must go beyond fleeting extrinsic motivations such as professional or academic obligations (12). This need for personal involvement can be seen as an indication that learners associate successful cognitive learning with their commitment as fully-fledged individuals. In this context, the use of fictional scenarios to avoid exposing oneself, potentially the migrant self, is not seen as effective or engaging (95).

Moreover, the brief but repeated exposure to sometimes complex emotions contributes to trauma healing (Montanez, 2023). Although the threat of re-traumatization raises great fears amongst teachers who are not trained to address such questions (Ab Rashid et al., 2025), language education could contribute to this process by advocating a laissez-faire approach. In practice, teachers should allow even negative emotions to emerge in the classroom (95) and yet not deliberately target difficult topics like death or violence (20). The discussion topics covered in the course should enable students to participate actively in class, using oral activities to

accelerate the development of the learners' language skills (60). Suitable topics would require a contemporary local thematic anchoring (6).

Finally, two more consequences can be drawn from the learner's commitment. On the one hand, courses with learners from a similar environment and with similar expectations tend to be perceived negatively (82). Consequently, courses bringing together a diversity of profiles, rather than a more homogeneous and normative majority, may help learners feel secure enough to further portray their authentic personalities and thoughts and therefore get more involved personally. On the other hand, personal involvement in the context of language for survival and resilience could possibly lead to excessive self-imposed pressure to succeed, leaving little room for mistakes. However, time and mistakes are considered essential components of the learning process, necessitating self-compassion (43). Although statement 43 does not explicitly specify whether the teacher should internalize this reminder of self-compassion, educators may wish to implement it to ensure that all learners establish a common ground.

In their practice, teachers also need to keep in mind that all three learner groups conceptualize the feeling of effectiveness and engagement as an interrelated concept (Kendall's tau τ for all raters = 0.6; p = 2.61e-18) (Phan et al., 2018; Trinidad et al., 2020). Consequently, the more effective migrant learners picture the teaching practice, the more they are likely to feel motivation towards learning; and vice versa. However, this moderately strong, positive correlation between perceived effectiveness and engagement varies slightly from one group to another. RFD learners are more sensitive to this association (τ = 0.63; p = 1.39e-12), while immigrants (τ = 0.5; p = 3.3e-19) and incoming learners (τ = 0.51; p = 2.91e-13) may be considering other influencing variables.

The remaining statements 5, 7, 54 and 62 (Table 2) as well as 18, 89 and 100 (Table 3) provide some indication of institutional choices that learners consider impacting language learning. Although motivation towards learning should go beyond academic obligations (12), participants agree that language courses should be integrated directly into their curriculum (18). This shift from a personal to an institutional choice to take part in language courses might entail responsibilities from the institution's perspective. These include providing a variety (62) of free or low-cost (5) course options to students. Additionally, institutional support would be appreciated in determining the learners' actual language proficiency before or at the beginning of the course (54) and in ensuring access to appropriate study facilities outside it (7). However, pre-university support relating to local practical or academic aspects is deemed ineffective and unengaging for language learning (89, 100).

Navigating Pedagogical Tensions

Besides the consensus discussed above, diverging needs assessments exist between these three learner groups. Due to partial agreement among two of the three tested learner groups, 45 identified language learning needs might raise perceptual concerns. Upon closer examination, 25 out of 45 needs can lead to the implementation of teaching practices that might negatively affect specific learner groups and thus deprive at least one group from learning opportunities.

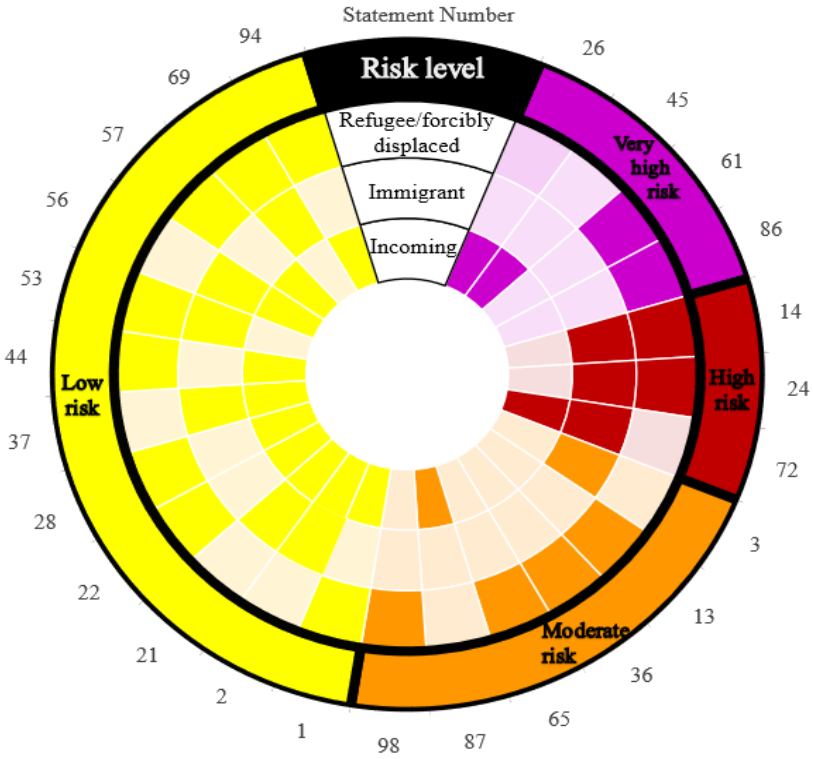
These possible deprivations of learning opportunities are highlighted in Figure 2 below. The different learning experiences among the groups also allow for categorizing the likelihood of a negative learning experience into four levels: very high, high, moderate, and low risk.

Statements 26, 45, 61 and 86 are labelled as very high. Very high risk refers to the possibility that teachers' insufficient knowledge about a learner group might lead them to prioritize a need they assume is typical for groups with a migration background. Although such a strategy would maximize 2 learner groups' chances to have an effective and engaging learning, the third group would persistently face unfavorable experiences.

Analyzing these discrepancies also helps to further inform and nuance the trends identified in the findings. Incoming students, for example, find evaluations aligned with the contents seen in class to be ineffective and unengaging for their learning (45). However, the need for predictability of immigrant and RFD students goes beyond clear communication standards and extends to the content of tests. Unlike immigrant and incoming learners, RFD learners also show an additional in-class need. Although multilingual approaches are not expected from the teacher, RFD learners would feel disadvantaged if they could not use languages other than the target language (86). Outside the classroom, these students also feel that local events do not meet their need for a learning community, nor do they offer practice opportunities in real-life settings or the multimedia format sought in immersion activities (61).

Figure 2

Needs At Risk of Creating Barriers to Learning



26 Have a competent teacher (who has completed teacher training)
45 Be assessed in a consistent and predictable way based on the content seen in class
61 Participate outside class in events organised by the university or the local community (social integration)
86 Take a course that is taught directly in the target language, avoiding use of other languages

14 Be given regular breaks during class (a 10-minute break for every 55 minutes of teaching)
24 Have a teacher from a country where the language is spoken
72 Receive clear explanations on practical subjects to familiarise themselves with the local academic system (e.g. criteria on plagiarism, how the online learning platform works, precise instructions about homework, etc.)

3 Learn using physical objects in the classroom (kinaesthetic learning)
13 Be able to take part in targeted catch-up lessons (for example if there is no written tradition in the learner's mother tongue or if the learner encounters difficulties during the learning process)
36 Have a teacher who uses humour as a medium for learning
65 Have solely pragmatic reasons for learning (work, study, integration, etc.)
87 Take a course based on the principle of continuous assessment (regular assessments)
98 Use a digital educational platform to receive support during the learning process, especially outside class

1 Acquire mainly vocabulary in class
2 Acquire mainly grammar in class
21 Read around the subject before starting a written assignment
22 Engage in activities in class that promote the learner's culture (e.g. language, cuisine, geography, public holidays, etc.)
28 Have a teacher who knows how to use digital technologies
37 Have mainly homework consisting of mainly short exercises, regardless of the subject (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, written tasks, etc.)
44 Have a structured learning framework in which the teacher monitors absences and gives additional homework so that the learner can work on the content covered in class at home
53 Be part of a community related to their origins, language or culture
56 Have the opportunity to jointly evaluate their progress with their teacher by developing a shared assessment portfolio
57 Be systematically corrected by the teacher
69 Maintain contact with the teacher outside class (WhatsApp, Teams, email)
94 Learn with games (e.g. online activities, fun quizzes, card games, dominoes, sketches/role plays, etc.)

Like very high-risk practices, high-risk teaching practices include statements with a minority-majority tension. However, it is the opposite here with two of the three learner groups could be affected by an unengaging and ineffective learning experience, while the third group enjoys what it perceives as most engaging and effective. A risk arises when the teachers focus on the needs of the learner group with whom they are most familiar, such as incoming students, and extrapolate a potential benefit to the other groups.

These high-risk practices highlight diverging priorities in terms of what is expected from the teacher. Immigrant and RFD learners do not see the teacher's nativeness as conditioning their learning success as much as incoming learners (24). However, RFD learners expect more from teachers than immigrants. They perceive teachers as resource people outside their community of origin that can help them overcome their lack of locally relevant knowledge and thus, support their adaptation to a new environment (72).

Among the practices that are deemed moderately risky, the tested statements are perceived as somewhat beneficial for 2 groups – either as effective but not engaging or engaging but not effective, but unhelpful for a minority. In this context, the risk of these practices being implemented is mitigated, as teachers would be expected to deprioritize practices perceived by the majority of the cohort as lacking pronounced positive impact.

Earlier findings from the study showed that multimedia resources were well received. Digital platforms received more mixed reviews, further isolating RFD learners (98). Similarly, despite the efforts of the teacher/institution, the introduction of catch-up sessions does not align with the learning needs of all groups (13). Rather than the result of a lack of motivation, students with these backgrounds find the energy to learn at other levels than others (65).

Lastly, practices with the lowest risks connote that if the opinion of one group is upheld for somewhat satisfactory results, the other two would go through an unengaging and ineffective experience. The risk here is at its lowest, given that a significant disadvantage for the cohort should lead to a markedly decreased likelihood of dedicated teaching practices.

Despite the need for a structured learning experience, teacher monitoring is considered effective but unengaging by immigrant students, while RFD and incoming students find it counterproductive (44). This statement’s assessment points towards the context of adult education, highlighting the greater freedom that adult learners usually value (Broek et al., 2023) and the desire to limit out-of-class constraints, such as homework, for which learners do not necessarily have time.

Overall, a significant majority of the 25 needs mentioned result in missed learning opportunities for RFD learners (16), as opposed to slightly more than half for incoming learners (14) and a lesser share for immigrant learners (10). The number of potentially risky practices for incoming learners may be surprising. However, the likelihood of experiencing less relevant practices is minimal, given that the practices that are potentially harmful to them coincide almost exclusively with practices presenting low risks. RFD students, on the other hand, find

themselves in the opposite situation. They are more likely to have their needs unaddressed because, in the event of divergence, these needs are inconsistent with the Go-zone assessment of the other two groups.

Discussion

The findings section shows that RFD, immigrant and incoming learners share similar perceptions regarding needs that must be met to guarantee an engaging and effective language learning experience. Capitalizing on shared assessments can maximize learning for all. However, some divergences exist, highlighting the risk of misunderstandings and tensions between teachers and learners. In that case, the views of RFD learners on what is optimal for their learning often diverge significantly from those of other learner groups. From a teacher perspective, focusing on the needs of the classroom's numerically dominant groups, namely the immigrant or incoming learners, is likely to sustain serious learning barriers for RFD learners, meanwhile the reverse is not true.

Feeling

The nature of learning as well as the effects of traumatic experiences on the brain could be one explanation as to why this study found the highest number of suboptimal practices among RFD learners. Literature indicates that quality learning is a risk-taking process which mobilizes the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and identity self (Broek et al., 2023). In such a transformative effort where affect is embodied, the learner's world is challenged and shaken with difficulty in order to reassess previous experiences and replace them with new ones (Murdoch et al., 2020; Trinidad et al., 2020). The extent of such a complex enquiry makes any learning process difficult for learners who are "not prepared for or accustomed to feelings of uncertainty and resistance" (Murdoch et al., 2020, p. 663). However, vulnerable individuals such as RFD learners are already in a heightened world-shattered state (Finnigan et al., 2023; Kester, 2024), as they were forced to give up who they were in their country of origin (Çelik, 2023) and are now required to navigate many spheres of their receiving societies without adequate preparation (Baker et al., 2018, Finnigan et al., 2023).

Their migration circumstances may prevent them from engaging in this reshuffling as efficiently as other learner groups (Aleghfeli et al., 2024; Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Bradley et al., 2025). These circumstances also explain why these learners in particular value structured, step-by-step courses (Larrotta & Ture, 2025). Spiral curricula, with its ability to review and refresh knowledge, allows for an increased number of repetitions that these learners need to embark on the language learning journey (Larrotta & Ture, 2025).

Feeling Seen

While RFD learners are hindered in their learning progress by a state of acute awareness of oneself and one's surroundings, they also yearn for their worth to be recognized and welcomed (Çelik, 2023; Larrotta & Ture, 2025; Murdoch et al., 2020). However, far from being exclusive

to RFD learners, the desire for respect is a long-held aspiration among migration groups (Lam, 2019).

These desires and the shape they take in the learning environment were also identified and examined in this study. However, further sustainable practices may be identified through existing literature. A selection is explored here and connected to the findings.

From a pedagogical perspective, Larrotta & Ture (2025) point out that teachers should, in addition to being attentive, empathetic, patient and encouraging, use their authority to avoid power dominance among learners. To support peacebuilding in a superdiverse classroom with multiple beliefs and agendas, Kester (2024) also advises teachers to actively promote mixed-group work. Such an approach provides the opportunity to challenge cultural, ethnic and gender-related beliefs (Larrotta & Ture, 2025), thus promoting diversity awareness and support, including within the local in-class learning community. With the specific needs of RFD learners in mind, teachers should additionally carefully select their teaching resources, paying particular attention to potentially unsettling visuals that could trigger emotional responses. Materials displaying or voicing the diversity present in the classroom are also well received (Ab Rashid et al., 2025; Larrotta & Ture, 2025).

Feeling Heard

Even if they build a divergent minority, ignoring RFD voices would convey the message that their "defective" alignment with the majority present in class makes them an undesirable problem (Kester, 2024; Lam, 2019). This path could further dehumanize RFD learners in a system that they may perceive has already taken away some of their humanity (Arjona Soberón et al., 2017; Sasia, 2018). In these circumstances, advocating for more language courses designed with RFD learners in mind, regardless of whether they are explicitly identified in the classroom, could bring more inclusion and social justice in language education.

Working in the direction of successful learning for all starts by building a respectful and humane learner-centered environment (Baker et al., 2018; Gravani et al., 2024; Kester, 2024; Larrotta & Ture, 2025) in which these students feel safe enough to bond with their peers and teacher. Social cohesion and empathy-building however require good communication between the teacher and the learners, and "good communication takes time" (Larrotta & Ture, 2025, p. 46). This observation serves as a call to institutions to prioritize language education programs that are delivered over time with frequent sessions. Course-wise, institutions should allow for flexibility notably in terms of attendance, scope and classroom language usage, as curricula should be fitted to the specificities of an adult population (Gravani et al., 2024; Lam, 2019; Larrotta & Ture, 2025).

Research Limitations

The findings presented here were assessed solely on the basis of the learners' self-reporting (Phan & Ngu, 2021). Although debated, learners are not always considered valid needs-related

informants despite their insider view (Choi & Park, 2024). The diversity, and more specifically, the dissimilarity, in the learners' backgrounds might also lead researchers to interpret the results with prudence (Phan & Ngu, 2021, p. 18).

Subsequent studies might therefore require both objective and subjective measures (Trinidad et al., 2020). Effectiveness might for instance be "empirically measured through students' grades, acquired skills, transfer of knowledge, or retention of ideas" (Trinidad et al., 2020, p. 162), while being correlated with the opinions and perceptions of other stakeholders, such as teachers. The repetition and comparison of needs analyses in other international and multilingual contexts will also support the context-dependency, which characterizes needs analyses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

No universal recipe exists to excel at language learning and teaching in all settings. But it is possible to build a more inclusive framework to language education. To succeed, such a framework needs to be informed of the attributes of diverse adult language learners, which will support teachers in making stimulating pedagogical choices for different groups of learners (Trinidad et al., 2020). Contextualized responses are required to address classroom realities, which is why this study suggests a vision of inclusion rooted in the local learning context.

Currently, language education at the University does not adopt programs tailored for specific learner groups. While such an approach comes with the disadvantage of isolating the learners concerned (Arjona Soberón et al., 2017), it has also been proven largely successful in other multilingual contexts like Switzerland. However, the main current approach to inclusion in Luxembourg relies on the "physical placement of students with additional or special needs in mainstream classrooms" (Murdoch et al., 2020, p. 679), supported on a case-by-case basis by a Committee for Reasonable Adjustments. This second definition of inclusion would require a still under-recognized equity group like RFD learners (Baker et al., 2018), to devote a substantial portion of their time and energy to adapting and integrating rather than to learning (Majhanovich & Deyrich, 2017).

In this context, a more holistic vision of inclusion could be put forward (UNESCO, 2025), emphasizing the focus on teachers and their ability to create links between different outcomes of the learning experience, beyond just grades. It could mean developing an educational community that gives learners opportunities to deal with their emotions, know that their presence and efforts are valued, and feel that their needs are heard, thereby underpinning the role that perceived social experiences play in fostering psychological processes, motivational beliefs and learning outcomes (Phan & Ngu, 2021, p. 15).

Striving for the learning's optimal outcome is a complex task, even for experienced teachers. Flexibly taking advantage of opportunities related to space, time, and resources in an international and multilingual context is a skill that must be learned (Gravani et al., 2024; Larrotta & Ture, 2025). Supporting teachers in this task would enable them to fulfill the

pedagogical responsibility brought about by superdiversity wherein educators acknowledge and encourage learners as they are (Kester, 2024), by recognizing their resourcefulness and vulnerabilities, and "challenging (...) any system which oppresses them" (Lam, 2019, p. 84). However, the language classroom is not isolated from wider society, highlighting the responsibility institutions also bear in this task. Teachers also have needs that deserve attention (Murdoch et al., 2020) and "more investment in service provisions and facilities from authorities" (Majhanovich & Deyrich, 2017: p. 438) are necessary (see also Ab Rashid et al., 2025). Future research should explore in greater detail how institutional responsibilities are coordinated with the role of teachers from a peacebuilding perspective.

In conclusion, the present study explored the needs of three different groups of newcomer language learners in higher education in Luxembourg. The results highlighted the importance of making teachers aware of how their teaching choices and responses to needs can affect learners' perceptions and in turn, resilience and competence development. Such awareness is particularly crucial for the most vulnerable learners, who often remain unnoticed due to institutional or individual silence.

Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to acknowledge the cooperation and support of the participants without whom this study would not have been possible. Sincere gratitude is also extended to Prof. Dr. Christina Siry for her exchanges and guidance throughout the writing of this paper.

Declaration of Generative Al and Al-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Generative Al and Al-assisted technologies, such as DeepL and Microsoft Copilot, were used in the writing process to improve the language as well as the readability of the paper. The author reviewed the content accordingly.

References

Ab Rashid, R., M.Madanat, H., Al-Smadi, O. A., Mohamed, M., Alqaryouti, M. H., Hashmi, U. M., & Al Ramahi, R. (2025). We are clueless: The voices of Jordanian teachers untrained in conflict-sensitive pedagogy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *153*, 104839. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104839

Aleghfeli, Y. K., McIntyre, J., Hunt, L., & Stone, C. (2024). Safety, belonging and success in education for refugees in Europe: A systematic review. *European Journal of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12852

Arjona Soberón, M., Reuter, L., & Chibuzor, A. (2017). Accessing higher education in Europe: Challenges for refugee students & strategies to overcome them. University of Cologne. Retrieved from https://sucre.auth.gr/sites/default/files/media/attachments/SUCRE-IO1-Final%20Publication.pdf

Baker, S., Ramsay, G., Irwin, E., & Miles, L. (2018). 'Hot', 'Cold' and 'Warm' supports: towards theorising where refugee students go for assistance at university. *Teaching in Higher Education, 23*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1332028

Bar, H. (2022). *RCMap: Relational concept mapping*. Retrieved from https://haimbar.github.io/RCMap/

Bar, H. & Mentch, L. (2017). RCmap, an Open-Source Software for Concept Mapping. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 60,* 284-92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2016.08.018

Bradley, L., Guichon, N., & Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2025). Migrants' and refugees' digital literacies in life and language learning. *ReCALL*, *37*(2), 147–156. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344025000047

Broek, S., Van der Linden, J., Kuijpers, M. A. C. T., & Semeijn, J. H. (2023). What makes adults choose to learn: Factors that stimulate or prevent adults from learning. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *29*(2), 620–642. https://doi.org/10.1177/14779714231169684

Çelik, Ç. (2023). Immigrants and refugees, tourists and vagabonds: why and how they integrate differently. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *11*(14), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-023-00339-y

Choi, H. J., & Park, J. H. (2024). Research Trends in Learning Needs Assessment: A Review of Publications in Selected Journals from 1997 to 2023. *Sustainability*, *16*(1), 382. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010382

Council of Europe (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/1680697848

Council of Europe (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4

Cummins, J. (2001). Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society (2nd ed.). California Association for Bilingual Education.

European Migration Network (EMN) Luxembourg (2018). Asylum and Migration: Glossary 6.0. A tool for better comparability produced by the European Migration Network. Retrieved from https://emnluxembourg.uni.lu/wp-content/uploads/sites/225/2019/02/interactive_glossary_6.0_final_version.pdf

Eurostat (2024). *Migration and asylum in Europe – 2024 edition*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/migration-2024#population-diversity.

Finnigan, C., Brown, J., & Al-Adeimi, M. (2023). Adjustment challenges faced by Yazidi youth refugees in Canada. *Children & Society, 38*(4), 1291–1316. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12801

Gerson, K., & Damaske, S. (2020). *The science and art of interviewing*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199324286.003.0004

Gravani, M. N., Slade, B., Brown, M., Jõgi, L., & Borg, C. (2024). From Learner-Centered Education (LCE) to Emancipatory Learner-Centered Education (ELCE): A comparative case study of language education for adult migrants in four European countries. *Prospects (Paris)*, *54*(1), 175–190. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-023-09633-0

Hattie, J. (2008). Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. London & New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203887332

Hawkey, J., & Horner, K. (2022). Officiality and strategic ambiguity in language policy: exploring migrant experiences in Andorra and Luxembourg. *Language Policy*, *21*(2), 195–215. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-021-09602-3

International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2019). *Glossary on Migration*. IML Series, 34. Retrieved from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf

Kane, M., & Trochim, W. M. K. (2007). *Concept mapping for planning and evaluation*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412983730

Kester, K. (2024). Toward a conflict-sensitive approach to higher education pedagogy: lessons from Afghanistan and Somaliland. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *29*(2), 619–638. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.2015754

Lam, M. (2019). Language Education for Newcomers in Rural Canada: Needs, Opportunities, and Innovations. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, *14*(1), 77–97.

Larrotta, C., & Ture, S. D. (2025). Reflective Case Study of a Literacy Instructor Teaching English to Refugee Adult Learners. *Adult learning, 36*(1), 38–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/10451595241235699

Lebreton, E. (2017) Les besoins langagiers des adultes migrants: une notion complexe à appréhender. In: Beacco, J.-C., Krumm, H.-J., Little, D. & Thalgott, P. (Eds). (2017). *The Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants/L'intégration Linguistique des Migrants Adultes: Some Lessons from Research/Les Enseignements de la Recherche*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 155–160. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110477498-020

Loi modifiée du 29 août 2008 portant sur la libre circulation des personnes et l'immigration. Mémorial A n°138 du 10 septembre 2008 (texte de base), Version coordonnée la plus récente: TC-Mémorial A n°113 du 3 juillet 2013, modifié par la suite Mémorial A n°63 du 14 avril 2014, www.legilux.lu, "Espace législatif": https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2008/08/29/n1/consolide/20240908

Luxembourg Centre for Educational Testing [LUCET] & Service de Coordination de la Recherche et de l'Innocation pédagogiques et technologiques [SCRIPT]. (2021). *Rapport national sur l'éducation 2021*. LUCET & SCRIPT. https://doi.org/10.48746/bb2021lu-fr-digipub

Luxembourg Centre for Educational Testing [LUCET] & Service de Coordination de la Recherche et de l'Innocation pédagogiques et technologiques [SCRIPT]. (2025). *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Luxemburg 2024*. LUCET & SCRIPT. https://doi.org/10.48746/bb2024lu-de-digipub

Majhanovich, S., & Deyrich, M.-C. (2017). Language learning to support active social inclusion: Issues and challenges for lifelong learning. *International Review of Education*, *63*(4), 435–452. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-017-9656-z

McBeath, B., Franks, O., Delormier, T., Périllat-Amédée, S., Mccomber, A., Abigosis, T., Leafe, D., Macaulay, A. & Lévesque, L. (2021). Reflecting on the use of Concept Mapping as a Method for Community-Led Analysis of Talking Circles. *Turtle Island Journal of Indigenous Health*, *1*(2). https://doi.org/10.33137/tijih.v1i2.36171

Montanez, J. (2023). *Traumatisme psychologique et facilitation d'apprentissage*. Unpublished presentation, internal meeting for European SERAFIN project, 18 December 2023.

Murdoch, D., English, A. R., Hintz, A., & Tyson, K. (2020). Feeling Heard: Inclusive Education, Transformative Learning, and Productive Struggle. *Educational Theory, 70*(5), 653–679. https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12449

Nicoras, R., Gotowiec, S., Hadley, L. V., Smeds, K., & Naylor, G. (2022). Conversation success in one-to-one and group conversation: a group concept mapping study of adults with normal and impaired hearing. *International Journal of Audiology*, *62*(9), 868–876. https://doi.org/10.1080/14992027.2022.2095538

Peguero, L.P. (2024). Language Learning for Refugees and Immigrants: Innovative Approaches. *International Journal of Enhanced Research in Educational Development*, *12*(2), 135–144.

Phan, H. P. & Ngu, B. H. (2021) Interrelationships Between Psychosocial, Motivational, and Psychological Processes for Effective Learning: A Structural Equation Modeling Study. *Front. Psychol., 12*, 740965. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.740965

Phan, H. P., Ngu, B .H., Wang, H.-W., Shih, J.-H., Shi, S.-Y. & Lin, R.-Y. (2018) Understanding levels of best practice: An empirical validation. *PLoS ONE, 13*(6): e0198888. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0198888

Puren, C. (2022). Innovation didactique et innovation technologique en didactique des langues-cultures : approche historique. *Recherche et pratiques pédagogiques en langues, 41*(1). https://doi.org/10.4000/apliut.9708

Reicherter, D., Wang, S.-R., Ohrtman, T. N., Ndukwe, N., Vaatainen, S., Alcalay, S., & Brown, L. M. (2022). Implementation of Trauma-informed Best Practices for International Criminal Investigations Conducted by the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). *Psychological Injury and Law, 15*(4), 319–329. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12207-022-09457-x

Sasia, J. (2018). Être étudiant et réfugié, la catégorisation à l'épreuve des mobilités et des politiques d'accueil. *Migrations Société*, *174,* 75–89. https://doi.org/10.3917/migra.174.0075

Scuto, D. (2023). The Copernican *Revolution of Luxembourg Nationality: From an Insular to an Expansive Citizenship Regime.* Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research, RSC2023/49. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4530440

Stack-Cutler, H., Schnirer, L., & Dare, L. (2017). Engaging populations living with vulnerable conditions in community-based research: A concept mapping approach to understanding positive practices. *Journal of Community Psychology, 45*(5), 601–616. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21880

The Hague Institute for Global Justice (2023). *The role of education in conflict prevention*. The Hague Institute for Global Justice. Retrieved from https://thehagueinstituteforglobaljustice.org/portfolio/the-role-of-education-in-conflict-prevention/

Trinidad, J. E., Ngo, G. R., Nevada, A. M., & Morales, J. A. (2020). Engaging and/or Effective? Students' Evaluation of Pedagogical Practices in Higher Education. *College Teaching*, *68*(4), 161–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2020.1769017

Trochim, W. H. & McLinden, D. (2017) Introduction to a special issue on concept mapping. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 60*, 166–175. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2016.10.006

UNHCR. (1951). *Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees*. Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees

United Nations. (2024, May 2). *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General*. General Assembly: Economic and Social Council. Retrieved from https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2024/SG-SDG-Progress-Report-2024-advanced-unedited-version.pdf

UNESCO. (2025). *Languages matter: Global guidance on multilingual education*. Paris: UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/MLIO7101

University of Luxembourg. (2024). *Incoming exchange students*. Retrieved from https://www.uni.lu/en/mobility/incoming-exchange-students/

Vertovec, S. (2022). *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203503577

Xu, X., Wu, Z., & Wei, D. (2023) The relationship between perceived teacher support and student engagement among higher vocational students: A moderated mediation model. *Front. Psychol., 14.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1116932

Corresponding author: Corine Philippart
Email: corine.philippart@uni.lu

Appendices

Appendix A

Students' Demographics in the Semi-Structured Interviews

Participant number	Field of study	Gender	Time spent in Luxem-bourg	Country of origin	Migration status	Current occupation
94	Psychology	female	<3 months	France	incoming	student
115	Law	female	3-6 months	Japan	incoming	student
166	IT	male	<3 months	Swiss	incoming	student
170	IT	male	> 5 years	Afghanistan	Naturalized refugee	student
176	Law	male	/	Russia	Forcibly displaced	student
203	Medicine	male	<3 months	Colombia	incoming	student
210	Educational sciences	female	1-3 years	Brazil	Immigrant	student
212	Finance	male	1-3 years	Italy	Immigrant	student
213	Humanities	female	>1 year	Ukraine	Refugee	student
249	IT	female	> 5 years	Iran	Refugee	student
386	IT	male	3-5 years	Moldova	Immigrant	student
402	Law	male	<3 months	Laos	incoming	student

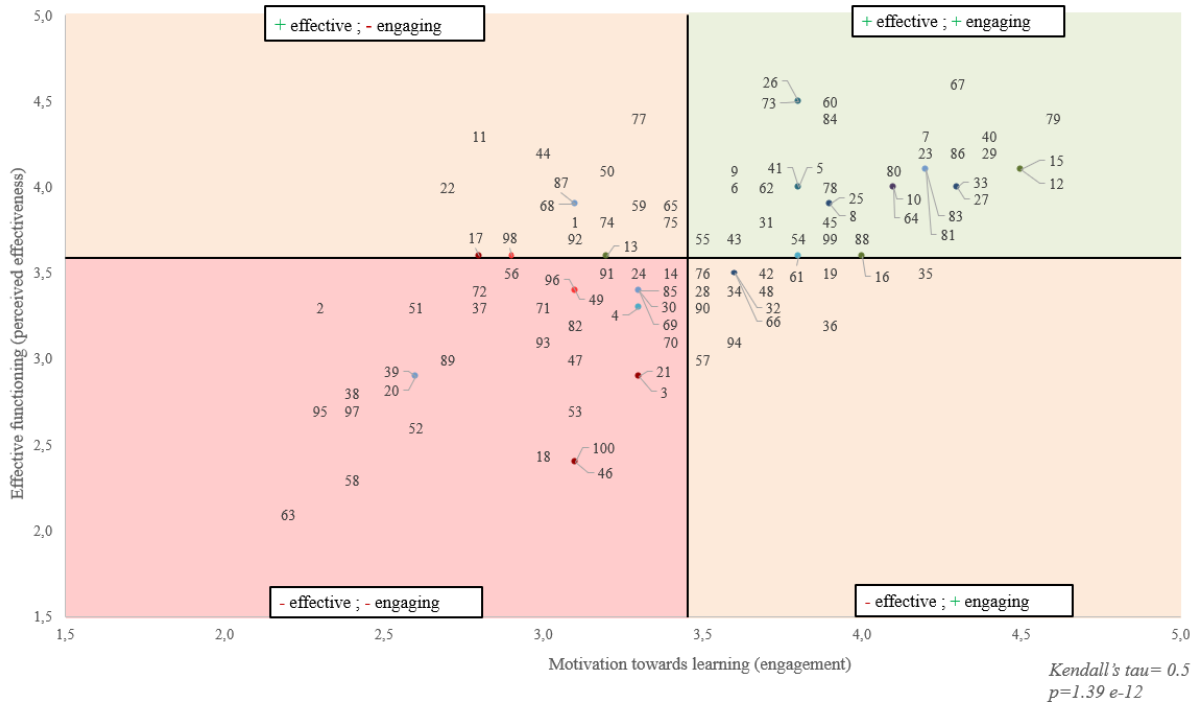
Appendix B

Other Participants' Demographics in the Semi-Structured Interviews

Participant number	Affiliation	Gender	Current occupation
2	English studies	female	Program director
10	Guest student services	female	Admin. staff
41	Language Centre	female	French/ German language teacher
61	IT	male	Program director
74	Language Centre	female	French language teacher
85	IT	male	Program director
89	Student services	female	Admin. staff
90	Language Centre	female	French language teacher
179	Formerly: Language Centre	male	French language teacher
198	Entrepreneurship/ innovation	male	Program director
235	Language Centre	female	French language teacher
274	Finance	male	Program director

Appendix C

Go-zone Plot: Immigrant Learners



Kendall's tau= 0.5
p=1.39 e-12

Appendix D

Go-zone Plot: Refugee/Forcibly Displaced Learners

Kendall's tau= 0.63
p=3.3 e-19

Promoting Intercultural Competence in EFL Contexts: Insights from Vietnamese University Teachers

Ngan-Giang Dang
Hanoi University, Vietnam

Abstract

In the era of globalization, the English language has been used as a major means of communication, and English language competence has become one of the key goals in the education and training of individuals in different fields. However, it is undeniable that the mere mastery of language cannot fully ensure the success of English users when communicating with either native or fellow non-native English speakers. As a result, more attention has been drawn to intercultural competence, which is generally defined as the ability to communicate and behave appropriately and effectively in communication involving culturally different others. In Vietnam, although some attempts have been made in issuing policies regarding intercultural competence in EFL education, there is a gap between policy and actual practice. It is, therefore, crucial to investigate teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of intercultural elements in their teaching as an attempt to facilitate growth of students' intercultural competence. Yet, such research remains limited, particularly in higher education. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore how seven university teachers perceived the development of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms. The findings revealed that the teacher participants had fragmented understandings of intercultural competence and struggled to promote it within the constraints of their courses. Some recommendations for curriculum design, pedagogical practices and teacher training are proposed to improve the promotion of undergraduates' intercultural competence in English teaching and learning.

Keywords: intercultural competence, university teacher, perception, higher education, EFL context, Vietnam

The increasingly globalized world has opened up more opportunities for interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, highlighting the necessity of an ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, which is often referred to as intercultural competence (Byram, 2021). In this context, English serves as not only a means of international communication but also a bridge between intercultural perspectives. This means that the mastery of grammar alone is insufficient, and learners should be able to apply the language appropriately within diverse social and cultural contexts (Byram, 2021). As a result, the goal of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning worldwide, including Vietnam, has gradually been expanded from linguistic accuracy and fluency to development of intercultural and communicative competence (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018). This change has indeed been highlighted in the most recent higher education reforms in Vietnam with the hope that English learners can better navigate the cultural complexities of the global community. To illustrate, cultural aspects are mentioned in two out of four training objectives of EFL curricula in tertiary education as stated in the Decision No. 36/2004/QĐ-BGD&ĐT issued by the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training promulgating the Curricula of Foreign Language Studies in Higher Education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2004), which continue to govern foreign language curricula in higher education in Vietnam despite being introduced two decades ago. To be specific, these objectives address knowledge and skills of different areas: (1) to provide students with a relatively broad knowledge of the English language, English-American culture, society, and literature, and (2) to train and develop students' English communication skills at a reasonably proficient level in common professional and social communication situations. Such inclusion aims to enable students to "compare and relate the target culture to their own culture and civilization" (Ministry of Education and Training, 2004, p. 7). In that sense, intercultural competence in the context of EFL in Vietnam is generally understood as the facilitation of dialogues and exchanges between Vietnamese and other foreign cultures rather than between different Vietnamese ethnic groups.

Despite the growing attention to intercultural competence in EFL education, research on this topic remains relatively limited in Vietnam, particularly in higher education contexts. Since there exists a paradox between policy and practice of English teaching in Vietnam (Thieu, 2024), understanding how teachers perceive intercultural competence is of crucial significance, as their perceptions shape their practices and provide important input for curriculum design and teacher training as well as policy development (Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018). Since a significant role of university education is to generate a qualified future workforce, examining how intercultural competence is addressed in this context as one of the workplace readiness skills is important. This study, therefore, aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of promoting intercultural competence in EFL classrooms at a public university in Vietnam, shedding light on how they perceived intercultural competence and its significance, and strategies as well as challenges they had when incorporating intercultural components into their English teaching. The findings of this study are expected to make meaningful contributions to research on intercultural competence in EFL contexts, as well as to provide suggestions for administrators and teachers to improve policies, curriculum development, and teaching practices regarding the enhancement of intercultural competence, particularly at the EFL tertiary level within and beyond Vietnam.

Literature Review

Culture and Cultural Teaching in EFL Contexts

According to Lustig et al. (2018), culture is defined as "a learned set of shared perceptions about beliefs, values and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people" (p. 35). Several key characteristics of culture can be identified from this definition. Firstly, culture is not innate but is acquired through social interactions and interpretations individuals form throughout their lives regarding their shared surroundings. This means that culture can evolve over time, depending on individuals' exposure and experiences. Moreover, culture involves people's perceptions of fundamental world views and beliefs, the principles a community deems important, expectations of proper actions, and conduct as guided by traditional norms. Lastly, culture shapes and influences daily interaction by affecting demeanors. In this sense, culture is viewed as a dynamic and multi-layered concept, with its outer layer demonstrated in behaviors and communications while its inner layer consists of beliefs, norms and values.

Hall (2015) agreed with this definition, adding that culture is continuously and interactively constructed between people, particularly through language use. This implies that language is an integral part of culture and also an expression of culture (Larzén, 2005, as cited in Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018). Specifically, language serves as a means for individuals to convey facts, ideas or events from their own perspectives, facilitating the exchange of information. Thus, language expresses culture. Additionally, language is used in communication to construct comprehensible meanings. I other words, language embodies culture. Furthermore, language functions as a system of signs that carries inherent cultural significance. In essence, language symbolizes culture. Therefore, it is widely accepted that true proficiency when learning a second language requires knowledge of its associated culture, just as cultural understanding can be facilitated if one masters a foreign language. As Byram et al. (2002) put it, language learners should be successful "not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures" (p. 7). Accordingly, this calls for a need to integrate cultural content into foreign language instruction and raise learners' awareness of the inseparability of language and culture in communication.

Intercultural Competence

There have been extensive efforts in conceptualizing intercultural competence as it is widely used in various disciplines under different terms, including cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural competence, cross-cultural efficacy, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, multicultural competence, international competence, global competence and global citizenship (Fantini, 2009). Throughout the decades, there has been a shift from viewing intercultural competence as merely the ability to function in another culture to a more multi-dimensional construct that involves different components in diverse cultural contexts, primarily attitudes, knowledge, skills or attributes. In general, scholars mainly define the term in relation to communication competence, highlighting the interpersonal interaction between

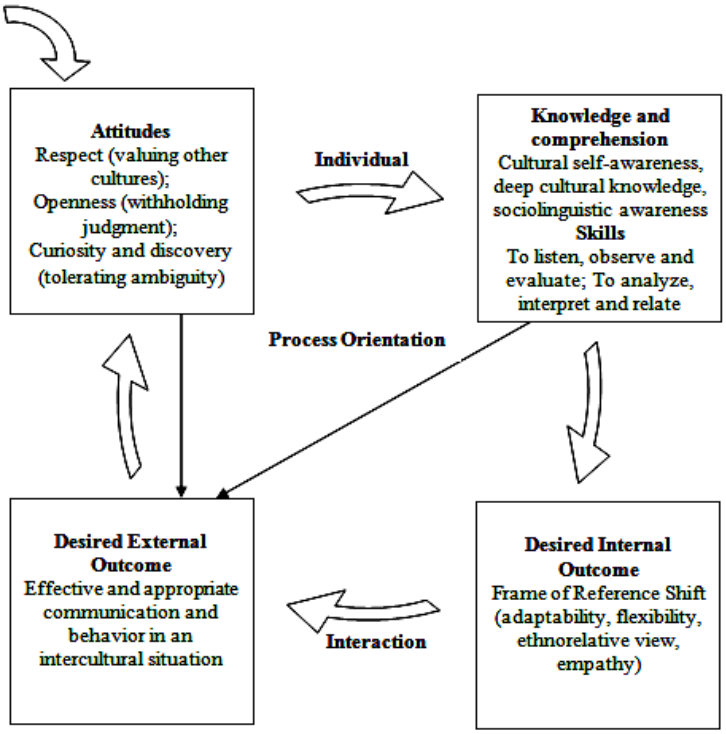
individuals from two distinct cultures (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009; Paige, 2004; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) as well as the ability to mediate between languages and cultures (Byram, 1997). This study adopted Deardorff's (2006) definition of intercultural competence, viewing it as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in cross-cultural interactions. Intercultural competence in this definition is viewed as a continuous developmental process rather than a fixed outcome of acquisition, with interaction playing a crucial role in its growth. This implies that to foster multicultural competence, targeted outcomes should be formulated on the basis of its core components, encompassing affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects.

Several frameworks have been proposed to deconstruct intercultural competence, among which the most widely cited ones are by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006). These foundational models have served as a central reference point in contemporary research and practice concerning intercultural competence. Byram (1997) provided a co-orientational model that describes intercultural competence as entailing the following five "savoirs": knowledge of oneself and the other, of individual and societal interaction, attitudes of relativizing oneself and valuing the other, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness. This model suggests that developing any type of cross-cultural competence requires equipping learners with these five components. Among these elements, positive attitudes are considered most fundamental to intercultural competence. Although Byram's model has continued to influence both research and pedagogical practices to this day, it has been criticized as not sufficiently incorporating the intricacies which regulate modern intercultural communication (Hoff, 2020, p. 57).

On that basis, Deardorff (2006) proposed another model which views intercultural proficiency as a dynamic process that constitutes not only attitudes, knowledge and skills but also internal and external desired outcomes of cultural competence. In this model, attitudes, including the ability to value other cultures, withhold judgment and tolerate ambiguity, are fundamental prerequisites for developing intercultural understanding as they are illustrated as the starting point of the process. Moreover, external outcomes refer to the ability to communicate and behave effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural contexts. These outcomes can be achieved without necessarily reaching internal outcomes, which include deeper personal traits such as adaptability, flexibility, possessing an ethno-relative view, and empathy. These internal traits reflect an individual's internalized orientation toward cultural diversity and are considered key indicators of a more advanced stage of intercultural competence development. This model defines intercultural skills more clearly compared with those in Byram's model, specifying the ability to listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret and relate to culture-specific contexts with various world views. It also highlights that this competence can be clearly demonstrated through interactions shaped by the above internal traits individuals acquire. The process model of intercultural competence is illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 1

Process Model of Intercultural Competence



Deardorff, D. K. (2006)

The Importance of Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching

The inclusion of intercultural competence has received increasing attention in foreign language education, particularly as teaching priorities underwent an expansion from a sole focus on linguistic competence to a broader emphasis on communicative proficiency and then to intercultural competence, which Byram (2021) refers to as a cultural turn. Indeed, since all communication and interactions in a foreign language inevitably involve cultural elements, fostering intercultural understanding extends learning a foreign language beyond learning linguistic skills by equipping learners with crucial attitudes, knowledge and skills to cope with the complexities of an open and interconnected world. This could help provide a strong basis for learners to take ownership of their intercultural development and pursue richer and more successful interactions. In this sense, the growth of intercultural competence can function as a source of personal development and enrichment (Huber & Reynolds, 2014).

Furthermore, the advancement of intercultural competence can allow learners to foster mental flexibility as it involves much self-reflection. This process is essential for mediating meaningful resolution to potential cultural misunderstandings (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999, as cited in Ho, 2011). It can equip learners with the ability to effectively apply their language skills to express appropriate attitudes and behaviors that help prevent unnecessary cultural conflicts in interactions with speakers of the target language. This is crucial for preparing students to live in a global world with better professional empowerment (Pinto, 2018).

In Vietnam, the significance of intercultural competence has increasingly been highlighted, especially since Vietnam joined different global organizations and trade agreements, including the ASEAN, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, and the World Trade Organization (Quyen, 2018, as cited in Thieu, 2024). In this context, becoming inter-culturally competent not only helps Vietnamese individuals assure harmony in cross-cultural settings but also allows them to develop sympathy, empathy and other internal factors (Thieu, 2024).

Strategies to Promote Intercultural Competence in EFL Contexts

As intercultural competence is increasingly recognized as an essential component of EFL education in university studies, various investigations have been conducted to identify effective strategies to facilitate the development of such competence among EFL learners. Most of the strategies involve communication and experiential learning, namely simulations, role plays and case studies (Deardorff, 2020). However, according to Deardorff (2020), these tools may not be contextually appropriate in non-Western settings due to their Western origin.

Other applicable strategies include group discussion, comparative analysis and the integration of cultural content through authentic materials (Byram et al, 2002). The use of meaningful materials should be accompanied by a critical approach and an analysis of their context and intention. The activities designed based on these strategies should allow learners to acquire skills of analysis rather than simple information gathering.

It is proposed that the adoption of plans for developing multicultural competence should involve critical reflection as a crucial component. Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff (2023) have suggested that reflection allows individuals to "incorporate new understandings, perspectives, and assumptions about how the world works" (p. 91), therefore, bringing about a shift in their interpretations of the world.

Overall, the specific strategy selected notwithstanding, the development of intercultural competence remains a lifelong continuous process rather than one-time training. Such goals as "practicing deep listening, increasing one's own cultural self-awareness, awareness of others, connecting across difference in a respectful background manner, developing empathy, and discovering similarities, especially with those who seem quite different" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 6–7) emerge as beneficial in that pursuit.

Previous Studies on Teachers' Perceptions of Intercultural Competence in EFL Contexts

Recently, several studies have been conducted in Asia with an attempt to explore non-native teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022). Bouslama and Benaissi (2018) analyzed teachers' perceptions of the concepts of culture, intercultural competence and the objectives of the intercultural approach in English language teaching contexts. The qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with eight Algerian high school teachers disclosed that teachers lack theoretical understanding of

the intercultural approach and its objectives despite their acknowledgement of the importance of culture and intercultural competence.

Adopting the same research approach, Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018) investigated how Thai university teachers perceived intercultural communicative competence in EFL classes and how they promoted it. Based on Deardorff's (2006) model, the semi-structured interview data showed that teachers viewed intercultural communicative competence as involving attitudes, knowledge, skills and desired external outcomes. Moreover, retelling experience, asking students to read and discuss, and using role-play are the most common strategies adopted to promote this competence.

With a more comprehensive approach, Estaji and Rahimi (2018) also examined teachers' perceptions of intercultural communicative competence in EFL classrooms, but took into consideration not only the impacts of instruction, education and experience on perceptions but also those of perceptions on practice. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study found no relation between Iranian teachers' instruction, education and experience and their perceptions. However, the findings showed that the teachers' perceptions did play a key role in their reported practices.

Within the Vietnamese context, Thieu et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative case study to examine student-teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural communicative competence in English language teaching. The questionnaire results demonstrated that student-teachers perceived culture and intercultural communicative competence as important in EFL education. It was also found that the participants applied different cultural topics and activities to foster intercultural communicative competence in their classrooms, with ways of socializing being the most common.

With similar use of the case study method, Thieu (2024) examined eight university teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms and their daily practices. Through interviews and class observations, the findings divulged that teachers have distinctive perceptions of intercultural competence though mostly positive. In addition, their practices were not exactly the same as their perceptions, mainly due to the dependence on potential intercultural competence content in the lessons.

In general, it is apparent that some studies have been conducted to examine teachers' perceptions, which play a pivotal role in shaping classroom practices as they are key determiners of how educational goals are interpreted and implemented (Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018). However, little has been uncovered about how university teachers perceive intercultural competence as a learning objective in EFL tertiary education, which strategies they use to facilitate it in their classrooms and what challenges they face in doing so, particularly in the context of Vietnam and foreign language universities. Furthermore, existing studies have not sufficiently explored whether university teachers in Vietnam view intercultural competence as a developmental process that should be promoted continuously. To address these gaps, this study was conducted to provide more in-depth insights into the perceptions of Vietnamese

teachers in a specific context of a public university specializing in training foreign languages in general and English in particular, thereby answering the following research question: How do Vietnamese university teachers perceive intercultural competence in EFL classrooms? It should be noted that this study was limited to investigating teachers' perceptions rather than assessing their direct impact on student learning outcomes.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore Vietnamese university teachers' perceptions of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms. This approach was appropriate for exploring the views of individuals and obtaining detailed information about a few people or a single research site (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), which aligned with the aim of the current study. By collecting text-based data from a small number of participants, this study could generate in-depth findings that were reflective of the teachers' perceptions of the topic under study.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a public university that serves as a fairly representative example of Vietnamese institutions of English higher education. The university emphasizes adaptability to international work environments as one of its core values, which underpins intercultural competence.

The target population of this study included non-native teachers at the English Department, where students specialize in English education to earn a BA degree in English Language Studies. Purposeful sampling was adopted to select seven full-time teachers from the Language Foundation Division, who were responsible for teaching English foundational skills for first and second-year students and were willing to participate in the study. Among these seven teachers, two were male, the others were female. Six of them had Master's degrees in either Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) or English Studies, while one had a Doctoral degree in Humanistic Studies. They all had diverse teaching experiences of at least five years and some direct exposure to other cultures, ensuring the richness and reliability of the data generated from their responses. Detailed information regarding the interviewees is provided in Table 1, with the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Qualification	Years of experience	Experience working/ studying abroad
A	Female	MA	8 years	No
B	Male	MA	4 years	No
C	Female	PhD	12 years	Yes
D	Female	MA	10 years	Yes
E	Female	MA	5 years	Yes
F	Female	MA	5 years	No
G	Male	MA	7 years	No

Research Instrument

An individual semi-structured interview was conducted in the study as a data collection instrument to answer the research question about university teachers' perceptions of the promotion of intercultural competence in their EFL classroom. The interview was employed to allow the participants to clarify their points and express themselves extensively, particularly in comparison to a questionnaire (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), thus enabling a more in-depth source of data. In order to facilitate the procedure, each interview closely followed a semi-structured interview protocol. This practice helped structuring the interview, ensuring key questions were addressed and facilitating note taking (Cohen et al., 2018).

The interview questions were designed based on the research question and informed by a study conducted by Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018), which also investigated university EFL teachers' perceptions of intercultural communicative competence but in another Asian context. Their question framework offered a relevant and validated basis for exploring similar themes in this study. Modifications were made to better reflect the specific aims of this study and focus on intercultural competence rather than intercultural communicative competence. Accordingly, the semi-structured interview protocol was structured into three main sections with a total of 13 questions, which were open-ended to allow for in-depth responses and flexibility during the interview process: (1) general background questions about the participants' teaching experience and intercultural exposure, (2) questions about their views on the objectives of English language teaching and learning, and (3) detailed question regarding their understanding of intercultural competence, classroom practices and challenges in promoting it in EFL contexts. Furthermore, a closing opportunity for participants to share any additional reflections was also provided at the end of the interview. Before the official data collection procedure commenced, a pilot interview with one teacher, whose background is similar to the participants, was conducted. Piloting the interview allowed the researcher to refine the interview questions for better language clarity and focus on the research topic.

Data Collection Procedure

Since the quality of a qualitative study is highly dependent on the quality of the data collocation procedure (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), much attention was paid to it. While inviting the teachers to participate in the interviews, the researcher clearly explained the aims and significance of the study. Once the teachers agreed, the researcher arranged interview schedules based on their availability. Seven individual interviews were conducted online via Teams for more convenience for the interviewees. Before starting the interview, the researcher reiterated the aim of the study and assured the participants of the protection of the educators' confidentiality to uphold ethical considerations. An interview protocol was used to ensure consistency across interviews and maintain focus on the questions that aligned with the research aim. The researcher recorded the interviews and also took notes during the process so as to facilitate theme organizations in the later stage. The length of the interviews varied from 27 to 33 minutes. Although all participants were Vietnamese, all interviews were conducted in English.

Data Management and Analysis

The recordings of interviews were transcribed by Google Cloud, transferred to word files and labeled with the interviewees' pseudonyms. After that, thematic analysis with content analysis elements was adopted manually, without the use of computer programs, to analyze the qualitative data achieved from the interviews. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022), initially, all interview transcripts were reread multiple times to familiarize the researcher with a general sense of the participants' responses regarding their definitions of intercultural competence, their strategies to develop intercultural competence, and challenges they encountered in promoting such competence. After that, initial codes from data extracts were generated and organized using Excel. Common themes across data from seven participants were then developed into codes. The subsequent step involved reviewing themes to merge repeated themes, discarding irrelevant ones or adding new ones, then calculating the frequency of each theme. The analysis ended with defining themes identified in the process in relation to the research question and the literature review, particularly Deardorff's (2006) process of intercultural competence development.

Ethical Considerations

Several measures were carried out to ensure ethical standards of this study. With the aim of ensuring participants' confidentiality, their actual names were removed and labels were used. Besides, the interview data were not disclosed to any individual outside the project. Additionally, the data were reported honestly without modification to serve any specific interests. Last but not least, credit was given for materials quoted from other studies to prevent plagiarism.

Findings and Discussions

Teachers' Perceptions of ELT Objectives

The qualitative data acquired from the interviews revealed that the participants held relatively different perceptions of the ultimate objectives of English language teaching and learning. They concurred that the goals of EFL education should be to help students develop English language skills, which was also mentioned in a broader term of "linguistic competence" (Participant A), and to foster communication skills in real-life situations, particularly to "function well in situations in which the English language is used" (Participant C), whether it is "academic, professional, or everyday contexts" (Participant G). However, some interviewees also highlighted the need to "equip students with background knowledge" (Participants B & C) and "cultural awareness" (Participant A) to allow the students to express themselves more effectively in sophisticated contexts. In this sense, cultural aspects were only viewed an essential component to facilitate more proficient language use. It thus can be inferred that developing intercultural competence was not considered one of the primary goals in EFL education, and teachers tended to prioritize linguistic skills over cultural integration in their teaching. Although these findings were consistent with those by Thieu et al. (2019) as well as Nguyen and Ho (2024), they suggest a misalignment with recent priorities in foreign language education, which increasingly emphasizes the development of intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency (Byram, 2021).

Teachers' Perceptions of Intercultural Competence

The participants' perceptions of intercultural competence, which was explored on the basis of Deardorff's (2006) model, are summarized in Table 2. The qualitative data disclosed that intercultural competence was perceived slightly differently among the participants although they shared a general consensus that intercultural competence refers to a person's ability demonstrated in situations or contexts involving communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. Specifically, all seven participants perceived intercultural competence as a desired external outcome, which involves effective relations and behaviors in diverse cultural settings. Meanwhile, only two participants (Participants F & G) perceived intercultural competence as a desired internal outcome, but mentioning only one aspect of it, principally adaptability, while overlooking other components. Moreover, five participants viewed intercultural competence as the "understanding" and "awareness" of cultures and cultural differences (Participants A, C, D, F & G). However, only two participants mentioned attitudes, particularly "respecting cultural differences" (Participant F) and "openness to new perspectives" (Participant G), as a component of intercultural competence although this construct is considered a requisite. It should also be noted that no participant commented on skills in their definitions of intercultural competence. This suggests that teachers may view intercultural competence as a final outcome rather than a continuous developmental process that involves attitudes, knowledge, and skills evolving over time (Deardorff, 2006).

Table 2
Teachers' Perceptions of Intercultural Competence

IC definition	Participants							Total mentions
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Desired external outcome	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	7
Knowledge and comprehension	/		/	/		/	/	5
Attitudes						/	/	2
Desired internal outcome						/	/	2
Skills								0

With regards to the desired external outcome, some participants specifically described the criteria for the target performance of communicating and behaving in intercultural contexts, highlighting "effectively", "properly" and "appropriately", which were mentioned in Deardorff's (2004, 2006) definitions.

Regarding the knowledge and comprehension construct, Participant C observed the knowledge of culture as that of both the target culture and one's own culture. This was agreed by Participant A, who addressed "self-awareness of one's own cultural values and perspectives" as a part of the understanding of cultures and cultural differences, highlighting the importance of reflection on one's own identity (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2023).

When asked whether they observed intercultural competence as fundamental in an EFL classroom, all participants agreed that it should be promoted although they did not consider it as a goal of English teaching and learning. This finding matches those of previous studies, which found that teachers recognized the need for intercultural competence in EFL classrooms (Nafisah et al., 2024). In particular, the participants shared that developing intercultural competence can help students "bridge language and cultural barriers, ensuring mutual understanding and reducing cultural misunderstandings" (Participant F), as "culture affects the language and language affects the culture" (Participant C). This view aligned with the participants' discernments of intercultural competence as merely knowledge of culture and external outcomes. Also, surprisingly, the teachers' recognition of the importance of promoting intercultural components was not parallel with their classroom prioritization of linguistic competence, highlighting a tension between traditional language teaching approaches and emerging global communication needs

Teachers' Perceived Strategies to Promote Intercultural Competence

Table 3 summarizes nine different strategies and activities that teachers carried out as attempts to develop their students' cross-cultural competence in their classes when possible, reflecting both explicit and implicit approaches. As can be seen from this table, all participants mentioned at least one strategy, indicating their enthusiasm for integrating cultural elements. Among the

strategies identified, the most popular one was to require students to identify the similarities and differences between cultures, indicating a strong reliance on comparative cultural analysis. Other commonly reported strategies included explicitly explaining aspects of different cultures, researching cultures and writing reflections and analyzing authentic materials for group discussions, suggesting a prominent view of multicultural competence as a process emphasizing identification of cultural elements for knowledge transmission over deep experiential learning through intercultural interactions or critical reflections. Meanwhile, sharing teachers' personal intercultural experience was only used by one teacher, who actually spent years living and studying abroad. These findings on teachers' preferences for strategies contradict with those by Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018), which can be explained by contextual differences and teacher demographics, particularly in overseas experiences and direct exposure to other cultures, as those with experiences of going abroad and interacting with people from dissimilar cultural backgrounds may be more confident in directly addressing intercultural competence in their classrooms (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022).

Table 3

Strategies/activities Used by Teachers to Promote Intercultural Competence

Strategies/Activities	Participant							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	mentions
Comparing and contrasting differences	/	/		/	/			4
Explaining explicitly about different cultures			/	/		/		3
Researching about cultures and writing reflections	/			/	/			3
Analyzing authentic materials (videos, movies, articles…) and having group discussions	/	/			/			3
Discussing cultural aspects that arise naturally			/				/	2
Doing role-plays and simulations		/				/		2
Researching intercultural issues and making presentations					/	/		2
Reading case studies and responding/ doing problem solving activities		/					/	2
Sharing teachers' personal experience			/					1

Regarding the concept of "culture" and how it is addressed in the EFL classroom, the data brought to light that the participants had different yet overlapping definitions of what constitutes "culture", reflecting both traditional and contemporary perspectives on culture, from static to more fluid construct. Predominantly, all of them perceived that culture refers to "shared" social elements among one community, for example, "values", "norms" (Participants A, E & F), ideologies (Participants B & F), "beliefs" (Participant C), and "behaviors" (Participants C & D). It can also be inferred from these data that the participants viewed culture as both abstract and observable as well as socially constructed, stating that it is "formed and maintained through social interaction" (Participant F). Such view corresponds well with the

definition of culture as a multilayered concept proposed by Lustig et al. (2018), signaling a reasonably sound understanding of culture. Also, the participants' notions of culture could help justify their choice of discussion and other interactive activities when they aimed at fostering intercultural competence in their classrooms.

It should also be noted that the participants acknowledged the lack of frequent and structured practice of promoting cultural responsiveness in all of their classes, which could be explained by the previous findings that they did not consider it a crucial objective of EFL teaching and learning. Unequivocally, they admitted:

> "I haven't explicitly designed lessons to promote intercultural competence, but I think it has been addressed indirectly in my classes." (Participant G)

> "I haven't structured activities specifically aimed at developing intercultural competence. […] It's usually something that emerges naturally rather than being an intentional learning objective." (Participant C)

> "I tend to address cultural topics informally when they arise rather than making them a structured part of my teaching." (Participant D)

Teachers' Perceived Challenges to Promoting Intercultural Competence

The participants pointed out a range of challenges that discouraged them from cultivating the students' intercultural competence in their EFL classroom, which can be classified into five main groups as presented in Table 4, namely material limitation, linguistic and cognitive barriers related to language competence and background knowledge, time constraint, and students' motivation. It should be highlighted that no teachers mentioned any challenges that stemmed from themselves. For example, the lack of knowledge of the target language culture or their intercultural experience to share with students, as found in studies by Banjongjit and Boonmoh's (2018) and Nguyen and Ho (2024) was not brought up. It can therefore be reasoned from these findings that teachers understood the development of intercultural competence as highly dependent on teaching context, institutional policies and students rather than themselves.

Table 4

Teachers' Challenges to Promoting Intercultural Competence

Challenges	Participant							Total mentions
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Time constraint and course design	/	/	/				/	4
Teaching materials and implementation	/		/	/			/	4
Linguistic and cognitive barriers				/	/	/	/	4
Student motivation	/				/		/	3

The data unveiled that most teachers struggled with integrating cross-cultural competence in existing language skill courses because of the limitations in teaching time, course design and instructional materials, which were also identified by Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018). They explained that they have "limited class time to address cultural aspects in depth" (Participant A) while "not all themes and topics of the lessons contain cultural contents" (Participant B), making it "difficult to find suitable moments to integrate culture into the lessons" (Participant C). This further confirmed the teachers' consistent view of EFL objectives and the secondary role of global cultural competence as something to be added when possible, rather than an integrated part of language learning. These views may infer that institutional initiatives alone, reflected in course objectives and textbooks, are insufficient to support practical promotion of cultural proficiency. Also, it can be implied that teachers viewed the inclusion of intercultural competence as dependent on potential cultural contents in each lesson, which aligns with the findings of Thieu (2024). Participant G also asserted that "While some textbooks include cultural aspects, they often present them in a superficial way", indicating the lack of depth in cultural elements provided in textbooks and the need for self-developed extra materials. This suggested that teachers may have regarded the development of multicultural competence as a heavy focus on knowledge rather than a set of attitudes, skills, and behaviors as defined by Deardorff (2006).

The participants also identified some sources of challenges from students in promoting intercultural competence, including their low English proficiency levels, lack of background knowledge and inappropriate attitudes towards cultural competence. They claimed that some students did not have sufficient language proficiency to comprehend and discuss cultural contents (Participant D) and "not have much to discuss or to share about cultures" (Participant E) when cultural issues were addressed. Also, the participants shared that some students viewed cultural discussions as less relevant to language learning, which may explain why they were reluctant to engage in culture-related activities. This indicates that teachers viewed intercultural competence as heavily dependent on linguistic ability and expected students to bring cultural awareness and attitudes to the classroom rather than develop it through instruction. Although this supported teachers' knowledge-based view of intercultural competence, it contrasted with Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence as a continuous developmental process where students could become more aware of cultures through guided activities and reflection. This suggests a need for professional training to move beyond factual cultural content to foster deeper understanding and more effective promotion of this competence.

Teachers' Suggestions for Effective Promotion of Intercultural Competence

The participants provided some suggestions to facilitate the promotion of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms, which are illustrated in Table 5. Although the participants did not mention the lack of their own intercultural experiences or insufficient knowledge of an global cultural approach to English language teaching and learning as challenges to promoting intercultural competence in their classroom, most of them expressed a need for more expertise in such practice. Participant A also suggested having "teachers who are native speakers or those who have extensive experience living in English-speaking countries to teach students lessons

that were more culturally-based." This implies the perception that direct exposure to cross-cultural interactions or people with intercultural experiences can help improve intercultural teaching and promote intercultural competence. However, according to Byram et al. (2002), "the teacher does not need to have experience or be an expert on the country" (p. 16) as their task should be to assist learners in making questions and interpreting answers.

The participants also recommended boosting collaboration among teachers, particularly in compiling and exploiting "multicultural media such as films, music and literature" (Participant F) to better engage students and expose them to different perspectives. Changing teachers' attitudes towards the importance of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms was also emphasized as crucial to navigate their practices, which is in line with Deardorff's (2006) view of attitudes as a prerequisite in the development of intercultural competence. It is interesting to note that only one teacher (Participant C) mentioned experiential learning as a way to better facilitate intercultural competence in EFL classrooms, although it has been proven to be one of the most effective strategies for developing this competence (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2023).

Table 5

Teachers' Suggestions for Promoting Intercultural Competence

Suggestions	Participant							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	mentions
Teacher expertise	/	/	/		/	/	/	6
Use authentic materials	/			/		/	/	4
Teacher attitudes		/	/		/			3
Collaboration		/		/			/	3
Frequent integration of intercultural content	/							1
Experiential learning			/					1

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to explore how Vietnamese university teachers perceive intercultural competence in EFL classrooms. Data generated from individual semi-structured interviews with seven teachers within the English Department of a public university in Vietnam unearthed some important insights, which highlight the transformative role and enormous potential of teachers and their perceptions in fostering intercultural competence in Vietnamese universities, thereby making significant contributions to research on intercultural competence in higher education within and beyond Vietnam.

First of all, although the teachers acknowledged the significance of intercultural competence, they did not regard it as a central objective of English teaching and learning. Despite policy shifts encouraging intercultural goals, they teachers tended to prioritize linguistic and factual

knowledge over intercultural attitudes and skills, rendering efforts to foster intercultural competence occasional and inconsistent.

Moreover, the teachers viewed cross - cultural competence primarily as a knowledge-based final outcome rather than a continuous developmental process involving various internal components, revealing somewhat fragmented understandings. However, all of the teachers were actively trying to do something to integrate intercultural aspects in their classroom, demonstrating relatively proactive orientation. Their instructional strategies largely focused on comparative cultural analysis, with limited more experiential engagement in intercultural situations and a lack of structured approaches.

Similarly, the teachers displayed a strong awareness of the challenges they faced in promoting intercultural competence, which contributed to a disparity between their classroom realities and the official curriculum goals. Last but not least, the teachers expressed a need for greater expertise, more positive attitudes, joint efforts to compile authentic materials and a stronger community of practice to facilitate intercultural competence in EFL classrooms.

Recommendations

Several corollaries for practice can be drawn from the findings of this study, including curriculum adjustment, resource development and teacher training. Since teachers acknowledged the importance of intercultural competence but did not view it as a core objective in EFL classrooms, curriculum designers and administrators should consider integrating clearer learning outcomes concerning intercultural competence alongside linguistic objectives. In particular, greater emphasis could be placed on the prerequisite affective dimensions of this competence, including openness, empathy, respect for cultural diversity and tolerance for ambiguity, to better facilitate its promotion (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2023). This could help navigate teachers' practices, facilitating more structured approach to promoting intercultural competence in English language teaching and learning.

In addition, to further support teachers, institutions should develop systematic resource banks containing authentic materials, including texts, videos, case studies and activities that teachers can easily adapt for classroom use to encourage students' intercultural engagement beyond surface-level cultural content. Such resources would not only facilitate the sharing of best practices and lesson ideas that involve intercultural competence, but also reduce burden on individual teachers to seek or compile cultural rich materials.

Furthermore, professional development opportunities through workshops and training programs should be provided to improve teachers' understanding of intercultural competence as a dynamic holistic developmental process. This is crucial as teachers' thorough understandings of intercultural competence, according to Iswandari and Ardi (2022), would enhance their choices of teaching pedagogies and better assist their students during the development of this competence. Teacher education should also target strategies to encourage emotional engagement and self-reflection among students, for example, role-plays, critical

incident analysis and intercultural simulations, to boost teachers' confidence and better prepare them for the development of students' intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills. To put it short, a holistic strategy, collective responsibility and collaborative action are required to initiate changes concerning the facilitation of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms (Nafisah et al., 2024).

Limitations

This study is subjected to several limitations. One of them is that the findings from a small number of participants (N=7) in this study indicates further research on a larger scale, perhaps including participants from several EFL education programs in Vietnam, other Southeast Asian countries, and beyond. Incremental expansion of the research study would eventually give a fuller picture of the status of instruction to build intercultural sensitivity in many regions of the world. Such information would enlighten educators in University EFL programs regarding how to facilitate ownership of this concept so that new teachers would be equipped with greater intercultural competence. Additionally, this study did not provide any course or curriculum evaluation although the findings pointed out that teachers sometimes struggle due to its limitations. Therefore, analyses of university curricula and institutional policies for promoting intercultural competence would add depth to the discussion.

References

Arasaratnam-Smith, L. A. & Deardorff, K. D. (2023). *Developing intercultural competence in higher education: International students' stories and self-reflection.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25694.20800

Banjongjit, B. & Boonmoh, A. (2018). Teachers' perceptions towards promoting intercultural communicative competence in the EFL classroom. *rEFLections, 25*(2), 76–97. https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v25i2.165393

Bouslama, A. & Benaissi, F. B. (2018). Intercultural competence in ELT contexts: A study of EFL teachers' perceptions. *Arab World English Journal, 9*(4), 122 –135. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no4.8

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsqmip.2022.1.33.46

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence.* Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters Ltd. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800410251

Byram, M., Gribkova, B. & Starkey, H. (2002). *Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching: A practical introduction for teachers*. Council of Europe.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approach* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *10*(3), 241–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002

Deardorff, D. K. (2020). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies: Story circles*. Routledge/UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429244612

Estaji, M., & Rahimi, R. (2018). Exploring teachers' perception of intercultural communicative competence and their practices for teaching culture in EFL classrooms. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language, 6*(2), 1–18. Retrieved from https://www.ijscl.com/article_32636.html

Fantini, A. E. (2009). Assessing intercultural competence: Issues and tools. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 456–476). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071872987

Hall, G. (2015). *Literature in language education*. (2nd ed.) Palgrave MacMillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137331847

Ho, S. T. K. (2011). *An investigation of intercultural teaching and learning in tertiary EFL classrooms in Vietnam* (Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington). VUW Research Archive.

Hoff, H. E. (2020). The evolution of intercultural communicative competence: Conceptualisations, critiques and consequences for 21st century classroom practice. *Intercultural Communication Education, 3* (2), 55–74. https://doi.org/10.29140/ice.v3n2.264

Huber, J & Reynolds, C. (2014). *Developing intercultural competence through education*. Council of Europe Publishing.

Iswandari, Y. A. & Ardi, P. (2022). Intercultural communicative competence in EFL setting: A systematic review. *rEFLections, 29*(2), 361–380. https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v29i2.260249

Lustig, M. W., Koester, J. & Halualani, R. (2018). *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures*. Pearson.

Ministry of Education and Training (2004). *Quyết định số 36/2004/QD-BGD&ĐT về việc ban hành bộ chương trình khung giáo dục đại học khối ngành tiếng Anh trình độ đại học [Resolution 36/2004/QD-BGD&DT on the approval of the Higher Education National Curriculum Frameworks of English]*. MOET.

Nafisah, S. L., Oktarina, I., Santri, D. & Suwartono, T. (2024). Teachers' perception and practices of intercultural communicative competence integration in the EFL Classroom: A systematic literature review. *English Education, Linguistics, and Literature Journal, 3*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10596576

Nguyen, C. D. & Ho, T. K. S. (2024). Vietnamese teachers of English perceptions and practices of culture in language teaching. In Nghia, T. L. H., Tran, L.T., Ngo, M. T. (Eds), *English Language Education for Graduate Employability in Vietnam* (pp. 305-326). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4338-8_14

Paige, R. M. (2004). Instrumentation in intercultural training. In Landis, D., Bennett, J. M. & Bennett, M. J. (Eds), *Handbook of intercultural training* (pp. 85–128). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452231129

Pinto, S. (2018). Intercultural competence in higher education: Academics' perspectives. *On the Horizon, 26*(2), 137–147. https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-02-2018-0011

Spitzberg, B. H. & Changnon, G. (2009). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In Deardorff, D. K. (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (pp. 2–52). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071872987

Thieu, Q. M., Thai, C., Thai, P. B. H., Ho, T. T. H., Pham, H. Y., Phu, T. H. C. & Nguyen, V. T. (2019). EFL student-teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural communication competence in high school English language teaching: A case in a university in Vietnam. *Proceedings of RSU International Research Conference 2019*. https://doi.org/10.14458/RSU.res.2019.78

Thieu, T. H. O. (2024). *An Investigation of intercultural competence inclusion in the EFL curriculum and teaching: A case study in a university in Vietnam* [Doctoral dissertation, Education University of Hong Kong]. The Education University of Hong Kong Library.

Corresponding author: Ngan-Giang Dang
Email: giangdn@hanu.edu.vn

Lexical Bundles: A Focused Framework for Enhancing Vocabulary and Syntax in English Composition Courses

Sally Kondos
American University in Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

The study explored the correlation between teaching lexical bundles and improving writing skills in English composition courses. The study addressed two research questions. First, to what extent can the explicit teaching of lexical bundles facilitate greater comprehension and retention of the elements of the bundles? Second, the study investigated the relationship between an increase in the number of lexical bundles comprehended and retained and a change in the writing grade. Formulaic sequences form a fundamental part of the English vocabulary. They are looked upon as an essential element of how students learn the English language. Lexical bundles are high-frequency combinations of words that often occur next to each other, whether in spoken or written text. The bundles are structurally incomplete, commonly formed by combining two noun phrases or a verb and a noun phrase or more phrases or clauses, such as *on the other hand* and *as a result*. Many studies have discussed the significant role that lexical bundles play in helping students to express themselves accurately in writing, besides providing them with the knowledge to produce coherent and precise text. Scholars in applied linguistics have argued that the ability to recognize patterns, recall them, and later reproduce them contributes greatly to language proficiency and to fluency in mastering the English language. A quantitative research design was implemented, and the findings were the outcome of the statistical analysis of the pre-test and post-tests and written assignments of the control and experimental groups. The findings concluded that the explicit instruction of lexical bundles significantly improved the overall writing grade of the experimental group. The study identified some commonly used lexical bundles among high-achieving participants, and the number of lexical bundles used in writing positively correlated with an improved overall grade.

Keywords: formulaic language, lexical bundles, second language acquisition, syntax, vocabulary

The study was conducted in the context of English composition courses in one of the English-medium universities in the United Arab Emirates. Students' main weakness rested in their inability to elaborate on their ideas and develop their writing further; they struggled to expand on a subtopic when writing their essays. As a way of helping the students in the composition courses, the teachers persistently advised students to read to learn more words to gain knowledge and expand their vocabulary.

A common practice intended to help students expand their vocabulary knowledge was for the English faculty to provide the students with weekly vocabulary lists adopted from the Academic Word List (AWL). Conversely, the current study proposed focusing more on formulaic language with a focus on lexical bundles, which are high-frequency combinations of words, rather than single words. As early as the 1980s, numerous linguists reasoned against the Chomskyan approach, which suggested that any natural language is the outcome of a set of countless utterances that are mostly generated from a group of grammatical structures. According to Ai and Lu (2013) and Wray (2013), language users are inclined to use particular words in their language production more than going through the hassle of forming complicated grammatical structures that could express the same concept. The expanding interest in what is known as the formulaicity of language production has been linked to the growing emphasis on new linguistic theories that focus on performance rather than on competence. This interest emphasizes the substantial role of formulaic sequences in language production (Al Hassan & Wood, 2015).

The Rationale of Integrating Lexical Bundles

Many language categories are under the umbrella of formulaic language, such as spoken idioms, phrasal verbs (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015), academic collocations (Ackermann & Chen, 2013), and lexical bundles. Several studies have investigated how English-language teachers can incorporate formulaic language in their classes (Schmitt, 2022).

The current study investigated the impact of lexical bundles as representative of formulaic language, since the research aimed to examine the correlation between the explicit teaching of lexical bundles and the improvement of writing skills of students in English composition courses. The rationale for using formulaic language originated from the idea that mastering language is characterized by the repetition of automatic systematic patterns, such as fixed and semi-fixed multi-words, which is the case of lexical bundles.

Lexical bundles are high-frequency combinations of words that usually occur next to each other. They are structurally incomplete, formed by combining two noun phrases, a verb, and a noun phrase, or more phrases and clauses. Referred to as building blocks of language, lexical bundles do not have any syntactic integrity and cannot stand on their own. They must be incorporated and integrated within sentences. Such lexicalized language may be classified into three different types: referential bundles – *at the end of – at the beginning of – in the interpretation of,* discourse organizing bundles – *on the other hand*, and finally, attitudinal lexical bundles, *it should be noted that* (Durrant, 2017).

Significance of Study

The study's significance goes beyond improving English language teaching practices at the university where it was conducted. The research project was meaningful for raising awareness and encouraging more educators to investigate the potential positive impact of lexical bundles in their teaching context. Through longitudinal research and published papers educators in foreign language studies may be better informed about the influence of lexical bundles on improving second language (L2) fluency, whether spoken or written.

It is worth mentioning that the successful utilization of lexical bundles is recommended in the effectual pedagogy for multiple foreign language programs, not singularly the English language. Lexical bundles play a significant role in Arabic as a foreign language program in universities worldwide. On the use of lexical bundles in Arabic as foreign language curricula, Sanosi (2022) argued that formulaic language, represented in lexical bundles, became a common practice in research on language teaching. The rationale behind the increased emphasis on teaching lexical bundles emanated from the benefit that the collocational patterns of learning language would train the learners to look at any oral or written segment of language as a string of words rather than single stand-alone words. Since L2 learners often fail to incorporate words from memorized lists into meaningful sentences, knowledge of lexical bundles saves much time due to automated language production. Subsequently, the learners have more time to focus on the content they plan to develop and express (Sanosi, 2022).

The rationale behind investigating the role of lexical bundles in the study was to highlight the significant role that teaching these bundles, defined as a sequence of words that frequently occur together in a specific context and are stored holistically in the brain, can play in promoting the acquisition of the target language, specifically in the area of academic writing. Thus, the study was developed to study the relevance of teaching lexical bundles in writing in composition courses.

Using lexical bundles can interest students to learn more about the English language, and the knowledge of formulaic language can open the door to a new perspective of language teaching. It can train students to be proactive in their writing instead of simply memorizing lists of vocabulary words without being able to use them accurately in sentences. Using lexical bundles in composition courses can help students improve their sentence structure and create more fluent and coherent writing. By developing their writing skills, they will have a better learning experience during their university years, especially since the teaching medium is all English throughout their 4-year university education. The following research questions served to guide the investigation.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. To what extent can the explicit teaching of lexical bundles facilitate greater comprehension and retention of the elements of the bundles?
2. Is there a relationship between an increase in the number of lexical bundles comprehended and retained and a change in the writing grade?

Literature Review

The Importance of Vocabulary in Language Acquisition

Vocabulary is part of the core of mastering a foreign language. Improving language fluency has always been associated with increasing vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2022). While grammar and vocabulary are considered two pillars of acquiring the English language, scholars and educators have emphasized the importance of vocabulary over grammar, arguing that, without vocabulary, students cannot express themselves adequately (Thornbury, 2002). It is undeniable that vocabulary is a potent tool in language acquisition. Language learners are considered fluent or competent in English if they are capable of expressing themselves with abundant expressions. Richards and Pun (2022) argued that vocabulary plays a crucial role in learners' language proficiency, suggesting that if learners fail to build solid language knowledge, communicating successfully in English is difficult.

Despite the growing interest in vocabulary today, teaching the lexicon was somehow overlooked at different times in the past. During the 1960s, the focus was on the audio-lingual language teaching approach. Researchers at that time believed that the emphasis should be on teaching grammar and phonology because, once these aspects were mastered, vocabulary could be easily acquired (Kurniawan, 2016). The demand for teaching vocabulary increased as the use of computers in language learning grew, marking the beginning of the communicative approach. The advocates of the communicative approach argued that mastering vocabulary comes at an early stage of language acquisition with grammar following.

The emphasis on building vocabulary intensified as linguists argued that an adequate number of vocabulary words is essential for successful communication (Kurniawan, 2016). Recently, English as a foreign language program developers have revisited the importance of vocabulary in language proficiency and no longer consider vocabulary as supplementary materials to the curriculum. Instead, syllabus designers now regard the lexis of a language to be an essential tool that needs further attention for language development (Kurniawan, 2016). Many aspects contribute to increasing vocabulary knowledge. Studies have frequently emphasized vocabulary's crucial role in mastering communicative skills in the English language. It is essential to understand that vocabulary does not mean memorizing words by rote memory. On the contrary, it includes the ability to understand the various functions of words.

Lexical fluency and the ability to express oneself through meaningful language are the cornerstones of mastering a language. The ability to express oneself with ideas, feelings, and emotions by using accurate lexis distinguishes the competent user from a novice to any language. Learning a new word entails mental engagement that is far more complicated than

simply remembering words and meanings. Most teaching practices focus on increasing the lexicon rather than promoting better practices to know how to use a new word correctly. This is a common criticism of applied linguistics advocates, who argue that word knowledge is unusually multi-faceted and requires the learners to be aware of the meaning and usage of words (Nation, 2024).

Language research has long focused on the syntactical and morphological aspects of learning vocabulary. The assumption was based on the notion that vocabulary development is linear (Nation & Meara, 2013). Little attention was given to significant lexical development in second-language acquisition. However, this changed in the early 2000s with research into lexical development and its impact on language proficiency (Nation & Meara, 2013). Despite ongoing research, there is no definitive answer regarding the ideal size of vocabulary. Language scholars proposed various figures over time. However, planning language goals to help learners achieve such extensive vocabulary is challenging. It is important to note that vocabulary size is typically measured in word families. Nation (2024) argued that the most common 1,000-word families have an average of six members each. Several researchers contend that language learners should be introduced to a large amount of vocabulary at the beginner's level. They suggest that if a learner does not have at least 2,000 high-frequency words as a starting point, they will continue to struggle with communication.

Teaching Formulaic Language to Improve Writing Skills

Formulaic language forms an integral part of English vocabulary. The advantages of teaching formulaic sequences have been the subject of many recent studies (Durrant, 2017; Wray, 2013). For instance, Martinez and Schmitt (2012) noted some key advantages of formulaic sequences. They compose a large percentage of English discourse, whether written or spoken (58.6% of speaking discourse and 52.3% of writing discourse) and they can facilitate the communication of many expressions (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). Finally, they enable learners to produce language successfully by providing chunks of expressions (Gyllstad & Schmitt, 2018). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to pursue their investigation of better ways to integrate more formulaic sequences in classroom materials to promote more effective techniques of teaching English as a foreign language with the ultimate outcome being greater fluency for L2 learners (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Jones & Haywood, 2004; Schmitt & Underwood, 2004). Linguists in the field of language acquisition advocate that teaching formulaic sequences to L2 learners might enable them to grasp the new language quickly and lead to more successful language production (Fitzpatrick & Clenton, 2017; Osborne, 2007; Wood 2015; Wray, 2013).

Researchers have also proposed that standard automatic sequences should be considered a valuable means of teaching academic writing, especially for L2 learners who experience difficulty in expressing themselves in writing (Hyland, 2012). Systematic language may facilitate the processing of the target language because multi-word sequences are understood more quickly than non-formulaic words (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). Linguists have indicated that one-third to one-half of the English language is made up of formulaic sequences.

Lexical Bundles as A Leading Representative of Formulaic Language

To investigate the correlation between the explicit teaching of lexical bundles and the improvement of writing skills of first-year university students, it is imperative to define lexical bundles clearly and explain why they are considered two essential representatives of formulaic language. The term "formulaic language" has many features, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, collocation, and lexical bundles. Using such an umbrella is risky because it hides the diversity of the phenomenon discussed. Granger (2018) conducted extensive research on the different features of collocations and lexical bundles, dividing both into the components of definition and operationalization, frequency, accuracy, appropriacy, L1 transfer, and development.

Definition and Operationalization of Lexical Bundles

Studies on learner corpora have taken a new direction by introducing lexical bundles, which are considered an asset in the field of phraseology (Granger, 2018). Lexical bundle is a term that refers to high-frequency combinations of words that often occur next to each other, whether in spoken or written text. Lexical bundles are incomplete grammatical structures, commonly formed by combining two noun phrases or a verb and a noun phrase or more phrases or clauses, such as *on the other hand* and *as a result* (Durrant, 2017). They are considered building blocks of any spoken or written text. Despite their unique nature as extracted chunks of language, they cannot deploy any syntactic integrity because they cannot stand on their own and need to be incorporated into sentences (Ädel & Erman, 2012). Lexical bundles have three advantages that interest language researchers: they can be easily identified in any given text, they play functional roles, and they can demonstrate the differences between text types (Durrant, 2017).

Before discussing the operationalization of lexical bundles, it is essential to consider the different types that would help improve the writing skills of English language learners. The study focused on introducing the lexical bundles that would help study participants improve their writing skills. The research project introduced different types of lexical bundles weekly throughout the 15-week program. The study aimed to train the participants to develop well-organized essays at the end of the program. Initially, the course classified the lexical bundles in this study based on the classification that was introduced by Hyland (2008), Biber & Barbieri (2007), Biber et al. (2004), Cortes (2004), and Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010).

Those prominent scholars categorized lexical bundles into three types: referential bundles, discourse-organizing bundles, and attitudinal bundles. In every category, there are subcategories. First, referential bundles, also considered research-oriented bundles, represent how reality or ideas are expressed. For example, there are time/ text bundles – *at the end of the*, *at the beginning of*, attribute bundles – *a little bit of, the use of*, and lastly, the topic-specific bundles – *in the interpretation of*. Secondly, discourse organizers' bundles are text-oriented, as listed by Hyland (2008) and are primarily concerned with how writers introduce and develop ideas, through writing, and ultimately build a solid argument that reflects a well-developed line of thought. Examples of this type of bundle would be logical relations bundles, also referred to

as transition bundles, and include *on the other hand*, and *in contrast*. Finally, attitudinal bundles, sometimes referred to as stance bundles, as named by Hyland (2008) and could be denoted as participant-oriented bundles because they demonstrate interpersonal meaning. For example, interactional bundles are used to argue a point – *it should be noted that;* or *it can be seen* (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2012).

There is a relationship between the number of words and the frequency, as well as the occurrence of the bundle per million words. As for the dispersion criteria, findings regarding any of the lexical bundles represent the corpus as a whole. Unfortunately, there is a lack of this criterion in learner corpora studies because it means that the number of occurrences of certain bundles in the writing samples of some learners should demonstrate that the learners used the lexical bundles (Granger, 2018). Therefore, additional research to verify such use in speaking and writing is needed.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The study investigation was completed within the scientific paradigm because it aimed to establish generalizable laws, which could lead to further development in the educational process. The scientific paradigm is used in physical sciences and experimental psychology and is primarily concerned with objectivity and the discovery of scientific generalizations that describe the subject of the study. It focuses on quantitative data, which is why it employs experimental methods. In this research, the scientific post-positivist paradigm (Dulal, 2025) was employed to investigate classroom and learner variables and to examine their association with academic and learning outcomes.

The rationale for adopting the scientific paradigm stemmed from the well-grounded belief that teaching and classrooms exist independently. Thus, the present investigation examined the impact of teaching lexical bundles on improving writing quality, eventually leading to better final grades for first-year students in Western universities in the Middle East. The study was designed to employ experimental and scientific tests to examine the effectiveness of lexical bundles. The scientific paradigm advocates that researchers establish a relationship between a social phenomenon, the language classroom for this study, and the instruction of lexical bundles to formulate a hypothesis and test it through continuous observation (Grix, 2004).

Research Methodology

The study was conducted using an intervention study methodology, a design typically employed in experimental studies with a control group and an experimental group. An intervention vocabulary program that focused on teaching lexical bundles rather than the words on the Academic Word List (AWL) was applied. The study included lexical bundles due to their vital role in competent English-language production, as many linguists have indicated that formulaic sequences should be a significant component of classroom instruction (Li & Schmitt, 2010).

Researchers who have investigated the impact of teaching formulaic phraseology, especially lexical bundles, on language teaching have developed lists that can guide other teachers who plan to follow similar procedures in their classes. These include academic lexical bundles, phrasal expressions (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012), academic collocations (Ackermann & Chen, 2013), and phrasal verbs. Scholars have also suggested that teachers should be selective in their choice of the target multiword combinations based on their students' levels of English acquisition (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012). The present study utilized bundles from the Academic Formulas List, compiled by Simpson et al. (2010). It was also validated and assembled with a specific purpose in mind, directed at learners very similar to the study population (Schmitt, 2022).

The list of lexical bundles used in the intervention study with the control group is provided in Table 1 below. The list was adopted from Simpson et al. (2010) and introduced in the intervention over a period of 15 weeks. The class met four times a week, each session lasting one hour. Every week, the class was given new formulas to learn. There was always a review session at the beginning of every class, where students recalled and practiced the previously taught concepts.

The list was divided into three lexical bundle categories. The study adhered to the syllabus, which mainly focused on teaching students the essential skills to write a well-developed, unified, and coherent essay.

Table 1

The List of Lexical Bundles Used in the Present Study

Group A: Referential Expressions		
An attempt to	in accordance with	in the course of
Are/was based on	in such a way that	In the form of
Depend on	in the absence of	there are no
On the basis of	to distinguish between	there are several
With regard to	in this case of	in a number of
In terms of	degree to which	in some cases
Be related to	it has been	this does not
Which can be	does not have	this means that
Is more likely	on the other hand	the difference between
At the end of this point	at this stage	

Group B: Stance Expressions		
Appear(s) to be	Are likely to	As a whole
Assumed to	Be argued that	Be explained by
Be regarded as	Been shown that	If they are
Is determined by	We have seen	Take in account
Can be achieved	Most likely to	Carried out by
Has been used	It should be noted	Take into account
Can be expressed	Can be achieved	Are able to
Group C: Discourse Organizing Functions		
As shown in	Important role	It is necessary
It is obvious that	It is interesting	It is worth
It is difficult	In the present study	As a consequence,
As a result of	Due to the fact	Is affected
It follows	And if you	To determine whether
In conjunction	Even though	

Instructional Methods

The study applied a communicative language teaching pedagogy. The approach to teaching lexical bundles originated from the claim that successful vocabulary learning has three psychological processes: noticing, retrieving, and generating (Nation, 2024). Noticing can occur when any formula, whether a collocation or a three-word bundle, is highlighted as noticeable in the reading text, from the assigned authentic reading passages in the participants' coursebook, in the input, or a class discussion in the pre-reading task. Looking up a word in a dictionary, guessing from the text, deliberately studying the formula, or explaining the formula are all possible factors that can lead to noticing (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010). In the study, the instructor began by giving the students a checklist to test their knowledge of the formulaic language to be taught during the lesson. When selecting the formulas for the study, it was essential to consider that motivation and interest are two key factors in learning formulas. The researcher wanted to ensure that the chosen formulas would benefit the students and help them later express their ideas in writing.

The retrieval stage was when students needed to understand the formula, whether it involved collocation or lexical bundles, and grasp it through explicit instruction. This process involved recalling the learned formula, which could be receptive as when recognizing the form of the word and remembering its meaning. Selected reading passages were implemented during the retrieval stage in the class so the students could read the formulas in context. Finally, the last stage in the process was the productive phase which occurred when the students took a word they previously encountered and reproduced it repeatedly but in a different way. Stahl and

Vancil (1985, as cited in Nation, 2024) advocated that teachers should encourage discussion at this stage, as it plays a vital role in building a semantic map, which is crucial for developing good vocabulary knowledge.

The writing stage involved the intervention study, which entailed practicing the writing of different types of essays using the new formulas. The writing stage focused on using the formulas taught to produce well-developed sentence structure essays. The second stage began by teaching the students the essential features of a well-developed five-paragraph essay. The intervention study focused on how the use of lexical bundles could lead to more unified and well-supported paragraphs. Teaching the formulas went hand in hand with teaching the main features of writing coherent introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs. The second stage thus taught the participants how to build a strong argument using lexical bundles. The participants worked on various class activities that taught them how to use collocations and lexical bundles to support their ideas and write more coherent paragraphs, ultimately leading to a stronger argument. The second stage also trained the students to use collocations and lexical bundles to write well-developed outlines that would turn into their first and final drafts.

Participants

The participants in this study included 65 first-year students who were enrolled in composition and rhetoric classes. The treatment group consisted of 35 students, 20 females and 15 males, from various countries in the Middle East, all of whom spoke Arabic as their first language (L1). They were 19 and 20 years old. The control group also involved 30 participants, 15 males and 15 females, from the Middle East with Arabic as their L1. They were 19 and 20 years of age.

The treatment group received training and instruction on collocation and lexical bundles, whereas the control group of 30 students did not. The two groups followed the same syllabus to achieve the same learning outcomes to fulfill the course requirements. However, the treatment group had some slightly different activities.

The students learned about the intervention program through a flyer, which provided the time and location of the class. Those undergraduates who voluntarily agreed to join the program did so in an effort to improve their writing skills. Once the participants volunteered, they were all given an ethical consent form and an information sheet explaining the program's stages. All participants in the English division were given a fair chance to be included in the sample. Once the participants volunteered, they were immediately assigned a pseudonym to use on the forms and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the 15 weeks.

Ethical Consent

The study was conducted after receiving formal approval from the university. All participants received an informed consent form and an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study before commencing the research. The procedures ensured the confidentiality of the

participants' identities throughout the investigation by giving each student a pseudonym to anonymize them. The essays and tests only contained a number, not a name. The procedures ensured non-traceability throughout the study, extending to the aggregation of the data. The data was never shared with third parties except with the researcher's supervisors. The information shared was treated with the strictest confidence and was not disclosed without the participants' permission or for reasons beyond the purposes of this study.

Data Collection Procedures

Each of the assessment tools in the intervention study were designed to measure the correlation between teaching lexical bundles and the improvement in the writing skills of first-year college students in composition courses. All pre-test and post-test results were statistically analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to examine the impact of teaching lexical bundles on students' language development (Zajić & Maksimović, 2021).

As a common practice in the English Department where the study was conducted, the final grades of all essays were determined by a panel of three English instructors who read the essays before grading them. After the panel finalized the grades, all the lexical bundles that the students used in their essays were highlighted to investigate how the students utilized them and whether such inclusion was successful. It was important to examine whether the frequency of the occurrence of the formulas contributed to the overall grade. The analysis also aimed to study whether the integration contributed to upgrading the quality of their syntax.

Data Preparation

The first part of data preparation involved comparing the pre-test and post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. The *Experimental Group.xlsx* and *Control Group.xlsx* spreadsheets were combined into a single spreadsheet, with the column header "Students" representing the student's unique identifier (ID), "pre-test" representing the pre-test score, and "post-test" representing the post-test score. For consistency, the analysis converted both pre- and post-test scores to percentages by dividing by 30 and then multiplying the result by 100. To enable comparisons between the two groups, a grouping variable "Group" was generated with the value 1 representing the experimental group and 2 representing the control group. Finally, there was the calculation of the outcome variable of "Change" (representing the change in score from pre- to post-test) as the post-test score minus the pre-test score for each participant.

Similarly, there was the combination of the final scores from the essay (out of 100) into a spreadsheet, with pre- and post-test scores for the treatment and control groups for each participant. The data was taken for the control group from the spreadsheets *The control group pre-intervention.xlsx* and *The control group post-intervention.xslx*, while data was taken for the experimental group from the spreadsheets, *The Experimental group pre-intervention.xlsx* and *The Experimental group post-intervention.xlsx***.** Again, a grouping variable for "Group" with the value of 1 represented the experimental group and 2 represented the control group.

The outcome variable, or change, was calculated. The study included participants with both pre- and post-test scores in the analyses aimed at comparing the findings across the two groups.

Data Analysis

The results were the outcome of the calculation of the mean, SD, minimum, maximum, and N (65 participants) for:

a. The pre- and post-test scores are separate for the experimental and control groups.
b. The change in score between the pre- and post-test groups separately for the experimental and control groups using the results from the essays.

To check the distribution of the outcome measure (change in both tests and essay scores), boxplots will be plotted to assess if the data were normally distributed. The Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was used to test whether the outcome was normally distributed. A p-value of less than 0.05 would indicate that the outcome variable was not normally distributed, in which case, non-parametric tests would be used to test for statistical significance. This will help determine what type of statistical tests are appropriate for the data.

Findings

This study included a total of 65 participants, with 35 participants assigned to the experimental group and 30 to the control group. The mean (SD) for the pre-test score was 44.7 (7.3) in the experimental group, while students in the control group had a slightly lower mean grade of 40.1 (8.0) (see Table 2). The post-test scores in the experimental group were markedly higher, 66.7 (12.7), compared to the control group, 41.1 (10.4), which achieved the same scores as in the pre-test, on average.

Table 2

Descriptive Summary of Control and Experimental Group Test and Essay Scores by Group

	Group	N	Mean (SD)	Median (IQR)	Minimum	Maximum
Summary of Test Scores by Group						
Pre-test	Experimental	35	44.7 (7.3)	43 (37, 50)	30	57
	Control	30	40.1 (8.0)	40 (37, 47)	20	53
Post-test	Experimental	35	66.6 (12.7)	67 (57, 77)	43	87
	Control	30	41.1 (10.4)	43 (30, 47)	17	60
Summary of Essay Scores by Group						
Pre-test	Experimental	35	76.1 (3.0)	77 (73, 79)	70	80
	Control	30	76.6 (4.0)	77 (75, 78)	66	83
Post-test	Experimental	35	80.7 (4.6)	82 (76, 85)	72	87
	Control	30	77.9 (4.0)	79 (77, 80)	66	83

Discussion of the Research Findings

The study did not question if lexical bundles play a role in learning a foreign language. This question has been discussed in several studies over the last three decades. Teaching English, and especially the field of English as a Foreign language, has benefited from the introduction of emphasis on formulaic language, in general, with collocations and lexical bundles, in particular.

The study's central question was not to argue the vital role of lexical bundles in learning the English language. Conversely, the study investigated what type of lexical bundles would be more practical and effective in learning English, particularly in developing students' writing skills. As such, the study focused on academic writing, which is one of the essential productive skills.

When discussing lexical bundles, it is imperative to note that there are many types of each. The question under investigation is what categories of lexical bundles help students most. An

additional question explores why those sorts of word combinations are more beneficial when it comes to writing.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between the use of lexical bundles and the improvement in writing skills. Staples et al. (2013) studied the use of collocations and lexical bundles in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) writing tasks. They concluded that the lower the students' level of fluency and proficiency, the more they used lexical bundles and collocations. Staples et al. (2013) also noted that the students tended to recycle the collocations and lexical bundles they found in the question prompts. Appel and Wood (2016) confirmed these findings, noting an increase in the use of collocations and lexical bundles in the low-scoring writing of students in the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL). Appel and Wood's (2016) model found that the low-scoring students made use of stance bundles and discourse organizing bundles, whereas high-scoring students used more referential bundles.

By comparing the findings of the current research project with those of Staples et al. (2013) and Appel and Wood (2016), it is too early to confirm a direct relationship between the use of collocations and lexical bundles and improvement in students' writing skills. However, what the present study revealed is that lower-scoring students tend to use more one- or two-word stance bundles and discourse bundles, such as *even though*, *as a result*, and *it is necessary*, and tend to repeat them many times in every paragraph. For instance, if the student is writing three body paragraphs, they use them in every body paragraph and sometimes in identical sequences, which makes the writing monotonous in style and robotic. On the other hand, high-scoring students use more referential bundles, which can be molded into the sentences rather than serving as fixed lexical bundles. As such, these require a certain level of proficiency for students to use them in sentences.

Durrant (2018) argued that scholars' understanding of the relationship between the use of some formulas and the improvement of writing quality still has a long way to go. However, there is an apparent increase in the demand to include more collocations and lexical bundles in the English language, particularly in English as a foreign language class. Nevertheless, the production and circulation of ready-made lists of collocations and lexical bundles should not be broadly encouraged because this approach to teaching English has not been shown to assist students in improving their language skills. On the contrary, it trains students to depend on ready-made lists and to use them in their writing without trying to improvise or diversify their use of lexical bundles. What is more helpful is to investigate what types of collocations and lexical bundles are most useful, why high-scoring students use more referential lexical bundles, and how to teach the use of collocations and lexical bundles to students in a way that nurtures their mastery and ability to use them in different contexts and forms.

For the recurrent need to consider an appropriate pedagogy that could work well while teaching the lexical bundles according to Pellicer-Sanchez & Boers' (2018) recommendations, it was essential to incorporate the covered lexical bundles into communicative classes as demonstrated in Table 1. The intervention study adopted a communicative teaching pedagogy

where every presented language formula, collocation, or lexical bundle was explicitly taught through interactive communicative lessons. The current study implemented the explicit instruction of lexical bundles, having been influenced by Jones and Haywood's (2004) model that sheds light on the relationship between the straightforward instruction of lexical bundles and the development of language proficiency. Jones and Haywood (2004) did not simply introduce formulas to the participants. On the contrary, they taught the participants some strategies to learn the formulae in an effort to transfer the formulas into acquired knowledge. This model helped raise students' awareness of the sequences so they could learn the formulas through unambiguous instruction. In the current communicative study, Nation's (2013) process emphasizing noticing, retrieving, and generating was also incorporated. Jones and Haywood (2004) paid attention to the little details of formula learning. What made their model exceptional was their understanding that to learn a formula, students need to notice it as they read, retrieve it through tasks, and generate it through writing activities. These steps are all critical for the formula to be considered acquired knowledge.

Lexical bundles should be regarded as a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. They should be utilized as a tool to inspire learning and to understand different forms of sentence structure, and not to create passive learners who use ready-made bundles in their writing without making any alterations. The use of lexical bundles should promote acquired knowledge rather than temporary learning experiences.

On the explicit instruction of formulaic language, especially collocation, Durrant and Schmitt (2010) carried out an experiment on non-native English as a second language students, during which they introduced the participants to some collocations in reading comprehension. They instructed the participants to read some low-frequency and adjective-noun collocations out loud. They then tested the participants to examine whether they could recall the collocations and found that the students remembered the collocations they had read. Although Durrant and Schmitt's (2010) study took place in a classroom with timed activities, it is still considered a successful model of how the unambiguous instruction of collocational knowledge helped students learn new collocations (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2013).

The findings of the present study confirmed the benefits of the explicit instruction of lexical bundles to non-native speakers (Schmitt, 2008). Although many studies have examined the impact of overt instructions on native and non-native language learners, it is necessary to differentiate the tools for examining both groups because the language exposure of non-native learners cannot compare to that of native speakers. Hoey (2005) introduced collocational priming and argued that bundles are acquired incrementally over time when students are exposed to them through input and that such exposure might help create new collocations or modify old ones. Hoey (2005) argued that native speakers might encounter collocational knowledge from their surroundings and benefit from indirect input, while non-natives, given their circumstances, may not have the same exposure as L1 speakers but benefit more from precise instruction on collocational knowledge, first through clear instructions on collocations and then through activities and tasks (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2013).

The present study investigated how the use of lexical bundles contributed to improving the writing of first-year university students. To confirm the findings, the lexical bundles that the high-achieving participants in the treatment group used were combined. By reviewing the essays of the experimental group, it became apparent that the students who achieved better grades were those who used more lexical bundles that included noun phrases with other modifier fragments and verb phrases + *and* clause fragments.

It is too soon to confirm that the high-achieving students scored better in their essays because they used more lexical bundles. However, the current results can be used to propose that raising awareness of the use of lexical bundles, as Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) noted, helps high-achieving students write more complex sentences rather than resorting to short sentences. The focus should now be on how lexical bundles help language learners improve their sentence structure and write more complex sentences to express their ideas with greater comprehensibility.

As a result, this study showed that it was not the use of lexical bundles that helped the students achieve better grades. On the contrary, what mattered was the type of lexical bundles employed by the students to fulfill written communication tasks. The high-achieving participants scored better grades because of how they used lexical bundles. They did not simply apply them in their simplest form, but they molded and changed them to suit their sentence structure and expressive needs.

There has been an increase in research on the impact of teaching lexical bundles on improving writing skills. Most studies have agreed on the importance of introducing more lexical bundles in English as a foreign language class, finding that they positively affect students' writing skills. A study in Indonesia investigated the type of lexical bundles students used in academic writing classes and concluded that the participants were aware of the importance of using them to improve their writing (Sugiarti et al., 2018). Sugiarti et al. (2018) also found that the participants tended to use more research-oriented lexical bundles in the results and discussion sections of their academic writing.

There is a clear increase in demand for studies on the impact of lexical bundles, but language researchers should maintain a realistic view when discussing the influence of lexical bundles, as they are not a magic formula that can improve language acquisition. Despite their clear importance to writing, researchers have noted that acquiring lexical bundles requires much time and exposure (Cortes, 2004, 2006). They are acquired incrementally and over an extended period, in similar form as single words (Nation, 2024; Schmitt, 2022).

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study investigated the correlation between the use of lexical bundles and the improvement in the writing of first-year college students. The findings confirmed that the use of lexical bundles positively impacted the quality of students' writing. However, it is difficult to confirm that correlation means causation. Improving writing is a complex and

lengthy process. However, the use of collocation and lexical bundles was one factor that improved writing quality.

Thus, instead of questioning whether lexical bundles help improve English as a foreign language learners' writing skills, more research should be directed to how teachers and program administrators can develop additional teaching materials to help English language teachers use lexical bundles in writing classes. Scholars might focus more on developing classroom materials to teach students to use lexical bundles to improve their sentence structure. In this way, instead of writing short, simple sentences with the use of lexical bundles, whether discourse, referential, or stance bundles, the students can develop their ability to compose more advanced and well-developed, structured sentences.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, suggesting that the results should be interpreted cautiously. First, the findings are highly dependent on the participants' language proficiency, which played a significant role in the outcomes. If the study were to be replicated with different participants in a different context, the results might vary, indicating that the findings cannot be generalized. Second, the research was conducted over a single semester, lasting 15 weeks. Conducting the study over two or more semesters would provide a better opportunity to confirm the positive impact of using lexical bundles on the improvement of writing skills. Additionally, the sample size was limited to 65 participants, which is relatively small.

Recommendations for Further Research

The study investigated the correlation between teaching lexical bundles and improving the writing skills of students in composition classes. The researcher chose to focus on writing skills; however, it would be beneficial if the same study were repeated to investigate the impact of teaching lexical bundles on the four language skills, not only writing. When analyzing the effects of any teaching material, a researcher must assess listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, a focus on the four skills was not possible in the current study because the learning outcomes of the syllabus bound the focus of the class to be on writing. It is recommended that the study be repeated, targeting the four language skills.

The study adopted a purely scientific approach that depends on the analysis of pre-tests and post-tests along with the results of the writing grade to investigate the effectiveness of the teaching materials that attend to collocations and lexical bundles. Nonetheless, it is recommended to add an interview at the end of the intervention programs to listen to the participants and obtain their feedback on the teaching materials and whether the lexical bundles assisted them in improving their language skills.

References

Ackermann, K., & Chen, Y. H. (2013). Developing the academic collocation lst (ACL)–A corpus-driven and expert-judged approach. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *12*(4), 235–247. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2013.08.002

Ädel, A., & Erman, B. (2012). Recurrent word combinations in academic writing by native and non-native speakers of English: A lexical bundles approach. *English for Specific Purposes*, *31*, 81–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2011.08.004

Adolphs, S., & Schmitt, N. (2004). Vocabulary coverage according to spoken discourse context. In P. Bogaards & B. Laufer (Eds.), *Vocabulary in a second language: Selection, acquisition, and testing* (pp. 39–49). John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/lllt.10.05ado

Ai, H., & Lu, X. (2013). A corpus-based comparison of syntactic complexity in NNS and NS university students' writing. *Automatic Treatment and Analysis of Learner Corpus Data*, 249–264. https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.59.15ai

Al Hassan, L., & Wood, D. (2015). The effectiveness of focused instruction of formulaic sequences in augmenting L2 learners' academic writing skills: A quantitative research study. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *17*, 51–62. 1 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.02.001

Appel, R., & Wood, D. (2016). Recurrent word combinations in EAP test-taker writing: Differences between high- and low-proficiency levels. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *13*(1), 55–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2015.1126718

Biber, D., & Barbieri, F. (2007). Lexical bundles in university spoken and written registers. *English for Specific Purposes*, *26*(3), 263–286. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2006.08.003

Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Cortes, V. (2003). Lexical bundles in speech and writing: An initial taxonomy. In A. Wilson, P. Rayson, & T. McEnery (Eds.), *Corpus linguistics by the lune: A festschrift for Geoffrey Leech* (pp. 71–93). Peter Lang.

Boers, F., Eyckmans, J., Kappel, J., Stengers, H., & Demecheleer, M. (2006). Formulaic sequences and perceived oral proficiency: Putting a lexical approach to the test. *Language teaching research*, *10*(3), 245–261. https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168806lr195oa

Boers, F., & Lindstromberg, S. (2012). Experimental and intervention studies on formulaic sequences in a second language. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *32*, 83–110. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190512000050

Boers, F., Demecheleer, M., Coxhead, A., & Webb, S. (2014). Gauging the effects of exercises on verb–noun collocations. *Language Teaching Research*, *18*(1), 54–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505389

Chen, Y.-H., & Baker, P. (2016). Investigating critical discourse features across second language development: Lexical bundles in rated learner essays, CEFR B1, B2, and C1. *Applied Linguistics*, *37*(6), 849–880.

Conklin, K., & Schmitt, N. (2008). Formulaic sequences: Are they processed more quickly than nonformulaic language by native and nonnative speakers? *Applied Linguistics*, *29*(1), 72–89. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amm022

Cortes, V. (2004). Lexical bundles in published and student disciplinary writing: Examples from history and biology. *English for Specific Purposes*, *23*, 397–423. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2003.12.001

Cortes, V. (2006). Teaching lexical bundles in the disciplines: An example from a writing-intensive history class. *Linguistics and Education*, *17*, 391–406. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2007.02.001

Crossley, S., & Salsbury, T. L. (2011). The development of lexical bundle accuracy and production in English second language speakers. *IRAL*, *49*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.2011.001

Davis, M., & Morley, J. (2015). Phrasal intertextuality: The responses of academics from different disciplines to students' re-use of phrases. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *28*, 20–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2015.02.004

Dontcheva-Navratilova, O. (2012). Lexical bundles in academic texts by non-native speakers. *Brno Studies in English, 38*(2), 37–58. https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2012-2-3

Dulal, T. D. (2025). Application of positivism and post positivism approach in contemporary research. *International Journal of Applied Research and Sustainable Sciences*, *3*(4), 305–314.

Durrant, P. (2017). Lexical bundles and disciplinary variation in university students' writing: Mapping the territories. *Applied Linguistics*, *38*(2), 165–193. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amv011

Durrant, P. (2018). Formulaic language in English for academic purposes. *Understanding Formulaic Language*, 211–227. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315206615-12

Durrant, P., & Schmitt, N. (2009). To what extent do native and non-native writers make use of collocations? *IRAL*, *47*, 157–177. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.2009.007

Durrant, P., & Schmitt, N. (2010). Adult learners' retention of collocations from exposure. *Second Language Research*, *26*, 163–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658309349431

Ellis, N. C. (2008). Usage-based and form-focused language acquisition. In P. Robinson & N. C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of cognitive linguistics and second language acquisition* (pp. 372– 405). Routledge.

Frankel Pratt, S. (2016). Pragmatism as ontology, not (just) epistemology: Exploring the full horizon of pragmatism as an approach to IR theory. *International Studies Review*, *18*(3), 508–527. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viv003

Fitzpatrick, T., & Clenton, J. (2017). Making sense of learner performance on tests of productive vocabulary knowledge. *TESOL Quarterly, 51*(4), 844–867. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.356

Garnier, M., & Schmitt, N. (2015). The PHaVE List: A pedagogical list of phrasal verbs and their most frequent meaning senses. *Language Teaching Research*, *19*(6), 645–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814559798

Granger, S. (2018). Formulaic sequences in learner corpora: Collocations and lexical bundles. In A. Siyanova-Chanturia & A. Pellicer-Sanchez (Eds.), *Understanding formulaic language: A second language acquisition perspective* (pp. 228–247). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315206615-13

Grix, J. (2004). *The foundations of research*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gyllstad, H., & Schmitt, N. (2019). Testing formulaic language. *Understanding formulaic language: A second language acquisition perspective* (pp. 174–191). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315206615-10

Gyllstad, H. (2007). *Testing English collocations* [Unpublished dissertation]. Lund University.

Hoey, M. (2005). *Lexical priming: A new theory of words and language*. Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2012). Bundles in academic discourse. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *32*, 150–169. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190512000037

Jones, M. A., & Haywood, S. (2004). Facilitating the acquisition of formulaic sequences: An exploratory study in an EAP context. *Language Learning & Language Teaching.* Degruyter. https://doi.org/10.1075/lllt.9.14jon

Kaushik, V., & Walsh, C. A. (2019). Pragmatism as a research paradigm and its implications for social work research. *Social Sciences*, *8*(9), 255. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8090255

Kurniawan, I. (2016). Measuring EFL students' vocabulary size: Why and how. *English Education: Jurnal Tadris Bahasa Inggris*, *9*(1), 89–102.

Li, J., & Schmitt, N. (2010). The development of collocation use in academic texts by advanced L2 learners: A multiple case study approach. In D. Wood (Ed.). *Perspectives on Formulaic Language: Acquisition and Communication* (pp. 22–46). London: Continuum Press.

Lu, X. (2010). Automatic analysis of syntactic complexity in second language writing. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, *15*(4), 474–496. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.15.4.02lu

Martinez, R. (2011). *Putting a test of multiword expressions to the test*. Paper presented at the IATEFL Testing, Evaluation and Assessment SIG. University of Innsbruck, September 16, 2011. Retrieved from https://ufpr.academia.edu/RonMartinez/Talks

Martinez, R., & Schmitt, N. (2012). A phrasal expressions list. *Applied Linguistics*, *33*(3), 299–320. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams010

Meara, P. (2002). The rediscovery of vocabulary. *Second Language Research*, *18*(4), 393–407. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/0267658302sr211xx

Nation, P., & Meara, P. (2013). 3 Vocabulary. In *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (pp. 44-62). Routledge.

Nation, P. (2024). Re-thinking the principles of (Vocabulary) learning and their applications. *Languages*, *9*(5), 160. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages9050160

Osborne, J. (2007). Investigating L2 fluency through oral learner corpora. In M. C. Campoy & M. J. Luzon (Eds.), *Spoken Corpora in Applied Linguistics* (pp. 181–197). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Pellicer-Sánchez, A., & Boers, F. (2018). Pedagogical approaches to the teaching and learning of formulaic language. In A. Siyanova-Chanturia & A. Pellicer-Sánchez (Eds.), *Understanding formulaic language: A second language acquisition perspective* (pp. 153–173). Routledge.

Richards, J. C., & Pun, J. (2022). *Teaching and learning in English medium instruction: An introduction*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003191445

Sanosi, A. B. (2022). The use and development of lexical bundles in Arab EFL writing: A corpus-driven study. *Journal of Language and Education*, *8*(2), 106–121. https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2022.10826

Schmitt, N. (2008). Instructed second language vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching Research, 12*(3), 329–363. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168808089921

Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching vocabulary: A vocabulary research manual*. Palgrave Press. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230293977

Schmitt, N. (2022). Norbert Schmitt's essential bookshelf: Formulaic language. *Language Teaching*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444822000039

Schmitt, N., Dörnyei, Z., Adolphs, S., & Durow, V. (2004). Knowledge and acquisition of formulaic sequences: A longitudinal study. In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *Formulaic Sequences: Acquisition, Processing, and Use* (pp. 55–86). John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/lllt.9

Schmitt, N., Schmitt, D., & Clapham, C. (2001). Developing and exploring the behaviour of two new versions of the vocabulary levels test. *Language Testing*, *18*(1), 55–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/026553220101800103

Simpson-Vlach, R., & Ellis, N. C. (2010). An academic formula list: New methods in phraseology research. *Applied Linguistics*, *31*(4), 487–512. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amp058

Sinclair, J. (1987). *Looking up: An account of the COBUILD project in lexical computing*. Collins Cobuild.

Sonbul, S., & Schmitt, N. (2013). Explicit and implicit lexical knowledge: Acquisition of collocations under different input conditions. *Language Learning*, *63*(1), 121–159. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00730.x

Stahl, S. A., & Vancil, S. (1985). The importance of discussion in effective vocabulary instruction. Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University.

Szudarski, P. (2012). Effects of meaning- and form-focused instruction on the acquisition of verb-noun collocations in L2 English. *Journal of Second Language Teaching & Research, 1*(2), 3–37.

Staples, S., Egbert, J., Biber, D., & McClair, A. (2013). Formulaic sequences and EAP writing development: Lexical bundles in the TOEFL iBT writing section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *12*, 214–225. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2013.05.002

Sugiarti, T. R., Fitrianasari, N. I., & Sulistyorini, T. (2018). Lexical bundles in academic writing by undergraduate and graduate students of English Language Education Program. *Loquen: English Studies Journal, 11*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.32678/loquen.v11i02.1102

Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. Pearson Education Limited.

Wang, Y. (2016). *The idiom principle and L1 influence: A contrastive learner-corpus study of delexical verb + noun collocations*. John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.77

Wood, D. (2015). *Fundamentals of formulaic language*. Bloomsbury Academic

Wray, A. (2013). Formulaic language. *Language teaching*, *46*(3), 316–334. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444813000013

Zajić, J. S. O., & Maksimović, J. Ž. (2021). The efficiency of the application of SPSS in higher education teaching: An experimental study. *Proceedings of CBU in Social Sciences*, *2*, 273–278. https://doi.org/10.12955/pss.v2.234

Corresponding Author: Sally Kondos
Email: sallykondos@gmail.com

Students' Views on Language Diversity and Heritage Language Maintenance in The Indonesian Context

Bayu Andika Prasatyo
Catholic University of Indonesia Atma Jaya, Indonesia

Roosita Suci Wiryani
Catholic University of Indonesia Atma Jaya & Universitas Prasetiya Mulya, Indonesia

Tri Ananti Listiana
Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Indonesia

Corry Ester Margaret Siagian
Catholic University of Indonesia Atma Jaya, Indonesia

Yanuarius Yanu Dharmawan
Catholic University of Indonesia Atma Jaya, Indonesia

Christine Manara
Catholic University of Indonesia Atma Jaya, Indonesia

Abstract

Indonesia's linguistic landscape is among the most diverse in the world, yet its many indigenous and minority languages face increasing marginalization amid the widespread use of Bahasa Indonesia and English. This study examined university students' perspectives on language diversity and the preservation of heritage languages within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the research drew on responses from a 24-item attitudinal questionnaire and semi-structured interviews conducted with 78 students representing varied ethnic and regional backgrounds. The findings revealed a dual orientation among participants. While Indonesian and English are valued for their functional utility in academic and professional spheres, heritage languages continue to hold symbolic importance, particularly in familial and cultural domains. Nonetheless, the frequency of active use remains low, suggesting a discrepancy between positive attitudes and actual linguistic practice. The results highlight the need for more deliberate efforts to integrate heritage languages into educational discourse and institutional frameworks. Encouraging heritage language use in formal settings may strengthen students' cultural identities and contribute to broader initiatives in language preservation. In light of these findings, policy and curriculum development should consider strategies that acknowledge the value of linguistic diversity, ensuring that heritage languages are not merely celebrated in principle but actively maintained through practice.

Keywords: EFL learners, heritage language, language maintenance, linguistic diversity, student attitudes

Indonesia is widely recognized for its extraordinary linguistic diversity and cosmopolitan sociocultural landscape. As of 2019, the country was home to approximately 718 languages (Aji et al., 2022), positioning it among the most linguistically diverse nations globally. This expansive language repertoire includes thriving indigenous languages such as Sundanese, Javanese, Bataknese, and Balinese, each spoken by distinct ethnic communities (Anoegrajekti et al., 2020; Rodway & Dungey, 2019). These languages represent not only modes of communication but also bearers of cultural identity and collective memory. For many Indonesians, navigating this complex linguistic terrain is part of their daily life. Although globalization has introduced certain threats to the survival of these languages, it has also contributed to the construction of hybrid identities and increased sociolinguistic awareness (Dharmawan, 2023).

Despite this rich linguistic ecology, concerns persist regarding the preservation of heritage languages, particularly in light of the growing dominance of Bahasa Indonesia as a unifying national language. The increasing fluidity of language domains, driven by inter-language contact and shifting intergenerational practices, has led to a lack of clearly defined, structured language attitudes. Spolsky (2019) argues that the presence of multiple languages in a society does not necessarily guarantee language maintenance unless it is supported by a coherent language ideology. This absence of structured ideological and attitudinal support in the Indonesian context raises important questions about the long-term prospects of heritage languages and their role in shaping identity, communication, and inclusion. Maintaining one's first language (L1) while learning additional languages has been associated with enhanced academic outcomes, stronger identity development, and improved cognitive flexibility (Cummins, 2014). These benefits underscore the urgency of understanding how young Indonesians perceive and use their heritage languages.

Consequently, understanding language attitudes becomes vital for addressing the sociolinguistic challenges associated with heritage language decline. These attitudes are not formed in isolation; rather, they are shaped by both internal factors, such as identity, experience, and motivation, and external influences, including family environment, education, and cultural context. As Walgito (2001) proposed, attitudes are complex psychological constructs that influence how individuals perceive, respond to, and interact with their cultural and linguistic environments. Expanding on Walgito's framework, this study draws upon the theoretical perspectives of Lewis and Lupyan (2020) and Pérez and Tavits (2018) to examine how such attitudes influence language behaviors and the maintenance of linguistic diversity among Indonesian learners.

While a growing body of research has examined strategies for heritage language maintenance, often focusing on parental roles (Alfian, 2021), teacher integration of cultural awareness (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021), or student valorization of mother tongues (Roostini & Manara, 2021), few studies have explored how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners perceive and value their heritage languages in formal and informal settings. Previous research has tended to focus on external agents of language maintenance, yet the internal perspectives of learners themselves remain underrepresented. Studies by Budiyana (2017), Sugiyanta (2020), and

Hidayati and Prasatyo (2023) have highlighted both challenges and positive dispositions toward heritage language use, but these have largely centered on parents or communities rather than the learners' individual experiences. Roostini and Manara (2021) offered valuable insights into the bilingual practices of Papuan students living in school dormitories, but this line of inquiry has not been sufficiently extended to include broader EFL populations.

This study addressed that gap by exploring how EFL students perceived the value of both the languages they acquired informally within the family or community and those they learn through formal instruction. Following Melo-Pfeifer (2015) and Cangelosi et al. (2024), heritage languages are defined as those spoken at home or among family members, which are often sustained through cultural practice and social reinforcement. While language acquisition refers to informal, naturalistic language development, particularly in familial contexts, language learning is understood as a more structured and intentional process that takes place in educational settings. By investigating how these learners conceptualize and prioritize their heritage language in relation to their overall linguistic repertoire, this study sought to contribute new insight into the processes that influence language maintenance among youth. Specifically, it examined the following research questions:

1. How did students perceive the roles and values of the languages they had acquired and learned?
2. What significance did participants attach to the continued use and maintenance of their heritage language in familial, educational, and social domains.

Literature Review

Language Attitudes

Attitudes toward language are multidimensional constructs shaped by both internal and external influences. These include individual experiences, cultural identity, family background, and exposure to linguistic environments. As Walgito (2001) argues, attitudes arise from complex psychological processes that guide perception and behavior; however, more recent studies have extended this understanding to account for sociolinguistic variables (Getie, 2020). Language attitudes are particularly relevant in multilingual settings, where learners must navigate competing linguistic demands. Sahadevan and Sumangala (2021) emphasize that in cross-cultural contexts, individuals' linguistic preferences are often mediated by their social positioning and perceptions of language prestige.

Importantly, positive attitudes toward a language are often associated with higher levels of motivation and engagement in language learning (Devi & Devi, 2024). For heritage languages, however, the relationship is more nuanced in that learners may express pride and affection for their heritage language while still favoring dominant languages for practical or academic reasons. This tension reflects the instrumental versus affective dimensions of language attitudes (Susanto, 2018). While languages such as English are often linked with upward mobility, heritage languages are generally tied to identity, memory, and family continuity.

Heritage Languages

Heritage languages are typically defined as languages spoken in the home that differ from the dominant language of the broader society (Melo-Pfeifer, 2015). Unlike first languages (L1), which are usually acquired early in life and used across multiple domains, heritage languages may not be fully developed or maintained due to limited use outside familial or cultural settings (Cangelosi et al., 2024). While both L1 and heritage languages may be learned naturally, the key distinction lies in their societal function because L1 often becomes the primary language of daily life, whereas a heritage language may be relegated to symbolic or emotional contexts.

Some scholars argue that heritage languages should be considered a unique category, distinct from both L1 and L2. Fishman (2006) highlights their role in fostering ethnolinguistic identity and intergenerational continuity. In many multilingual societies, however, children may grow up acquiring a heritage language at home while simultaneously learning the dominant language at school. In such contexts, the heritage language may lack institutional support, increasing the risk of attrition. For instance, Pillai et al. (2015) found that Malaysian youths perceived their heritage languages as integral to their cultural identity but did not use them consistently outside the home.

The symbolic and emotional value of heritage languages is especially relevant in Indonesia, where local languages are often subordinated to Bahasa Indonesia and English. Hidayati and Prasatyo (2023) argue that parental attitudes and home practices are crucial for sustaining heritage language use. Similarly, Alfian (2021) emphasizes the need for intergenerational language transmission to maintain linguistic continuity.

Language Maintenance

Language maintenance refers to efforts by individuals or communities to preserve the use of a minority language in the face of pressures from dominant languages. Holmes and Wilson (2022) describe this process as both a cultural and political act, requiring not only individual commitment but also structural support. Community practices, educational policies, and family norms all contribute to whether a heritage language is sustained or lost.

Maintenance does not occur automatically, even when attitudes are favorable. As Arka (2013) notes, positive sentiment alone is not sufficient; systematic planning and supportive environments are required. In the Indonesian context, language maintenance is complicated by the national emphasis on Bahasa Indonesia, which often displaces regional and ethnic languages. This dynamic has led to hybrid identities and shifting language loyalties, particularly among younger generations (Dharmawan, 2023).

Recent studies suggest that educational institutions can play a critical role in supporting language maintenance. Yurtsever and Özel (2021), for instance, emphasize the importance of integrating cultural awareness into language teaching. However, their work focuses more on foreign language instruction than on heritage language maintenance specifically. A more direct

connection is found in the work of Roostini and Manara (2021), who investigate the language attitudes of Papuan students in Indonesia and highlight the ways in which institutional settings can either reinforce or undermine heritage language use.

Efforts to maintain linguistic diversity must account for both structural and individual factors. Without active use, even positively viewed languages risk marginalization. As Cangelosi et al. (2024) argue, families alone cannot shoulder the responsibility; institutional and policy-level interventions are equally necessary.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive methodology, guided by Creswell's framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), to explore the perceptions of EFL learners concerning language diversity and heritage language maintenance. This approach was appropriate for investigating nuanced patterns of attitudes and behaviors across diverse sociocultural settings such as Indonesia's multilingual context. The study provided rich descriptions of students' language-related experiences and perspectives, grounded in their ethnic, regional, and educational backgrounds.

Data were collected at the Higher School of Foreign Languages of Technocrat, located in Tangerang Regency, Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who were considered information-rich cases due to their varied language exposure, educational levels, and regional backgrounds. This sampling ensured the inclusion of participants with firsthand experience of both heritage language use and formal language education, thereby facilitating a deeper exploration of the research questions.

Participants

The study involved 78 university students from various regions across Indonesia who were enrolled in an English language program. Participants represented different academic levels, with 26 freshmen, 29 sophomores, 13 juniors, and 10 seniors. Their selection was based on purposive criteria. The intention was to identify participants with diverse linguistic backgrounds who could provide meaningful reflections on heritage language usage. The participants included individuals from regions such as Lampung, Kupang, Tangerang, West Java, and Central Sumatra. Additionally, 10 students were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to complement and enrich the survey data. These participants were chosen to represent varied gender and ethnic affiliations.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Participants (N = 78)

Participant	n	%		n	%
Age			**English language**		
≤ 20	55	70.5	**proficiency**	14	17.9
>21	23	29.5	Beginner	42	53.8
			Intermediate	19	24.4
			Advance	3	3.8
			Superior		
Gender			**other foreign languages**		
Male	17	21.8	**acquired**		
Female	61	78.2	English	64	82.1
			Arabic	6	7.7
Academic year			Mandarin	4	5.1
Freshmen	26	33.3	Japanese	2	2.6
Sophomore	29	37.2	Korean	2	2.6
Junior	13	16.7			
Senior	10	12.8			

Note: n = Number of participants

Data Collection Procedure

Two primary instruments were utilized to gather data: a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire comprised 24 items aimed at exploring students' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors concerning heritage language use, language acquisition, and multilingual identity. It included both binary (yes/no) questions and statements rated on a four-point Likert scale (DeVellis, 2017) ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The items were informed by theoretical frameworks in sociolinguistics and psychology, particularly Ajzen's (2014) Theory of Planned Behavior and Walgito's (2001) model of attitude formation, ensuring alignment with established constructs relevant to language attitudes and behavior.

To support validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review by two scholars in applied linguistics and language education. Their feedback was used to assess the content's relevance and clarity, with particular attention to the Indonesian sociolinguistic context. Additionally, a preliminary pilot study involving eight students, who did not participate in the main study, was conducted to identify ambiguities and assess the appropriateness of item wording. Revisions were made accordingly to enhance the instrument's face and content validity.

Although formal statistical tests for reliability, such as Cronbach's alpha, were not applied due to the study's qualitative orientation, the instrument's internal consistency was evaluated during piloting. Problematic items were refined or removed. Moreover, consistency between

questionnaire responses and themes that emerged from interview data contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the findings through methodological triangulation.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a systematic procedure involving transcription, translation, coding, and thematic categorization. Using manual coding, the research team identified recurring patterns and themes related to language use, attitude, and cultural identity. The process was informed by Ajzen's (2014) Theory of Planned Behavior, which conceptualizes attitude as a function of belief, emotion, and behavioral intention. These categories helped structure both the interpretation of survey results and the qualitative narratives derived from interview data. The integration of thematic analysis enhanced the study's ability to connect individual experiences with broader sociolinguistic frameworks, thereby generating comprehensive insights into the role of heritage language in multilingual education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review board of the Higher School of Foreign Languages of Technocrat. All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality measures. Participants' names were anonymized using pseudonyms during transcription and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The participants responded to the yes/no question in the questionnaire to view the language they had acquired. The table demonstrates that Indonesian was the predominant first language among the majority of students. Table 2 also displays the frequency percentages of the languages they had acquired.

How Learners View the Languages They Acquire

Table 2
Participants' Language Acquisition

Linguistic Aspect	Language Acquisition		
	L1 %	L2 %	Other Language %
Indonesian	83.3	15.3	3.7
Sundanese	6.4	30.7	8.4
Javanese	7.7	17	7.7
Bataknese	-	1.3	-
Kupangnese	-	1.3	-
Lampungnese	1.3	-	-
Timornese	-	1.3	-
Palembangnese	-	2.5	-
Betawi	-	1.3	-
Kupang	1.3	1.3	-
Korean	-	-	7.5
Arabic	-	-	5
Japanese	-	-	2
Other	-	-	5.3
English	-	28	60.3
Total	100	100	100

The findings from Table 2 reveal that Bahasa Indonesia was the dominant first language (L1) among participants, with heritage languages such as Javanese and Sundanese reported far less frequently. This linguistic distribution reflects an ongoing trend of language shift in Indonesia, wherein regional languages are increasingly displaced by the national language in both domestic and educational domains. Although Indonesia's language policy promotes unity through a shared national language, its widespread dominance may inadvertently contribute to the erosion of local linguistic identities. The reduced presence of heritage languages as L1s, particularly among youth, suggests a generational decline in intergenerational transmission, a key factor in long-term language maintenance (Fishman, 2006; Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

Furthermore, English appeared prominently as a second or third language, which was predictable given the participants' enrollment in an English literature program. However, its functional association with academic and professional advancement raised concerns about the diminishing relevance of heritage languages in formal and aspirational contexts. These patterns underscored a linguistic hierarchy wherein English and Indonesian are positioned for mobility and access, while heritage languages are increasingly confined to symbolic or familial roles. Such dynamics reflected broader sociolinguistic pressures that may undermine the

sustainability of minority languages unless counterbalanced by institutional and community-level support (Cangelosi et al., 2024).

Beyond L1 and L2, English also emerged as the most acquired additional language, with 60.3% of students reporting proficiency. This trend aligned with the academic orientation of the participants and broader global patterns in English language learning (Crystal, 2003; Hartshorne et al., 2018; Ushioda, 2017). Other foreign languages such as Korean, Javanese, and Sundanese were also noted, though less frequently, suggesting exposure to a multilingual environment. Rather than indicating balanced multilingualism, these patterns reflected a hierarchy in language use and function, where English is often associated with academic advancement, while heritage languages are more closely tied to familial and cultural identity.

How Learners View the Languages They Learn

The following table provides a detailed breakdown of EFL learners' views towards language use, encompassing proficiency, confidence, interest, enjoyment, intelligence, pride, and usage across their first language (L1), second language (L2), and third/other languages. The data indicated that learners exhibited positive attitudes towards their L1, reinforcing the idea that strong cultural and emotional ties to heritage languages are crucial for their maintenance and transmission (Alfian, 2021; Roostini & Manara, 2021; Sugiyanta, 2020). These positive attitudes are essential for fostering a sense of cultural identity and continuity (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). Students expressed stronger emotional attachment and pride in their L1 compared to L2 and other languages, which were more associated with instrumental goals such as academic success or global communication. This reflects a common trend in multilingual communities where heritage languages carry affective value, while foreign languages are linked to future mobility.

The findings highlight a nuanced interplay between affective and utilitarian orientations in students' language attitudes. While learners expressed emotional attachment and cultural pride in their heritage languages, their attitudes toward Indonesian and English were largely driven by instrumental motivations, such as academic performance, employment prospects, and social mobility. This distinction goes along with Gardner's framework of integrative versus instrumental motivation, wherein heritage languages are valued for their role in affirming identity and community belonging, while dominant and global languages are perceived as gateways to personal advancement. Such dual positioning underscores a pragmatic form of multilingualism shaped by external pressures and internal affiliations (Devi & Devi, 2024; Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

However, the coexistence of these attitudes does not necessarily result in balanced multilingualism. Rather, the hierarchy of languages in students' lived experiences revealed that affective value does not guarantee functional use. This observation points to a critical challenge in language education: without institutional encouragement, heritage languages risk being relegated to symbolic domains, gradually losing relevance in students' everyday interactions. These insights emphasize the need for educational policy to go beyond promoting

multilingualism in theory and actively support the maintenance of linguistic diversity through curriculum design, teacher training, and community engagement (Cangelosi et al., 2024; Dharmawan, 2023).

Table 3

EFL Learners' Views Towards Languages They Learn

Items related to learner's views on languages	Frequency and Percentage											
	L1				L2				Third / Other Language			
	SA %	A %	D %	SD %	SA %	A %	D %	SD %	SA %	A %	D %	SD %
Expertise	64	32	2.6	1.4	30.8	62.8	6.4	-	59 5	33.3	7.7	0
Confidence	51.2	41	6.4	1.4	16.6	29.4	50	3.8	12. 8	47.4	29.5	10.2
Interest	30.7	51.2	18	-	7.6	14	64	14	10.3	32	48.7	1.3
Enjoyment	52.5	46.2	1.3	-	19.2	59	21.8	-	28.2	44.8	25.6	1.3
Intelligence	42.3	48.7	9	-	30.7	48.7	18	2.5	47.4	46.2	5	1.3
Pride	71	28.2	1.3	-	43.6	51.3	5	-	52.6	47.4	-	-
Usage	20.5	39.7	27	12.8	11.5	29.5	43.6	15.3	28.2	42.3	23	6.4

Note: SA=Strongly agree, A= Agree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

Table 3 highlights students' affective orientations toward the languages in their repertoire, revealing notably high levels of confidence, pride, and enjoyment associated with their first language (L1), which in many cases corresponds to a heritage language. This strong affective bond suggests that heritage languages remain integral to students' self-concept and cultural identity. However, this emotional attachment did not consistently translate into regular use, as indicated in other sections of the data. The discrepancy points to a critical divide between identity-based valuation and functional utility, where heritage languages are emotionally meaningful but practically sidelined in favor of more socially and institutionally dominant languages.

Ajzen's (2014) Theory of Planned Behavior helps explain this contradiction. While students may hold positive beliefs and emotional attitudes toward their heritage language, their actual language behavior is shaped by perceived norms and situational constraints, factors that often favor Bahasa Indonesia or English. This suggests that language choice is not simply a reflection of preference but a negotiated response to social and educational pressures. In this context, high confidence in L1 usage may reflect comfort within private or familial domains yet be counterbalanced by reduced public or academic usage due to institutional expectations and peer dynamics (Lewis & Lupyan, 2020; Spolsky, 2019).

The data thus revealed a form of passive maintenance, wherein heritage languages are preserved emotionally but not functionally. For language educators and policymakers, this accentuates the need to create opportunities for students to engage with heritage languages beyond informal contexts, such as through culturally inclusive curricula, peer language communities, and heritage language media access. Without such reinforcement, the gap

between language attitude and usage may continue to widen, accelerating language shift despite positive dispositions.

In contrast, students' confidence in their second language (L2) appeared more variable. Although 16.6% expressed some level of disagreement regarding their confidence in L2, the majority still indicated overall positive attitudes, implying functional proficiency in the language. This may reflect the influence of L2 usage in educational or regional contexts, where exposure is frequent but not necessarily tied to cultural identity (Getie, 2020). Notably, the data showed that 60.2% of students felt confident using their third or additional language, most often English, highlighting the instrumental role this language played within their academic trajectories. This finding aligns with their status as English literature students and underscores the perceived utility of English as a tool for academic and professional advancement, rather than as a marker of cultural belonging.

In respect of interest, a significant portion of respondents expressed interest in using their first language for communication in campus settings, while a smaller percentage showed interest in conversing in their second language. Interestingly, a considerable number of respondents expressed appeal in communicating using their third language, particularly English, for academic and social interactions (Alfian, 2021; Roostini & Manara, 2021). In terms of enjoyment, a majority of respondents voiced enjoyment and happiness when communicating in their first language. Similarly, a significant percentage enjoyed using their second language, especially in social contexts. Moreover, a notable proportion reported enjoyment in using their third language, reflecting a positive attitude toward language acquisition and usage (Sugiyanta, 2020).

Participants' responses suggested a high level of pride in their first language, particularly where it aligned with their heritage language. This affective dimension of language identity, often shaped by familial and cultural connections, reflects the symbolic value attributed to heritage languages within private and community settings. However, the data also indicated that this pride did not consistently manifest in frequent use across broader social or educational domains. The discrepancy reveals a critical tension between emotional valuation and practical language behavior, highlighting what some scholars describe as ideological support without active practice (Fishman, 2006; Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

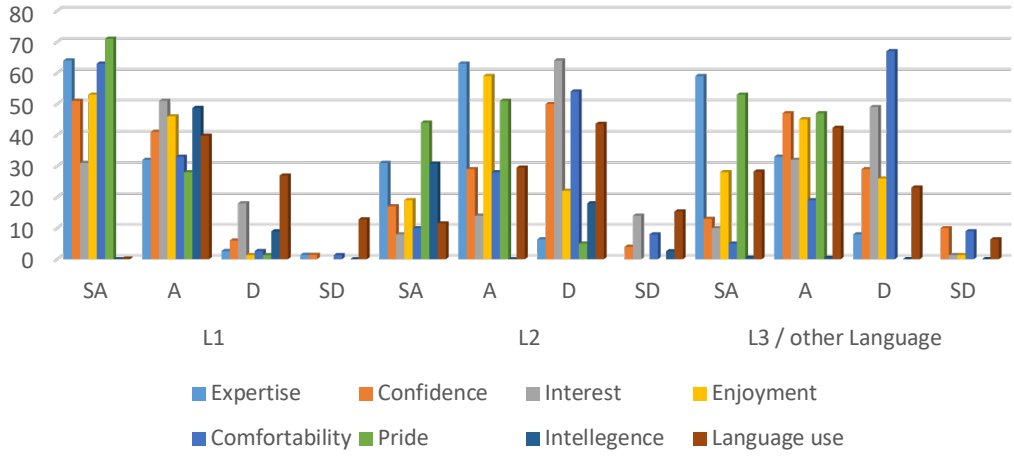
This pattern may be understood through the lens of perceived language hierarchies, where heritage languages retain sentimental value but lack institutional reinforcement. Students may feel pride in their linguistic roots while simultaneously internalizing the belief that proficiency in Indonesian or English is more advantageous for academic success or professional advancement. As a result, pride becomes an inward, retrospective attachment rather than a motivator for public language use. This feature supports the broader literature on language shift, which identifies social context, prestige, and perceived utility as decisive factors in long-term language maintenance (Cangelosi et al., 2024; Spolsky, 2019).

Moreover, although respondents reported that their first language enhanced their academic abilities, this belief appeared to reflect cognitive familiarity and comfort in expression rather than active deployment in academic tasks. In contrast, English was more frequently associated with intelligence and opportunity, pointing out its instrumental role in educational contexts. These contrasting associations further reinforce the symbolic-functional divide, where heritage languages support identity formation, while dominant languages are viewed as tools for success. Addressing this imbalance will require targeted pedagogical strategies that not only affirm students' linguistic heritage but also integrate it meaningfully into academic discourse and practice.

The following figure visually represents the percentage distribution of EFL learners' views toward different languages. This visual data emphasizes the significance of heritage languages in the learners' linguistic repertoire, reinforcing the necessity of positive language attitudes for effective language maintenance and cultural identity preservation (Dharmawan, 2023; Hidayati & Prasatyo, 2023). The positive views of EFL learners towards their heritage languages and other acquired languages stress the importance of fostering a supportive environment for language maintenance and cultural identity (Ajzen, 2014; Walgito, 2001).

Figure 1

Learners' Views on Languages They Learn



Note: SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

The survey instrument employed a four-point Likert scale, Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD), to measure the frequency and intensity of students' attitudes toward their first (L1), second (L2), and additional languages. The response categories support Ajzen's (2014) theoretical model of attitudes, which conceptualizes attitudes as predispositions to respond either positively or negatively to an object, influenced by affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. The questionnaire comprised seven key indicators: expertise, confidence, enjoyment, curiosity, pride, usage, and perceived intelligence. Each item was designed to capture a specific dimension of language attitude, thereby offering nuanced insight into how students perceive, experience, and engage with the different languages in their

linguistic repertoire. Collectively, these measures provide a comprehensive portrait of learners' language-related dispositions, reflecting both emotional attachment and functional value across their multilingual experiences.

This comprehensive analysis demonstrated the multifaceted nature of student attitudes toward language acquisition and usage, emphasizing the significance of heritage languages alongside proficiency in other languages, principally English, in shaping their academic and social experiences. The study's findings supported the theoretical perspectives outlined in the introduction and literature review, confirming the critical role of positive language attitudes in maintaining linguistic diversity and fostering effective multilingual interactions (Alfian, 2021; Getie, 2020; Roostini & Manara, 2021).

How Learners View Language Use

Despite the fact that Indonesian is the dominant language in their everyday and academic contacts, the findings showed that students generally had positive attitudes regarding their mother tongue. The predominance of Indonesian notwithstanding, local languages are still spoken in social contexts, displaying a deep appreciation for their linguistic heritage. The experience increased by the ways that students use to preserve their heritage language, such as employing it in specific cultural contexts or social groupings. Furthermore, students' attitudes about language use were shown by their responses to specific statements about second and third/other languages. The following statements gave light on their perspectives of how language acquisition impacted their personalities and whether it interacted with their heritage language. The analysis of response distribution across agreement categories indicates the variations in their views on language acquisition and its impact on their native language.

Table 4

Learners' Views on Language Use

Items related to views on language utilization	Second Language				Third /Other Language			
	SA %	A %	D %	SD %	SA %	A %	D %	SD %
The language I acquired caused my personality to change.	14	37	37.2	11.5	20.5	35.8	38.4	-
I don't think that the language I acquired inhibited my heritage language	27	43.5	23	6.4	39.7	35.8	18	5.1

Note: SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

The analysis of EFL learners' views towards language use and the significance of their heritage language showcased a wide range of positive perceptions. These views reflected a sense of security and pride in their heritage language, despite the influence of other languages in their multilingual environment. As shown in Table 4, a significant number of participants admitted how their L2 and third or other languages shaped their personalities. Specifically, 37% of

participants reported that their L2 had influenced their personality, while 35.8% indicated a similar effect from their third or other languages. This finding goes along with the theory that attitudes toward language are fashioned by various personal and societal factors, including cultural background and environmental stimuli (Lewis & Lupyan, 2020; Walgito, 2001).

How Learners Value their Heritage Language Maintenance

The information highlighted in Table 5 depicts how heritage language maintenance is highly valued. The data are taken from the items distributed in a questionnaire and complemented by insights from interviews conducted. The responses offered a more complex understanding of students' views and behaviors toward maintaining their heritage language.

Table 5

Students Values on Heritage Language Maintenance

	Items related to values on heritage language maintenance	**Frequency and Percentage**			
		SA %	A %	D %	SD %
1	In my opinion, my first language should always be used	46.1	43.5	10.2	-
2	By continuing and practicing the first language in my daily life, I help maintain the first language.	62.8	35.8	1.3	-
3	I do not feel that the second language and or other languages that I acquire or learn can disrupt my heritage language.	26.9	43.5	23	6.4

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

Table 5 indicates that a majority of students conveyed strong agreement with the importance of using their first language, particularly in relation to cultural preservation. This reflected a clear recognition of heritage language as a carrier of tradition, identity, and familial connection. However, despite this stated value, many participants reported infrequent use of their heritage language in daily interactions, especially outside domestic settings. This dissonance emphasizes the dissimilarity between symbolic valuation, where a language is cherished for what it represents, and functional usage, which depends on its relevance in everyday life and institutional contexts (Fishman, 2006; Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

The gap between belief and behavior suggests that heritage language maintenance faces obstacles beyond personal attitude. Structural forces such as school language policies, peer norms, urbanization, and media exposure tend to prioritize Bahasa Indonesia and English, marginalizing local languages from public discourse. These pressures create what Spolsky (2019) terms “unseen language policies,” where informal expectations and prestige dynamics silently regulate linguistic behavior.

Moreover, while participants reported that continued use of their L1 contributes to its maintenance, their language practices appear to be largely passive or symbolic—often confined to conversations with older family members or community-specific rituals. This limited domain use, though emotionally meaningful, may not be sufficient to sustain intergenerational transmission, particularly as younger speakers grow more immersed in multilingual but dominantly Indonesian and English-speaking environments. As Cangelosi et al. (2024) argue, without institutional reinforcement or formal educational inclusion, heritage languages risk becoming static markers of identity rather than living modes of communication. Thus, the data from Table 5 should not only be seen as evidence of positive attitudes but also as a warning of the vulnerability of heritage languages when cultural value is not accompanied by active use and social support. Addressing this challenge requires more than encouraging individual pride, it calls for systemic changes that legitimize and incorporate heritage languages into public, academic, and digital spaces.

According to Hidayati and Prasatyo's (2023) research on native languages in the home and the impact of digital resources and social contexts on language preservation, 62.8% of respondents actively use and practice their heritage language on a daily basis. Of those surveyed, 43.5% feel that learning another language does not threaten their heritage language. This emotion underlines the persistence and relevance of their language heritage in the face of linguistic diversity and globalization. This is consistent with Dharmawan's (2023) research on how globalization might promote identities in complex linguistic situations, as well as Sugiyanta's (2020) study on the many methods and challenges of heritage language preservation. The information taken from the interview can depict how the heritage language is essential to be used in daily basis communication.

Excerpt 1: “HL should always be used in everyday communication whatever language you study, but at home you must use your HL.” Even, parents should also teach the children to know their culture, their first language (Christ (Pseudonym)).

The study suggests that the participants' positive views seemed to be rather closely related with their family and cultural ties. Christ’ comment, which emphasized the need of using their ancestral language, particularly inside their own homes, helps to underscore the relationship of L1 and family expectations. This is in line with earlier studies accentuating the critical need of language in the preservation of identity and the spread of culture (Alfian, 2021). Nevertheless, even though the importance of heritage language was recognized, numerous participants admitted to rarely using it in their day-to-day interactions. This discrepancy between valuing and using heritage languages highlights the influence of broader sociolinguistic pressures. Although students recognize the cultural importance of their L1, institutional and peer norms likely encourage the use of Indonesian or English in daily life. Similar findings are noted by Roostini and Manara (2021), who observed that language shift can occur even when positive attitudes are present. In this case, the difference between attitude and behavior may be attributed to several factors, such as the widespread use of Indonesian as the primary language in society and education. This raises concerns about the preservation of native languages in the face of Indonesian dominance (Spolsky, 2019).

The positive attitudes that they manage seem to reflect their feeling towards the relation with families, friends and acquaintance even when they were asked about the frequency of their using heritage language claimed that most of them are seldom to use it in their everyday use. This is strengthened by the fact that those whose first language is Indonesian, 50 respondents or 64% of them use their L1 or Heritage language to communicate with older people. While those whose L1 is not Indonesian, for example (the majority is Sundanese with 31 % followed by English 28 % and Javanese 17 %, see in table 1) only 6 respondents or 8 % of them use their L2 to communicate with older people which means that they are reluctant to have a communication with vernacular language since their parents speak it politely. They are more likely to use the dominant language, that is Indonesian, to using their heritage language. They valued their Heritage language as a cultural or family tie in the same manner as the teenagers in (Roostini & Manara, 2021). This can be proven by one of the participant's excerpts below whose heritage language is Sundanese.

Excerpt 2: "I rarely speak Sundanese with my parents in my home because my parents speak Sundanese very politely and I can't adjust to it, so I use my second language, Indonesian, instead of Sundanese" (Erick (Pseudonym)).

The excerpt suggests that although individuals acknowledge the significance of their heritage language, their language habits are influenced by the prevailing cultural and educational constraints that prioritize the use of Indonesian. The disparity between attitude and behavior underpins the intricate interaction of individual, familial, and societal elements in the preservation of language and the significance of favorable language attitudes in safeguarding linguistic variety, as delineated by Liu (2023). Therefore, it is crucial to take into account both the encouraging and demanding elements of linguistic contexts to successfully encourage and maintain heritage languages within Indonesia's multilingual context.

Another step as a way of valuing their heritage language is reflected in statement number two, where 62 % of respondents strongly agreed and 35.8 % also agreed that by ongoing practicing as well as using their heritage language meant that they choose to maintain it to exist in a community. As Holmes and Wilson (2022) point out, language maintenance occurs when a speech community continues to use its language regularly, even in the face of pressure from more dominant languages. The above datum clearly highlights that most of the speakers of the heritage language are still about to use it as a part of their daily lives. This fact is also proved by the result of an interview where one of participants claimed that our heritage language should be preserved starts from the family, otherwise it can be lost.

Excerpt 3: "In maintaining my heritage language, which is Sundanese, I only use and speak it with my peers within the same community. if I see the adolescent today, where the majority of them for example such as what happens in my village that most of them are reluctant to speak Sundanese as their heritage language, they prefer using Indonesian, English or other foreign language to Sundanese. for me this can endanger our heritage language" (Devy (Pseudonym)).

Devy's contemplation on preserving her Sundanese cultural language demonstrates a conscious endeavor to sustain its usage within society. She stresses that she only talks in Sundanese with classmates who share the same cultural background, demonstrating a proactive stance toward language conservation. This practical approach is under the imperative of fostering positive language attitudes to ensure the preservation of heritage languages, as elucidated by Alfian (2021) who emphasizes the significance of parental roles and strategies like Heritage Language Only (HLO) and One Parent One Language (OPOL) in upholding cultural identity.

Devy's statement of current teenage linguistic trends reveals a disturbing trend in which a large number of young people, particularly in her village, are hesitant to speak in Sundanese. Instead, they choose Indonesian, English, and other foreign languages. Concerns have been raised about the potential loss of Sundanese cultural and linguistic heritage as a result of the language shift. This tendency exemplifies the broader issues raised by Spolsky (2019) and Zhang & Pérez-Milans (2019), who argue that globalization and the interaction of multiple languages can lead to the decline of indigenous languages.

Excerpt 4: "My Heritage Language is Sundanese and it is practiced at home and my neighbors also speak Sundanese. I value that my HL will not disappear" (Joane (Pseudonym)).

Joane's statement highlights the importance of individual attitudes in maintaining the use of heritage languages. Her experiences stress the necessity of developing good attitudes about language and implementing effective strategies to resist the effects of globalization and linguistic homogenization. The findings are consistent with the theoretical frameworks and empirical data mentioned in the introduction and literature review, emphasizing the critical need for targeted actions for maintaining linguistic diversity and cultural identity in Indonesia (Hidayati & Prasatyo, 2023).

Maintaining their mother tongue while being exposed to other languages is viewed as an important strategy for students. Individuals who actively use and promote their native language not only keep it alive but also increase its recognition and admiration from others. This confirms Walgito's (2001) emphasis on the role of internal and external factors on attitudes, implying that personal commitment and environmental reinforcement are critical in sustaining heritage languages. Students' proactive approach is consistent with the findings of Alfian (2021), who emphasized the importance of cultural transmission through language, and Roostini and Manara (2021), who underlined students' appreciation for heritage languages.

Sandra, one of the participants, points out the importance of keeping the language they first learned within their social networks, underlining the active role that individuals have in protecting their language heritage and ensuring its survival for future generations. This conforms with prior research by Sugiyanta (2020) and Hidayati and Prasatyo (2023), who found that maintaining heritage languages necessitates positive attitudes and active efforts within family and community settings.

Excerpt 5: "We should not feel shy to speak our heritage language anytime anywhere for our interaction. If we do not feel proud of, who else will" (Sandra (Pseudonym)).

Maintaining one's heritage language frequently provides pride and enjoyment. When people can speak their native language, they feel fulfilled and connected to their culture (Gilchrist, 2012; Walgito, 2001). As language preservation becomes tied to ethnic community identity and strength, pride grows beyond personal feelings (Bradley, 2022). Furthermore, the desire to enhance one's community drives the maintenance of historical language. Individuals contribute to cultural revitalization by actively maintaining and promoting their heritage language (Getie, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). They help their community members accept their cultural history and navigate modern society while maintaining a strong cultural identity (Ajzen, 2014).

What was expressed above is evidence of how the maintenance of heritage language helps one to develop self-esteem. Generally speaking, one uses the language to express their ethnic identity, acquire respect, boost their self-esteem and pride, help their community grow and flourish, and maintain language diversity (Walgito, 2001). The findings basically show a more specific discussion on maintaining of heritage languages, stressing their important influence on maintaining culture, communal strength, and personal identification. Those that embrace and support their heritage language not only value their cultural heritage but also ensure that next generations may inherit and value it (Liu, 2023; Roostini & Manara, 2021).

Conclusion

This study examined the attitudes of Indonesian EFL students toward language diversity and the maintenance of heritage languages within a multilingual context. While the findings demonstrate that students hold strong emotional and cultural connections to their heritage languages, these sentiments do not consistently translate into active use, particularly in formal and public settings. The data suggest a symbolic-functional divide: heritage languages are valued as identity markers but are increasingly overshadowed by the perceived utility of Indonesian and English in academic, professional, and social domains.

These insights emphasize the need to reconsider how language education and policy frameworks can support not only linguistic diversity in principle but also in practice. Emotional attachment alone is insufficient for long-term language sustainability. Without structural reinforcement, through curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional support, heritage languages risk being reduced to passive symbols of identity rather than dynamic tools of communication. Educational institutions, particularly at the tertiary level, can play a transformative role by normalizing heritage language use in academic contexts, legitimizing bilingual and multilingual identities, and fostering inclusive attitudes toward local linguistic heritage.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this study. First, while purposive sampling ensured diversity in participants' linguistic backgrounds, the data

were drawn from a single institution, which may limit generalizability across the wider population of Indonesian university students. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data through questionnaires and interviews, which are subject to participant bias, including the tendency to present socially desirable responses regarding language attitudes. Third, although the instrument was reviewed by experts, no formal statistical validation of the questionnaire (e.g., reliability coefficients) was conducted due to the qualitative emphasis of the study. Additionally, the absence of observational or longitudinal data restricts insights into how language attitudes evolve over time or translate into actual language behaviors in situ.

Recommendations

Future research should adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to explore how language attitudes and practices develop across different educational stages and regional contexts. Including classroom observations, language diaries, or ethnographic approaches could enrich understanding of real-world language use beyond self-report. Researchers should also examine how gender, socioeconomic background, and geographic location (urban vs. rural) influence heritage language maintenance.

At the policy level, greater integration of heritage languages into school curricula and extracurricular activities could help reposition them as legitimate, usable languages rather than relics of the past. Language policy makers are encouraged to support community-based language revitalization efforts and to provide teacher training focused on culturally responsive pedagogy. Ultimately, sustaining Indonesia's linguistic diversity requires both individual commitment and systemic support that bridges the gap between cultural pride and everyday language practice.

Declaration of Generative Al and Al-Assisted Technologies in The Writing Process

The utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in this investigation was carefully restricted to the purposes of theoretical grounding references and natural language processing.

1. We recognize the utilization of Humata.ai in the evaluation of our literature reviews as outlined in our theoretical frameworks.
2. We also recognize the utilization of DeepL Translate to produce translations of vital terminologies from English into our first language, Indonesian, in the preparation of this manuscript. We typed the following prompts: "Shared Languages, One Parent One Language (OPOL)." We employed the output to enhance our comprehension of the subject matter as we carried on the research.
3. We also admit the utilization of Grammarly in assisting us to evaluate our writing at the final stage before submission. We implemented the following prompt: "Propose method to enhance clarity and accuracy. Present general guidance with illustrative examples. please avoid re-writing any of the work." Subsequently, we critically

evaluated the feedback provided by Grammarly and, as a result, revised the text using our own language and expressions.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Beasiswa Pendidikan Indonesia (BPI) or Indonesia Education Scholarship, Pusat Pembiayaan dan Asesmen Pendidikan Tinggi (PPAPT) or Center for Higher Education Funding and Assessment, under The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (Kemdiktisaintek) and Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP) or Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education for funding their doctorate degree.

References

Aji, A. F., Winata, G. I., Koto, F., Cahyawijaya, S., Romadhony, A., Mahendra, R., Kurniawan, K., Moeljadi, D., Prasojo, R. E., Baldwin, T., Lau, J. H., & Ruder, S. (2022). One Country, 700+ Languages: NLP Challenges for Underrepresented Languages and Dialects in Indonesia. In S. Muresan, P. Nakov, & A. Villavicencio (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 60th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics (Volume 1: Long Papers)* (pp. 7226–7249). Association for Computational Linguistics. https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2022.acl-long.500

Ajzen, I. (2014). The influence of attitudes on behavior. In Albarracín, D., Johnson, B. T., & Zanna, M. P. (Eds). *The Handbook of Attitudes (pp. 173–221)*. NJ: Lawrence Eribaum Associates. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264000974

Alfian. (2021). Students' language attitude in maintaining heritage language. *Jurnal Eduscience*, *6*(2), 78–83.

Anoegrajekti, N., Macaryus, S., Bustami, A. L., Wirawan, R., & Masyithoh, N. (2020). Ritual as a conservation space for using language. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, *485*(1), 12028. https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/485/1/012028

Arka, W. (2013). Language management and minority language maintenance in (eastern) indonesia: strategic issues. *Language Documentation & Conservation*, *7*, 74–105. Retrieved from http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/ldc/http://hdl.handle.net/10125/4568

Bradley, D. (2022). *Language maintenance*. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199772810-0290

Budiyana, Y. E. (2017). Students' parents' attitudes toward Chinese heritage language maintenance. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *7*(3), 195. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0703.05

Cangelosi, M., Borghetti, C., & Bonifacci, P. (2024). How parents' perceived value of the heritage language predicts their children's skills. *Languages*, *9*(3), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages9030080

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486999

Cummins, J. (2014). Beyond language: Academic communication and student success. *Linguistics and Education*, *26*, 145–154. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2014.01.006

DeVellis, R. F. (2017). *Scale development: theory and applications* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications Inc.

Devi, R. K. R., & Devi, K. R. (2024). A survey of elementary school students' attitudes towards English language learning in Manipur. *Theory and Practice*, *2024*(5), 6667–6673. https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i5.3990

Dharmawan, Y. Y. (2023). Professional identity of faculty members: a case of multilingual context in the periphery. In R. J. Dickey & H. K. Lee (Eds.), *AsiaTEFL Proceedings 2023: Papers from the 21st AsiaTEFL Conference* (pp. 1083–1096). AsiaTEFL.

Fishman, J. A. (2006). Language maintenance, language shift, and reversing language shift. In T. K. Bhatia & W. C. Ritchie (Eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingualism* (pp. 406–436). Blackwell Publishing Ltd. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756997.ch16

Getie, A. S. (2020). Factors affecting the attitudes of students towards learning English as a foreign language. *Cogent Education*, *7*(1), 1738184. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184

Gilchrist, A. (2012). Objective and subjective sides of perception. In G. Hatfield & S. Allred (Eds.), *Visual Experience: Sensation, Cognition, and Constancy* (pp. 105–121). Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199597277.003.0006

Hartshorne, J. K., Tenenbaum, J. B., & Pinker, S. (2018). A critical period for second language acquisition: Evidence from 2/3 million English speakers. *Cognition*, *177*, 263–277. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.04.007

Hidayati, D., & Prasatyo, B. A. (2023). Parents attitude towards heritage language maintenance. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa*. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31571/bahasa.v12i1.6212

Holmes, J., & Wilson, N. (2022). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Routledge.

Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey. *Journal of Marketing*, *80*(6), 69–96. https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0420

Lewis, M., & Lupyan, G. (2020). Gender stereotypes are reflected in the distributional structure of 25 languages. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *4*(10), 1021–1028. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0918-6

Liu, Y. (2023). Language attitude analysis research in Normal University. *Frontiers in Sustainable Development*, *3*(8), 38–45. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.54691/fsd.v3i8.5517

Melo-Pfeifer, S. (2015). The role of the family in heritage language use and learning: Impact on heritage language policies. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *18*(1), 26–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.868400

Pérez, E. O., & Tavits, M. (2018). Language influences public attitudes toward gender equality. *The Journal of Politics*, *81*(1), 81–93. https://doi.org/10.1086/700004

Pillai, S., Soh, W.-Y., & Yusuf, Y. Q. (2015). Perceptions about one's heritage language: the case of the Acehnese in Kampung Aceh and Malacca Portuguese-Eurasians in the Portuguese settlement in Malaysia. *KEMANUSIAAN*, *22*(2), 67–92.

Rodway, N., & Dungey, G. (2019, July 20). *The fight to save Indonesia's threatened indigenous languages: Members of the Mentawai Community are fighting to keep their language alive.* DIPLOMAT MEDIA INC. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/the-fight-to-save-indonesias-threatened-indigenous-languages/

Roostini, K. E., & Manara, C. (2021). Students' attitudes towards languages and maintenance of heritage language: a case study of Papuan senior high school students. *Journal of English Language and Culture*, *12*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.30813/jelc.v12i1.2697

Sahadevan, P., & Sumangala, M. (2021). Effective cross-cultural communication for international business. *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, *8*(4), 24–33. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v8i4.3813

Spolsky, B. (2019). A modified and enriched theory of language policy (and management). *Language Policy*, *18*(3), 323–338. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-018-9489-z

Sugiyanta. (2020). Parents' language attitudes towards languages and maintenance of heritage language. *Dialectical Literature and Education Journal (DLEJ)*, *5*(1), 43–52. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.51714/dlejpancasakti.v5i1.13.pp.43-52

Susanto, A. (2018). The important role of motivation in foreign language learning: a review. *JUDIKA (JURNAL PENDIDIKAN UNSIKA)*, *6*(1), 50–59. https://doi.org/10.35706/judika.v6i1.1158

Ushioda, E. (2017). The impact of global English on motivation to learn other languages: Toward an ideal multilingual self. *The Modern Language Journal*, *101*(3), 469–482. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12413

Walgito, B. (2001). *Pengantar psikologi umum* (5th ed.). ANDI.

Yurtsever, A., & Özel, D. (2021). The role of cultural awareness in the EFL classroom. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.17569/tojqi.776499

Zhang, J., & Pérez-Milans, M. (2019). Structures of feeling in language policy: the case of Tibetan in China. *Language Policy*, *18*(1), 39–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-018-9469-3

Corresponding author: Bayu Andika Prasatyo
Email: bayuandikaprasatyo@gmail.com

Near-Peer Feedback: Shaping EFL Teacher Identity and Enhancing Classroom Learning

Blerta Mustafa
University of Prishtina, Kosovo

Yllkë Paçarizi
University of Prishtina, Kosovo

Art Shala
Independent Researcher, USA

Abstract

Near-peer models are well-established within the medical field and the benefits of these models have been demonstrated convincingly by research. However, near-pear practices and research exploring these practices seem to be scarce in humanities and especially in the context of language teaching and learning. With a noticeable disparity in research and practice, this qualitative study explored the role of near-peer feedback in shaping the identities of pre-service teachers who taught English as a Foreign Language. Moreover, it explored the role of near-peer feedback in enhancing student learning. The participants in this qualitative study were students enrolled in their fourth year and second year of Bachelor studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina. Fourth-year students were undergoing their pre-service teacher education, whereas second-year students were involved in an integrated-skills course designed to improve their language skills, particularly in writing. One hundred ten student reflections were analyzed to gain insight into their experiences when engaging in near-peer feedback. Findings from this study not only support existing research in the medical field regarding the benefits of engaging in near-peer feedback, but they also offer important evidence regarding the role of near-peer feedback in shaping teacher identity in pre-service teachers and enhancing learning for language learners. Findings from this study also create a basis for near-peer feedback practices in English language teaching and learning.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, language learning, near-peer feedback, pre-service teachers, teacher identity

The development of teacher identity is complex and dynamic, influenced by the teacher-environment interaction undercurrents (Dao et al., 2018, as cited in Çetin & Eren, 2022, p.250), including teacher emotions (Richards, 2020). Even though teacher identity is ever changing, it is important to use teacher education programs to equip future educators with skills and knowledge that will guide their identity development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011). Opportunities to help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers understand their growth as professional educators are especially critical given the importance of EFL teacher identity in language instruction, acquisition, and teacher development (Richards, 2021). Teacher identity is what influences every aspect of an educator's instruction, including the teacher's expectations for self and for students, the curriculum, the scope and sequence for the objectives to be taught, and the teacher's perception of student needs and success. It is the individual educator's notion of teacher identity that may point to more effectual teaching and greater academic success for students. One such opportunity to guide pre-service teachers' progress in the development of their professional identity is engaging them in near-peer practices.

Near-peer feedback is a form of peer-assisted learning (PAL). The terminology used to describe near-peer models in research varies, with common terms including tutoring, teaching, and mentoring. In this study, "near-peer" refers to a relationship between individuals or groups in which one is at least one academic year ahead or has more advanced knowledge and skills (Olaussen et al., 2016). Extensive research on near-peer models has been done in the field of medical education (Bulte et al., 2007; Chandrasekera et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2012; Peysner & Bingham, 2024; Williams & Fowler, 2014), positioning medical study researchers as pioneers regarding near-peer models. It is evident that near-peer models offer significant benefits for both senior and junior students, with the former especially benefiting by enhancing their teaching skills.

The existing literature highlights the advantages of near-peer models in enhancing learning experiences, particularly in medical education. However, there is a significant gap in research regarding the role of near-peer feedback in language learning contexts and teacher identity development. Thus, this study explored how near-peer feedback could be integrated into EFL teacher education and language learning programs to support professional development among pre-service teachers and to enhance learning in feedback receivers.

Literature Review

Near-peer feedback has emerged as a beneficial learning approach, primarily utilized in medical education (Nelson et al., 2012; Peysner & Bingham, 2024; Chandrasekera et al., 2024; Bulte et al., 2007; Hall et al., 2013; Williams & Fowler, 2014). However, there is limited research on near-peer feedback within the humanities, particularly in language learning contexts. This dearth was also noted by Dekker et al. (2023), who conducted a comprehensive review of 111 empirical, peer-reviewed studies on near-peer teaching in higher education. They found that the majority of studies reported positive experiences for both feedback providers and receivers. However, this systematic review also revealed that the existing research

primarily focused on medical and science education, leading to the conclusion that "studies outside the medical domain are needed" (Dekker et al., 2023, p. 34).

Near-Peer Feedback

Near-peers are typically individuals who have at least a year of difference in their academic journey (Chandrasekera et al., 2024; Olaussen et al., 2016; Pierce et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2025) or individuals who have varying levels of knowledge, abilities, and expertise (Olaussen et al., 2016). While a general consensus on the definition of near-peers exists, research presents varying models of near-peer relationships which include near-peer teaching (Bulte et al., 2007; Irvine et al., 2018; Pierce, et al., 2024; Hari et al., 2025; Thomas et al., 2025), near-peer tutoring (Iqbal et al., 2020; Khalil & Wright, 2022; Olaussen et al., 2016; Olvet et al., 2020) and near-peer mentoring (Akinla et al., 2018; Chandrasekera et al., 2024; Olaussen et al., 2016;). Given the varying models of near-peer relationships and based on the near-peer concept, the current study used near-peer feedback to refer to the provision of feedback by senior students to junior students.

Benefits of Near-Peer Models

In addition to easing instructor workload (Chandrasekera et al., 2024), near-peer models have proven to be valuable for both senior and junior students. Research is clear in that near-peer models develop senior students' teaching skills (Botehlo & Boubaker, 2024; Botelho et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2012). By engaging in near-peer feedback/teaching, senior students learn how to identify learning styles (Peysner & Bingham, 2024) and appropriate teaching strategies to meet students' needs (Botelho et al., 2022). This prepares senior students for potential future roles as teachers (Botelho et al., 2022). Research is also clear in that to be able to engage in teaching and giving feedback, senior students need to gain deeper understanding of content and master the content so they can explain it to junior students (Botelho et al., 2022; Sader et al. 2022). Engaging in near-peer teaching/tutoring/feedback seems to also give senior students the skills create comfortable learning environments for students (Botehlo & Boubaker, 2024), to engage in metacognitive practices for their learning as well as that of junior students (Botelho et al., 2022).

One of the research highlights that makes near-peer feedback stand out is cognitive and social congruence (Botehlo & Boubaker, 2024; Peysner & Bingham, 2024). Cognitive congruence refers to the "shared knowledge base" (p.1) between senior and junior students which enables senior students to use language that is understandable by junior students (Lockspeiser et al., 2008 & Schmidt et al., 1995, as cited in Loda et al., 2020). In contrast, social congruence refers to shared "social roles" (Loda et al., 2020, p.1). In the context of near-peer feedback, that translates into being enrolled in the same study program and seeing senior students as successful role models who have succeeded in certain course milestones (Lockspeiser et al., 2008 & Schmidt et al., 1995, as cited in Loda et al., 2020). Moreover, it translates into the commitment of senior students to meet the needs of their junior peers (Lockspeiser et al., 2008 & Yew & Yong, 2014, as cited in Loda et al., 2020).

Selected scholarly studies described in the literature stress that near-peer models are beneficial for junior students in several ways. To begin with, near-peer models create a less intimidating environment for learning (Botelho et al., 2022; Calisi et al., 2023; Sader et al., 2022). In addition, cognitive and social congruence results in more personalized feedback for junior students, less stress, and more needs met, given that senior students are more considerate of the junior students' needs (Botelho et al., 2022; Sader et al., 2022). Near-peer models also enhance junior students' confidence in their content and skill mastery, given the senior students' tendencies to motivate junior students and validate the progress in learning (Botelho et al., 2022; Calisi et al., 2023).

Teacher Identity

While there is not one definition to which researchers refer when characterizing teacher identity, many agree that the formation of a teacher's professional self is an "enduring process that embeds interactions between teachers and their environments" (Dao et al., 2018, as cited in Çetin & Eren, 2022, p.250). Studies also show that teacher identity is complex and ever changing. A study done by Pennington and Richards (2016) explores teacher identity in a language teaching context. They cite Singh and Richards (2006) who note that identity, unlike in other fields, is of a unique role in teaching and that teacher learning is not just about the knowledge and skills of teaching a language but also about what it *means* to be a language teacher (as cited in Pennington & Richards, 2016, p.5). Similarly, a study by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) discusses how teachers who enter the school communities of their initial practice tend to experience identity shifts that reflect their learning, and that also is different from the identity previously shaped by their own past teachers and school experiences.

An important aspect of teacher identity seems to be a sense of responsibility. This was brought up by two different studies completed by Eren and Çetin (2019, 2022). In 2019, they acknowledged that little research existed on teachers' sense of responsibility on student results. Two years later they published another article examining achievement goal orientations, emotions about teaching, teacher identity, and the sense of responsibility, which ended up showing significant relation to one another. They used responsibility as a sense of personal commitment and duty to achieve, or avoid, specific outcomes (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, as cited in Çetin & Eren, 2022). Çetin and Eren (2022) suggest that educators take into account pre-service teachers' emotions, their developing teacher identity, and the need to support its growth.

Near-Peer Feedback as a Starting Point for Teacher Identity Development

Potential impact of near-peer feedback on teacher identity development remains an underexplored topic. An important part of teacher education is learning to give feedback (Ropohl & Rönnebeck, 2024). However, it is also essential to equip pre-service teachers with strategies to manage stress and navigate the emotional challenges of teaching (Birchinall et al., 2019; Csaszar et al., 2018; Hadar et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2020; Prilleltensky et al., 2016; Sulis et al., 2021, as cited in Cochran & Parker Peters, 2023, p. 8). Studies similar to that of Masitoh

et al., (2023) emphasize teacher's identity as a lifelong project, thus pre-service teacher identity is important in an English as a Foreign Language class. This way, by giving feedback, pre-service teachers could get a sense of what it is like to actually be a teacher. Moreover, near-peer feedback becomes a catalyst for early development of teacher identity for which Beauchamp and Thomas (2011) offer support by suggesting that a teacher education program is an ideal foundation for fostering an awareness of the need for identity growth and an understanding of the ongoing changes that will shape it.

Definition of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) has gained traction in teacher education due to its impact on teacher identity, teacher well-being and professional success. There are two fundamental models that define emotional intelligence: the ability model and the mixed model (Mayer et al., 2000). As Mayer et al. (2000) distinguish, the ability model "is located entirely within the area of emotional-cognitive interactions (for example perceiving emotions and understanding emotions)" (p. 404). In contrast, Goleman's (2001) prominent mixed model goes beyond cognitive abilities and "is split between both intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities (like motivating oneself; handling relationships) as well as interactions between emotion and cognition (recognizing emotions in others)" (p. 404). More specifically, Salovey and Mayer (1990) conceptualize emotional intelligence as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." (p.189). On the other hand, Goleman's model expands the concept of emotional intelligence by focusing on 4 domains: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management (Goleman, 2001). More specifically, as presented in Goleman's (2001) framework of emotional competencies, each domain consists of specific competencies (p. 28):

- Self-Awareness: Emotional self-awareness; accurate self-assessment; self-confidence
- Self-Management: Emotional self-control; trustworthiness; conscientiousness; adaptability; achievement drive; initiative
- Social Awareness: Empathy; service orientation; organizational awareness
- Relationship Management: Developing others; influence; communication; conflict management; visionary leadership; catalyzing change; building bonds; teamwork and collaboration.

Emotions play a significant role in teaching and are reflected in classroom practice, decision-making, teaching approaches, engagement with co-workers and students, provision of feedback and overall job satisfaction (Richards, 2020). Therefore, it is critical to train EFL instructors on emotional regulation to ensure teacher effectiveness, well-being and resilience (Chen & Tang, 2024) and to assist in shaping teacher identity (Lee & Kutty, 2023; Richards, 2020). Given the general consensus that EI can be learned (Goleman, 2001; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and given research implications that pre-service teachers demonstrating strong EI skills are

more effective teachers (Koçoğlu, 2011; Turner & Stough, 2019), it is essential to explore the importance of incorporating EI in teacher education.

While there is a general consensus of the importance of EI in teacher education, and targeted EI training in teacher education is recommended (Long et al., 2024; Lee & Kutty, 2023), deeper understanding of practices that would increase pre-service teachers' emotional intelligence is crucial to ensure applicability of such practices across diverse contexts.

Methodology and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of second-year and fourth-year students in the English Language and Literature Department of the University of Prishtina in Kosovo as they engaged in near-peer feedback practices. To capture the students' views on the effectiveness of this innovative approach, the challenges they encountered and its pedagogical implications in shaping student learning, a thematic analysis of their written reflective assignments was conducted. A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which includes familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and final write-up. The student reflections were first read holistically, then coded manually into recurring themes to allow for closer engagement with the content. Reflective writing was used as the primary data source, following Jasper's (2005) assertion that such writing offers valuable insight into students' cognitive and emotional engagement, allowing researchers to better understand the internal processes behind their learning and meaning-making.

This study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How does near-peer feedback shape pre-service EFL teachers' identity?
2. How does near-peer feedback enhance second-year students' learning experiences?

Participants

The study involved two cohorts of university students: the first group consisted of 54 second-year students (hereafter JS1-JS54), attending "English 3", an integrated skills-based course. As they were writing an essay, intended for publication in a magazine, they were assigned the role of feedback recipients. They shared their essay drafts with senior students and subsequently received feedback from them. At the end, they submitted written reflections on the entire experience, including lessons learned, their views on the effectiveness of near-peer feedback on writing development and implications of this experience for the future.

The second group consisted of 56 fourth-year students (hereafter SS1-SS56) attending a "Methodology of English Language Teaching" (ELT) course. As part of their training, to be better prepared for their future roles as teachers and educators, they were tasked to provide

feedback on the essays written by second-year students. This task was designed to create a structured opportunity for future teachers to apply their theoretical knowledge and skills in a low risk but authentic teaching environment. In comparison to second year-students, senior students have engaged in regular peer and teacher feedback practices during their studies. Teachers have applied the feedback approach that initially highlights the strengths of writing and then provides specific suggestions for improvement. Moreover, the written feedback was also complemented with discussion over feedback comments and/or over further exploration of ideas. This model was slowly adapted by students as they were shifting between the roles of feedback receivers and feedback providers. The Methodology of ELT course, on the other hand, provided the theoretical foundation for feedback and empowered students to make connections between their practical experiences and theory.

All participants were native speakers of Albanian from Kosovo, thus eliminating any linguistic and cultural differences. All communication throughout the near-peer feedback process took place in English. This linguistic context reflected the structure of the English language and literature program. However, occasional code-switching to Albanian occurred, predominantly during oral communication to facilitate understanding.

Participants were selected based on their enrollment in their respective courses at the time of the study: second-year students in an integrated skills-based course, and fourth-year students in a methodology course focused on English language teaching. Participation in the feedback exchange and reflection writing was part of the course requirements. The group included 103 females and 7 males, which mirrors the typical gender representation within the English Language and Literature Department.

Senior students were purposefully selected to serve as mentors due to their extensive but progressive experience with writing and feedback throughout their studies. The strong foundation they had built started in the same year of studies as their junior peers: they had to complete the same writing tasks, and they were also trained on how to give and receive peer and teacher feedback. This skill was further developed in other courses during the third year of study. By the fourth year, as part of the mandatory course on Methodology of English Language Teaching, they were introduced to the theoretical and pedagogical principles of feedback and writing. As part of a low-risk assessment, they were invited to guide junior students' writing development by drawing on their previous practical experience and connecting it with theoretical learning. Though this task took place in a supportive and supervised context, it simulated real-world teaching scenarios. Also, the proximity in experience allowed senior students to serve as relatable role models having navigated through the same challenges in the past.

Participants were informed that these reflections could be used for research purposes only after the course had ended and assessment was completed, to minimize any influence in responses. Also, they were informed in advance and assured that all identifiable information would be anonymized, and confidentiality would be maintained. Students were given the option to opt

out from the study by explicitly stating their preference in the submitted assignment, exercising hence their right to withdraw from the study.

To put into action their theoretical knowledge and practical skills related to feedback and writing, 2-3 fourth-year students worked alongside a pair of second-year students. During this time, they were expected to meet at least twice with second-year students, engage in dialogic feedback, provide concrete suggestions for improvement and guide them further, as needed. They too submitted written reflections focusing on their experiences as feedback providers, including challenges, lessons learned and how this experience shaped their understanding of teaching.

To gain deeper insights into the reciprocal benefits of near-peer feedback practices, this study analyzed written reflection from both groups. The aim of the study was to explore the benefits of near-peer feedback in enhancing the academic progress of second-year students, and in developing feedback and evaluation practices of fourth-year students.

Effective reflection and feedback were supported by several factors: students had previous experience with both peer and teacher feedback in earlier coursework, and the senior students had also engaged in formal instruction on feedback practices through their Methodology of English Language Teaching course. This foundation gave students a shared framework and confidence when participating in the near-peer process.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed to uncover recurring themes and patterns in the written reflections (Saldana, 2013). The first researcher started the open coding process, where data was categorized into emerging themes (Saldana, 2013). As the dataset was manageable in size, coding was conducted manually using Google Docs, with researchers utilizing highlighting and comment features to collaboratively organize and refine themes. To ensure inter-coder reliability, a second researcher independently coded the data, and any discrepancy was resolved through detailed discussion. To further ensure the accuracy and reliability of data analysis, the third researcher reviewed the thematic structure, providing insight and feedback. The continuous collaboration between the three researchers not only played a crucial role in reconciling differences, but it minimized potential bias, reinforcing the credibility of the findings.

To safeguard students' privacy, any personal information that could potentially be connected to a specific student was anonymized. This was crucial in maintaining confidentiality and preventing any information from being traced back. In addition, students were made aware from the onset that their reflections were part of course requirement, and their analysis would contribute to understanding the impact that near-peer feedback could have in enhancing learning. They were assured that analysis for research purposes was an entirely separate matter and it would not extend beyond their regular academic responsibilities. Moreover, they were

ensured that reflection analysis would occur only after coursework was completed to minimize any potential power dynamics that could have impacted their responses.

The near-peer feedback exchange and accompanying written reflections were part of the regular coursework and graded on a complete/incomplete basis. Students were informed that after the course concluded, their reflections might be used for research purposes, with an option to opt out. The analysis of reflections was conducted only after final grades were submitted to minimize potential bias or pressure. All identifying information was removed prior to the analysis and students' names were substituted with numerical codes.

Findings

Senior Students

At the onset, senior students felt anxious as they doubted their abilities to provide constructive feedback on the writing of junior peers. As one participant explained: "I was extremely stressed out and constantly doubting whether I can do it" (SS15). Overall, senior students conveyed a sense that the reason why they doubted themselves was linked to the uncertainty of providing clear feedback that is understood by the junior peers. The general experience is best exemplified by the following statement: "I had a lot of self-doubt the first few days, wondering if I would be accurate and clear when giving comments on essays to these students. What if it seemed too harsh or we were misunderstood?" (SS25).

Also, a strong concern among participants was how to strike a balance between praise and constructive criticism. The possibility of unintentionally offending juniors' feelings, making them feel that they are being judged or demotivated made their uncertainty more pronounced, as one student put it: "I questioned whether I had been too harsh in giving feedback and feared it might demotivate them even though I knew I was careful about that" (SS5). This perspective was echoed by others who stated "I was scared of the choice of words. I did not want to judge them but to improve them" (SS48).

They repeatedly reported that though providing constructive feedback was challenging, a more prevailing matter was the manner in which feedback was conveyed to students, and in creating an environment where students would feel comfortable and open to discussing feedback and actions for improvement. However, as participants engaged in the process, they became more comfortable and confident in their abilities: they realized that they were replicating feedback practices utilized by their instructors over the years, in other words they balanced critiques by initially highlighting the strengths and then offering concrete suggestions for improvement. They also became mindful of "tailoring feedback to meet the needs of the students" (SS35), which often required them to go the extra mile and organize instructional sessions and provide scaffolded support on the importance of academic integrity such as plagiarism avoidance, proper use of APA guidelines and overreliance on AI.

In reflecting on their roles as near peers, many senior students grew a deep sense of empathy towards their junior peers. Having once been in their shoes and facing the same struggles and frustrations, created an emotional connection that turned into a powerful drive that increased their desire to go beyond corrective feedback. The shared experience drove their commitment to help juniors succeed while providing more compassionate suggestions for improvement.

One student captured the sentiment by stating: "I thought about the time when I was in those students' shoes, and I knew I had to try my best to help them by giving them comprehensive and constructive feedback" (SS49). Another student reinforced and expanded the idea by stating: "I really wanted to help them because I have been in that spot before them and I know it is not an easy thing to do. This is why I was literally double-checking every comment I was giving because I wanted to be as understandable as possible" (SS10).

In the process, many seniors reported to have grown a sense of responsibility to help junior peers succeed. They understood that they played a crucial role in junior students' progress, hence they continuously sought ways to help them grow and improve. What further reinforced this sense of responsibility was the trust placed in them by the course instructor, which encouraged them to take a professional role and complete their responsibilities successfully. This point is demonstrated by the following quote: "Just knowing the fact that the professor counted on me to be professional and to assist the students was a reality that was in my mind for every word I was reading…and I did not want to let my professor down" (SS41).

Nevertheless, the feedback process journey was challenging for some of the seniors: they reported that juniors had not acted upon suggestions for improvement, particularly after the first round of feedback. This made them feel disappointed and frustrated. It also led them to question if proximity in age and educational experiences made their comments undervalued or whether their feedback and instructions were inadequate. Several senior students highlighted their frustration and disappointment with junior peers for failing to act on suggested revisions. As one of them reflected: "I was a bit disappointed, it felt as if they didn't take us seriously even though they changed some parts that we commented on, they still left some things like they were" (SS43). On a positive note, almost everyone was proud of the progress students demonstrated by the end of the course. As supported by the following quote: "Seeing the first draft of the essay and the final version made us proud" (SS51), seniors felt that their work resulted in meaningful progress.

Overall, they were all satisfied with the guidance they provided to juniors, though acknowledging that there was still room for improvement such as when articulating feedback. Through their role as feedback providers, the majority of senior students reported to have experienced significant personal growth, which would impact their future endeavors, particularly in their future teaching practices. The experience had a multifaceted impact on their learning: by reading juniors' writings, they gained insights into their writing progress over the years but also in the mistakes they unconsciously repeated. The experience helped them shape their teaching philosophy, as well. As one student reported: "this experience also taught

me that teaching is not only about the students' growth; it is more about collaborating and improving *together"* (SS42). Another student expanded by saying:

Teaching is more than just sharing knowledge; it's about creating a space where every student's perspective matters, contributing to our shared learning journey. It's not just about fixing essays; it's about helping students grow and giving them a nudge to shine (SS44).

Overall, most seniors stated that this experience emphasized the complexities behind guiding someone's writing. It also highlighted the role that feedback has in the process of writing as illustrated by the following student: "… it made me understand how important feedback giving is" (SS17). For most, it became clear that providing feedback and monitoring students' progress takes time, hence it requires a great level of patience and support. This experience, as one of the students reflected, has taught one that "teaching and learning requires patience, support and effective communication" (SS1). Moreover, senior students realized that beyond being patient they also needed to be open-minded, flexible and adaptable to meet individual learners' needs, as encapsulated by the following excerpt: "I realized the paramount importance of adaptability, patience, and careful consideration in the aspect of teaching…. And being flexible in my approach allows me to better cater to individual learning needs" (SS56).

Lessons learned from this experience encouraged students to reflect on how to shape their teaching in the future so that learning is effective and helps students' academic growth. As one student reported: "I plan to use my classes peer-feedback and self-reflection activities to help students develop their writing skills and their critical thinking" (SS40). Furthermore, they started envisioning their teaching as a space where feedback is a crucial component of their English language classes, while students feel safe and their opinions are respected.

Also, by engaging in this experience, senior students grew appreciation for the teaching profession, recognizing the commitment it demands. They realized that as learners, they too have overlooked the time, energy and commitment teachers invest. However, stepping into the role of the teacher, their perspectives shifted, and they grew an immense respect for the profession and its demands.

This insight was shared by multiple participants, including two who noted: "I've come to appreciate the challenges of being a teacher, as I think that this profession is underrated sometimes" "When I think about how much time and effort has gone into this one task, I've come to realize the significant burden educators bear, yet they consistently give their best for the students' success." The other student came to understand that no financial compensation can measure the transformative power of teaching in shaping students' futures. As he stated: "teachers don't do what they do just to earn a paycheck and go to bed, they always try to do their best because if they don't, their students suffer the consequences." Also, as they experienced a wide range of emotions while providing feedback, they too realized that teaching can be an emotionally intense experience. As one student stated: "being a teacher is like a rollercoaster. There are times when you feel proud about your work… Hard times can also exist when students do not understand something, no matter how hard you try." (SS21).

Second-Year Students

As near-peer feedback was a new experience, students entered the process without fully comprehending how it would unfold. This triggered a mix of emotions: some students felt anxious as they were afraid their writing skills would be judged by their senior counterparts. Others found it "nerve wracking and also very scary" (JS24) because they were going to work with unfamiliar students, hence they felt uncertain if they would be supported or criticized. As one participant reflected: "At first, when we were told that we are going to receive feedback from senior students I was a little scared because I did not know who I will be working with and how they will react" (JS13). However, their concerns faded during the first encounter with senior students, as they were approachable and genuinely interested in helping junior peers with their writing. As one student stated: "After our first session with them we were relieved because of their warm approach" (JS30). The most common words used by junior peers to describe senior students were nice, supportive, gentle, honest, respectful, well-informed, professional, helpful, patient, available, collaborative, welcoming, indicating that they perceived them as credible authority in providing constructive feedback and respectful in the manner they provided it.

The fact that near-peers have navigated through a similar assignment in the past, motivated students to "receive advice from people who had experienced similar challenges during their own studies" (JS45). In addition, since their expertise was grounded in authentic academic experience, their feedback was perceived to be more relatable and practical, while their insights to be empathetic. In describing one's experience, a junior student reflected as follows: "Their feedback was thorough and thoughtful, approaching the task with professionalism and empathy, which eased my concerns and allowed me to be more receptive to their feedback" (JS40). The prevailing opinion was that senior students' feedback was detailed, specific and action-oriented, as illustrated by one student who remarked: "Rather than providing generic comments, they pointed out precise examples, offering a roadmap for improvement that was both detailed and actionable" (JS43). Due to its quality, senior students' feedback was compared to that of the professors, as suggested by the following quote: "… it felt like receiving feedback from your professor sometimes due to the quality, clarity and professionalism of the implementation of their work" (JS12) or "Their feedback was outstanding" (JS22).

Though students have received feedback from peers on the same assignment, many of them reported that while peer feedback was a good initiative and some changes were made to their essays, overall, it was short and unproductive compared to near-peer feedback. As suggested, students may feel uncomfortable being honest with their peers as they "do not want to seem harsh or subjective" (JS47). On the other hand, senior students not only pointed out parts that need improvement but they "also gave us examples or alternative approaches in which the arguments can strengthen and really clarify the meaning of writing" (JS42).

Also, the dialogical nature of feedback created opportunities for students to reach out to senior students to clarify any part of the feedback that was not comprehensible. Senior students, as reported, were reachable and ready to help with any issue and at any time, making the entire

learning experience effective. Another aspect that made the feedback experience more effective was that senior students had knowledge and skills related to academic integrity. As many struggled with academic convention, senior students provided guidance and helped them correct any issue related to citation, source integrations and adherence to APA style of referencing, hence making "us aware about the importance of citations and references" (JS39).

Overall, as students reported, working on a writing assignment under the guidance of senior students was beneficial in multiple ways. Beyond improving their writing skills, and enriching their knowledge and skill regarding academic integrity, this experience helped them revise their perspectives on the value of feedback in improving writing and in helping students' academic growth. The insights gained from this experience, as suggested by many students, will be incorporated in their future work such as: "to be specific and not generalize things…But most importantly to keep the reader in mind" (JS50). Also, "I intend to use in my future writing… citation, referencing, and paraphrasing, these skills will enhance the credibility of my work" (JS1). This opportunity prompted them to also reflect on their own feedback practices encouraging them to be more mindful, supportive and professional.

Discussion

How Does Near-Peer Feedback Shape Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Identity?

The findings of this study show that engaging in near-peer feedback changed pre-service English teachers' beliefs and conceptions about teaching, leading to a shift in their teacher identities and skills. Senior students, or pre-service English teachers in this case, reported that while providing constructive feedback was challenging at first, they became more comfortable and confident with practice and patience. This aligns with previous research showing that near-peer feedback helps pre-service teachers develop their roles and responsibilities (Botelho et al., 2022; Peysner & Bingham, 2024). Moreover, the pre-service teachers began to view teaching as a collaborative process rather than simply knowledge transfer, relating to research by Beauchamp and Thomas (2011).

The findings also emphasize the importance of emotions in shaping teacher identity within a collaborative environment. Senior students expressed strong empathy for their junior peers, which motivated their commitment to support their success. The trust placed in them by the course professor also fueled their sense of responsibility. This is consistent with research which connects teacher identity to a sense of responsibility for student outcomes (Eren & Çetin, 2019; Çetin & Eren, 2022).

Additionally, pre-service teachers noted that stepping into the role of a teacher deepened their appreciation and respect for the teaching profession, and their own instructors, due to recognition of teachers' time, energy and commitment required. This aligns with research that suggests that the development of teacher identity in pre-service teachers is also shaped by the recognition that teaching is not only about the skills and knowledge required but also about

embodying the role and responsibilities of a teacher (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Ultimately, findings from the research project suggest that this type of feedback not only supports the development of teaching skills but also catalyzes early teacher identity growth, helping pre-service teachers understand the emotional challenges of the profession and the importance of fostering a collaborative and reflective approach to teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Ropohl & Rönnebeck, 2024).

How Does Near-Peer Feedback Enhance Second-Year Students' Learning Experiences?

The results of this study show that engaging in near-peer feedback also enhanced second-year students' learning experiences. Findings broadly support previous research that confirms the impact of social and cognitive congruence in junior student learning (Botelho et al., 2022; Sader et al., 2022). As indicated in previous research, junior students were motivated to get feedback from someone who had already experienced similar challenges during their studies, while also noting that the quality of feedback received was comparable to that of the course instructors. The high quality of feedback was due to senior students' knowledge and ability to transmit their knowledge to junior students in a language that aligns with their level of understanding.

The outcomes of the study also support previous research in that near peer feedback enhances junior students' learning experiences since senior counterparts create a supportive, comfortable and less intimidating learning environment (Botelho et al., 2022; Calisi et al., 2023; Sader et al., 2022). Interestingly, junior students reported that before meeting their senior peers, they were at first hesitant and anxious to receive feedback from them. While this could be related to junior students' previous experiences with peer feedback, further research could explore students' perceptions of peer feedback and provide insights to refine teaching practices before implementing near peer feedback.

Linguistic and Cultural Awareness in Feedback Practices

Participants' reflections revealed a growing awareness of the role of language and culture in teaching and learning. Senior students frequently noted their careful attention to word choice, tone, and clarity when giving feedback, driven by a desire to be supportive and not demotivating. This sensitivity demonstrates an emerging cultural and linguistic awareness that is crucial for future EFL educators and their students. One student explained their approach by saying they "double-checked every comment to make sure it would be clearly understood and respectful," reflecting their growing awareness of language as both a pedagogical and relational tool. Although the participants shared a native language, using English throughout most of the process required efforts to communicate with precision and empathy while maintaining shared cultural awareness. This linguistic awareness aligns with what Richards (2020) describes as the emotional and relational dimensions of language teaching, where clarity and empathy are essential to effective communication. Moreover, sensitivity to linguistic choices and their

effects on learners is a hallmark of intercultural competence, a critical skill for EFL educators (Chen & Tang, 2024).

Conclusion and Recommendations

If implemented strategically, near-peer feedback can transform educational practices. By institutionalizing near-peer feedback, pre-service teachers would not only gain exposure to real-world classroom interaction, but they will also experience professional growth and gain insights into the complexities of teaching. Through mentorship, feedback, and collaborative learning, as was the case with senior students in this study, pre-service teachers will strengthen their pedagogical skills and actively shape their teacher identity. Consequently, this experience would make them more confident and competent upon transitioning into the teaching profession. By adopting this approach, institutions would promote greater student autonomy, a stronger peer support network, and enhanced learning. However, to utilize the benefits of this pedagogical tool, the following measures could be taken:

Training of students

To ensure the successful implementation of near-peer feedback initiatives, senior students need training in providing constructive feedback, guidance, and mentorship. Before guiding junior peers, they ought to have great insights into effective feedback practices. When considering preservice EFL teachers whose first language is not English, it is essential to prepare the more experienced students who serve as near-peer mentors to carefully select language that is comprehensible. This training could be embedded as part of pedagogical courses. Though, ideally, by the time senior students engage in near-peer feedback, they need to have had an opportunity to internalize effective feedback practices through role models in their education. In the current study, senior students received feedback on their writing from both teachers and peers over the years, and consequently, this shaped their skills and knowledge in guiding junior peers successfully.

Scaffolding Feedback

To help students gain confidence and expertise with feedback practices, a phased feedback approach can be implemented. Initially, feedback could be provided and modeled under the structured guidance of a faculty member before evolving into more independent peer feedback. At the onset, the focus could be on teaching students how to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Moreover, providing students with guided prompts or rubrics could help them further explore feedback practices before becoming involved in more independent peer feedback practices.

Integrating Technology

To make near-peer feedback more accessible, time-bound integration of technology must be an integral part of the near-peer feedback process. By communicating through collaborative

digital platforms, or video conferencing or texting each other through various messaging apps, near-peers are provided with an opportunity to revisit the written feedback, ask questions, clarify misunderstandings, and engage in a dialogue. This experience not only helps them enhance their learning, but it equips them with digital literacy skills, pivotal for their future. Nevertheless, institutions need to make sure that all students have access to technology.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study provides valuable contributions to near-peer feedback, EFL pre-service teacher identity and student learning. However, the study is subject to several limitations. First, the study was conducted within a single department at a public university in Southeastern Europe and included a total of 110 BA students (54 second year students, 56 fourth year students). The participants in this study cannot fully represent the diversity of student populations or academic contexts and hence results from this study may not be generalizable. Second, the study explored students' experiences with engaging in near-peer feedback through the reflections that students submitted at the end of the course. While question prompts guided students' reflections, interviewing students would offer a more in-depth exploration of student experiences. However, data analysis commenced only after final grades were assigned to students. This made it difficult to set up interviews with 4th year students who had already graduated.

Future research could focus on a more in-depth exploration by incorporating interviews to collect data. Interviews with pre-service teachers could also be conducted at multiple points throughout the semester to get a more comprehensive understanding of teacher identity development. Finally, for a more comprehensive view, future research could also focus on analyzing the quality of the feedback provided by pre-service teachers to gain a deeper understanding of its effectiveness in student learning.

References

Akinla, O., Hagan, P., & Atiomo, W. (2018). A systematic review of the literature describing the outcomes of near-peer mentoring programs for first year medical students. *BMC Medical Education*, *18*(1), 98. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1195-1

Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: an overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *39*(2), 175–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252

Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2011). New teachers' identity shifts at the boundary of teacher education and initial practice. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *50*(1), 6–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2011.04.003

Birchinall, L., Spendlove, D., & Buck, R. (2019). In the moment: Does mindfulness hold the key to improving the resilience and well-being of pre-service teachers? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *86*, 102919. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102919

Botelho, M. G., & Boubaker, B. (2024). Near-peer teaching in a psychomotor skills course: Benefits, challenges and solutions. *European Journal of Dental Education*, *28*(1), 313–319. https://doi.org/10.1111/eje.12951

Botelho, M. G., Boubaker, B., & Wong, I. B. (2022). Near-peer teaching for learning clinical photography skills: Perceptions of students. *European Journal of Dental Education*, *27*(3), 477–488. https://doi.org/10.1111/eje.12831

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bulte, C., Betts, A., Garner, K., & Durning, S. (2007). Student teaching: views of student near-peer teachers and learners. *Medical Teacher*, *29*(6), 583–590. https://doi.org/10.1080/01421590701583824

Calisi, O., King, S., Berger, D. J., Nasir, M., & Nickolich, S. (2023). Comparing the perceptions of reciprocal- and near-peer objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) in medical students. *Cureus*. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.35535

Çetin, G., & Eren, A. (2022). Pre-service teachers' achievement goal orientations, teacher identity, and sense of personal responsibility: The moderated mediating effects of emotions about teaching. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, *21*(2), 245–283. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-021-09303-y

Chandrasekera, T., Hosseini, Z., Jayadas, A., & Boorady, L. M. (2024). PeTe (Peer Teaching) mentors: How near peer mentoring (NPM) affects academic success and retention in design education. *Innovative Higher Education*, *49*(5), 975–991. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-024-09709-5

Chen, S., & Tang, L. (2024). EFL teachers' engagement: The impact of well-being and emotion regulation. *Heliyon*, *10*(5), e27338. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e27338

Cochran, L. M., & Parker Peters, M. (2023). Mindful preparation: An exploration of the effects of mindfulness and SEL training on pre-service teacher efficacy and empathy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *123*, 103986. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103986

Csaszar, I. E., Curry, J. R., & Lastrapes, R. E. (2018). Effects of loving kindness meditation on student teacher's reported levels of stress and empathy. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 45*(4), 63–85.

Dekker, I., Thurlings, M., Delnoij, L., & Van Der Veen, J. (2023). *A systematic review on near-peer teaching in higher education: Training, types of instruction, and outcomes*. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/c467y

Eren, A., & Çetin, G. (2019). Pre-service teachers' beliefs about the teaching profession, curriculum orientations, and personal responsibility. *Curriculum Perspectives*, *39*(1), 19–32. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-018-00061-1

Goleman, D. (2001). An EI-based theory of performance. In C. Cherniss & D. Goleman (Eds.), The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace (p. 27–44). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hadar, L. L., Ergas, O., Alpert, B., & Ariav, T. (2020). Rethinking teacher education in a VUCA world: Student teachers' social-emotional competencies during the Covid-19 crisis. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(4), 573–586. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1807513

Hall, S., Lewis, M., Border, S., & Powell, M. (2013). Near-peer teaching in clinical neuroanatomy. *The Clinical Teacher*, *10*(4), 230–235. https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.12001

Hari, R., Oppliger, S., Dolmans, D. H. J. M., Huwendiek, S., & Stalmeijer, R. E. (2025). Comparison of practical skills teaching by near-peers and faculty. *Academic Medicine*. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000006003

Iqbal, F., Gaffar, F., & Singh, H. (2020). The use of near-peer tutors to improve level of learning & confidence in areas of human physiology. *Journal of Biological Education*, *56*(1), 85–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/00219266.2020.1756898

Irvine, S., Williams, B., & McKenna, L. (2018). Near-peer teaching in undergraduate nurse education: An integrative review. *Nurse Education Today*, *70*, 60–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.08.009

Jasper, M. A. (2005). Using reflective writing within research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *10*(3), 247–260. https://doi.org/10.1177/174498710501000303

Katz, D. A., Greenberg, M. T., Jennings, P. A., & Abenavoli, R. M. (2020). The influence of mindfulness training for teachers on teacher-student interactions and student outcomes: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 112*(7), 1402–1416. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000427

Khalil, M. K., & Wright, W. S. (2022). Attendance of near-peer tutoring sessions improves academic performance of first-year medical students. *Medical Science Educator*, *32*(6), 1433–1438. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-022-01661-3

Koçoğlu, Z. (2011). Emotional intelligence and teacher efficacy: a study of Turkish EFL pre-service teachers. *Teacher Development*, *15*(4), 471–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2011.642647

Lee, M. Y., & Kutty, F. M. (2023). Emotional intelligence and professional identity of student teachers during practicum. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *13*(4), 620–634. https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i4/16736

Loda, T., Erschens, R., Nikendei, C., Giel, K., Junne, F., Zipfel, S., & Herrmann-Werner, A. (2020). A novel instrument of cognitive and social congruence within peer-assisted learning in medical training: construction of a questionnaire by factor analyses. *BMC Medical Education*, *20*(1), 214. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02129-x

Long, J., Ying, K., Luo, Y., & Chen, X. (2024). Emotional intelligence development predicts novice teachers' professional identity, teaching enthusiasm, and teacher-student relationships: the mediation of positive teacher emotions. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2024.2414910

Masitoh, F., Cahyono, B. Y., Suryati, N., & Suhartoyo, E. (2023). Pre-service EFL teachers' identity construction in relation to digital gamification: A social theory of learning perspective. *The JALT CALL Journal*, *19*(3), 369–393. https://doi.org/10.29140/jaltcall.v19n3.1062

Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., & Caruso, D. (2000). Models of emotional intelligence. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Handbook of Intelligence* (1st ed., pp. 396–420). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511807947.019

Nelson, A. J., Nelson, S. V., Linn, A. M. J., Raw, L. E., Kildea, H. B., & Tonkin, A. L. (2012). Tomorrow's educators … today? Implementing near-peer teaching for medical students. *Medical Teacher*, *35*(2), 156–159. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.737961

Olaussen, A., Reddy, P., Irvine, S., & Williams, B. (2016). Peer-assisted learning: time for nomenclature clarification. *Medical Education Online*, *21*(1), 30974. https://doi.org/10.3402/meo.v21.30974

Olvet, D.M., Wackett, A., Crichlow, S., & Baldelli, P. (2020). Analysis of a near peer tutoring program to improve medical students' note writing skills, *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 34 (4), 425-433, https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2020.1730182

Pennington, M. C., & Richards, J. C. (2016). Teacher identity in language teaching: Integrating personal, contextual, and professional factors. *RELC Journal*, *47*(1), 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688216631219

Peysner, K., & Bingham, E. (2024). The experiences of implementing a near-neer teaching scheme into an undergraduate dental hygiene and dental therapy programme at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Dental Hygiene*, idh.12879. https://doi.org/10.1111/idh.12879

Pierce, B., Van De Mortel, T., Allen, J., & Mitchell, C. (2024). The influence of near-peer teaching on undergraduate health professional students' self-efficacy beliefs: A systematic integrative review. *Nurse Education Today*, *143*, 106377. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2024.106377

Prilleltensky, I., Neff, M., & Bessell, A. (2016). Teacher stress: What it is, why it's important, how it can be alleviated? *Theory into Practice, 55*(2), 104–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1148986

Richards, J. C. (2020). Exploring emotions in language teaching. *RELC Journal*, *53*(1), 225–239. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220927531

Richards, J.C. (2021). Teacher, learner and student-teacher identity in TESOL. *RELC Journal*. 54 (1), 252-266. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688221991308

Ropohl, M., & Rönnebeck, S. (2024). Making learning effective – quantity and quality of pre-service teachers' feedback. In M. Grangeat, C. Harrison, & J. Dolin, *Developing Formative Assessment in STEM Classrooms* (1st ed., pp. 63–83). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003466079-4

Sader, J., Cerutti, B., Meynard, L., Geoffroy, F., Meister, V., Paignon, A., & Junod Perron, N. (2022). The pedagogical value of near-peer feedback in online OSCEs. *BMC Medical Education*, *22*(1), 572. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-022-03629-8

Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional Intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, *9*(3), 185–211. https://doi.org/10.2190/DUGG-P24E-52WK-6CDG

Sulis, I., Murdaca, A. M., & Marzocchi, G. M. (2021). Mindfulness-based interventions for teachers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Mindfulness, 12*, 2416–2431. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-021-01755-2

Thomas, G.J., Munge, B., Fox, R., & Carey, M. (2025). Near-peer teaching in a university outdoor environmental education programme: following footprints in the sand. *Higher Education Research & Development,* 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2486187

Turner, K., & Stough, C. (2020). Pre-service teachers and emotional intelligence: a scoping review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *47*(2), 283–305. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00352-0

Williams, B., & Fowler, J. (2014). Can near-peer teaching improve academic performance? *International Journal of Higher Education*, *3*(4), 142. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v3n4p142

Corresponding author: Art Shala
Email: Art.Shala.1@hotmail.com

Educational Potential of Student-Generated Visuals for Learning English as a Second Language in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Svitlana Mykytiuk
Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Ukraine

Olena Lysytska
Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Ukraine

Oleksandr Chastnyk
Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Ukraine

Serhii Mykytiuk
H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Ukraine

Abstract

The study explored the educational potential of the application of student-generated digital visual content for learning English as a second language (ESL) by undergraduate students enrolled in the course Foreign Language which is actually Introduction to Legal English. This study used a mixed-methods approach. The researchers designed a quasi-experimental design to examine whether the students' creation of visual content, supported by structured use of artificial intelligence (AI), could improve second language learning outcomes, increase motivation, and promote critical engagement with digital tools. The experimental group was tasked with creating personalized visual learning materials. The applied approach was structured in several steps, from creating simple forms including infographics and comparative charts to poster presentations and digital video passion projects. The algorithm for collaboration with AI and the work with specific features of AI-generated materials was applied aimed at making a student a critical consumer of this content and mitigating potential drawbacks of using AI. To assess the learning outcomes after the intervention, the post-test was administered, which revealed that the studied instructional design had a positive impact on language development across all aspects checked. The questionnaire, which included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, investigated students' perceptions of the applied methodology and faced challenges. The findings showed that students perceived integrating visual creation and structured AI-supported activities into English language learning as beneficial for language skills development, boosting motivation and interest, and the advancement of digital literacy.

Keywords: AI, learning English as a second language, learning outcomes, motivation, student-generated digital visual content

Foreign language education in the digital age is being revolutionized with unprecedented speed as a response to modern demands and challenges. One of the latest requirements for language teaching in higher education is to train language learners to be competent contributors to a digitally and culturally complex workplace environment (Dressen-Hammouda & Wigham, 2022). It means that there is a need to combine teaching linguistic aspects with digital, multimodal, and communicative practices. Considering the psychological characteristics of modern students who eagerly navigate in the world with multiple forms of media, prefer interactive content, social and collaborative learning, and are highly adaptable to new technologies, language educators try to find new methods to keep pace with current requests. The integration of multimodal techniques requires intensive attention to the work with visual content and helps address the complexities of real-world interactions and prepare students for them. The importance of this approach can be seen in language teaching curricula of several countries, such as China (Zhong, 2024), where viewing was introduced as the fifth skill alongside reading, listening, writing, and speaking. *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* in China regard viewing as skills of understanding meaning by making use of graphics, tables, animations, symbols, and videos in multimodal texts (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Today students are not only exposed to teacher-generated visuals they are also actively involved in the generative learning process. The constructive potential of student-authored visual content for students' language acquisition as well as performance, engagement, and motivation has been studied in various research studies (Guenier, 2023; Jiang & Ren, 2020; Lecumberri and Pastor-González, 2020). Despite the interest of scholars in this technique, limited attention has been given to the impact of the introduction of AI on the creation of visual content by students and their language development. Addressing this gap, the present research aimed to enhance the understanding of how the engagement of students in creating visuals and the use of a structured approach to AI could benefit language learning, motivation, and interest. The practical recommendations for managing both the challenges and advantages of AI in language education can help to inform more effective and responsive practices of teaching English as a second language.

Literature Review

The Psychological Considerations of Digital Multimodal Content in Education

One of the foundational theories guiding the design of educational multimedia is the Multimedia Learning Theory by Richard Mayer (Mayer & Fiorella, 2022). Most works related to visual tools and cognitive processes at the present stage, in one way or another, refer to his 12 principles of multimedia learning, which are considered an important resource for curriculum developers, methodologists, and educators. Among them is the modality principle, which states that people learn better from visuals and spoken words than from visuals and on-screen text. Other principles, important in this context, are the dual-channel assumption principle that individuals possess two distinct channels for processing auditory and visual information, spatial contiguity principle stating that text and visuals should be presented close together on the screen to maximise learning, and the temporal contiguity principle pointing out

that students learn better and build meaningful connections when words and pictures are presented at the same time rather than sequentially (Mayer & Fiorella, 2022).

Modern research on psychology tries to enhance the understanding of integrating visual media effectively into learning to improve retention and support comprehension. Schoenherr et al. (2024) observed that various visualization exercises and strategies enhance students' visual abilities and strategic knowledge thus contributing to both short-term and long-term learning. According to Patel (2025), visuals influence short-term memory by engaging quick and unconscious information processing as well as active memorization. Goujon et al. (2022) highlight that meaningful images positively affect long-term memory by making information easier to store and retrieve. The improvement of deep cognitive processing of information, leading to better academic performance, was reported due to the multimedia content (Lv et al., 2024; Mangaroska et al., 2021; Stankovic et al., 2018). However, cognitive overload was observed when students completed multimodal composition tasks (Hellmich et al., 2021). In modern research, little attention has been given to empirical studies on effective teaching strategies to make learning both stimulating and cognitively manageable.

Student-Authored Multimodal Content in Education

Digital multimodal composing (DMC) was applied in second language learning as a multi-skill practice. The technique aimed to engage students in the "use of digital tools to construct texts in multiple semiotic modes, including writing, image, and sound (to name a few)" (Hafner, 2015, p. 487). In such a situation, students became not only consumers of learning materials but also digital designers who often had to work in collaboration with peers as the learner-generated content was supposed to be shared with other learners to support learning (Lecumberri & Pastor-González, 2020). Even though various research reported the beneficial impact of this activity (Guenier, 2023; Jiang & Ren, 2020; Lecumberri & Pastor-González, 2020), there remains a need for further exploration of effective instructional strategies that can allow educators to optimize the use of multimodal projects to maximize student engagement and learning outcomes as well as sustain self-regulated learning.

Insightful observations were made by Lecumberri and Pastor-González (2020) who studied content acquisition through multimedia content in two stages. First, they gave the students the assignment to create a poster presentation showing a given template. This activity helped to develop basic skills in data management. Second, they assigned a task to create a video, a more complex task, which provided the opportunity to enhance creativity and critical thinking. The researchers considered that these digital practices helped to master language, explore cultures, and make the process meaningful. The suggested approach is of notable interest as it manages to enhance students' engagement by gradually increasing the cognitive demand and making the learning process both accessible and intellectually stimulating.

Jiang and Ren (2020) examined the use of DMC in second language learning and revealed contrasting perspectives between teachers and students. Teachers primarily employed this technique to support the acquisition of linguistic forms, whereas students perceived digital

modes as more engaging and effective for self-expression. The researchers argued that these different perspectives could create at the micro level internal barriers to student investment and at the macro level external barriers, as students' digital and multimodal competencies risk being undervalued in traditional assessment. These findings show that educators should consider the meaning-making potential of multimodality and refrain from restricting students' engagement.

Integrating AI tools in English Language Teaching

The use of AI technologies in language teaching has attracted significant attention in recent years. Kostikova et al. (2024) studied the process of a new language course creation using AI. Mananay (2024) reported that AI is actively used to enhance language instruction through interactive simulations, adaptive learning, and individualized feedback. The improvement of learners' motivation, engagement, and attitude as well as a decrease in learning anxiety, were noticed by AlTwijri and Alghizzi (2024). The ability of AI to create more personalized and engaging learning experiences was observed (Ahmed et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2024; Lee, 2024; Levy & Windmann, 2020).

Studies indicate that AI can improve language learning. AlTwijri and Alghizzi (2024) and Mohammed & Mahdi (2025) demonstrate that AI tools positively influence various aspects of language learning, including receptive and productive skills, vocabulary acquisition, grammar, comprehension, and intercultural competence. Guo and Wang (2024) highlighted that AI-based strategies enhanced writing skills by providing individualized instruction and timely, personalized feedback, leading to improved accuracy and overall language proficiency. Zhang et al. (2024) reported that interacting with AI supported speaking development, as students explained concepts to chatbots in a dialogical exchange. The beneficial impact on speaking competencies was also noted by Du and Daniel (2024) and Yang et al. (2022).

At the same time, researchers observed various challenges connected with the integration of AI in language teaching. AI-powered writing tools can impact academic integrity (Roe et al., 2023). The risk that over-reliance on technology can potentially diminish the human element in teaching was acknowledged by Mohebbi (2024). Mohamed (2023) emphasized the essential role of teacher presence in second language learning, arguing that AI tools alone cannot foster deep understanding, creative language use, or mastery of linguistic logic. Another problem is the information reliability issue as AI-generated content can be incorrect, and references can be invented. Asscher and Glikson (2023) highlighted that even the most sophisticated translation tools may misunderstand the context or provide wrong meanings of field-specific terminology. Gerlich (2025) also warns that heavy dependence on AI can lead to a decrease in students' critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities. These findings show that further studies are needed to investigate approaches to working with AI tools critically, design targeted instructional strategies for their educational application and effectively utilize their capabilities. This is the gap the researchers wanted to address in this study.

Considering the findings of previous studies, the researchers put forward the hypothesis that learners' participation in constructing digital visual content in learning English as a second

language may have a beneficial impact on students' learning outcomes as well as interest and motivation if instructional methods are carefully designed to train students to critically engage with multimodal and AI-generated content. The work aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does participation in the creation of visuals and a structured approach to using AI contribute to enhanced learning outcomes in foreign language education?
RQ2: How do students perceive the impact of creating visuals on their language development, motivation and interest?
RQ3: What are the main difficulties students experience in the process of creating visuals and working with AI?

Methodology and Methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quasi-experimental design, pre and post testing, and a questionnaire, that included open-ended and closed-ended questions, to investigate the impact of visual content creation and structured use of AI by students on foreign language learning outcomes as well as to explore learners' perceptions and challenges. These approaches were informed by previous studies, such as quasi-experiments (Chastnyk et al., 2024; Reichardt et al., 2023), pre- and post-testing (Kumar, 2021; Pan & Sana, 2021), and questionnaires (Bang, 2024; Sajko, 2024).

Participants

The research was conducted during the 2023–2024 academic year at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University. The participants (N = 114) were first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the compulsory academic course Foreign Language which is actually Introduction to Legal English. The sample included 61 female and 53 male students, aged from 17 to 19 years. A purposive stratified sampling strategy was applied to ensure equivalence in English language proficiency across the experimental and control groups. At the beginning of the academic year, all students enrolled in the course took a standardized English language proficiency test (pre-test). Based on the test outcomes, 6 academic groups with nearly equal proficiency levels were chosen from a total of 10. These 6 groups were randomly assigned to either the control group (3 groups; N = 56) or the experimental group (3 groups; N = 58). The study was conducted in compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University before the commencement of the quasi-experiment and data collection. Prior to participation, all students were informed of the research purpose and participated voluntarily.

Research Design and Tools

To address research question 1 (RQ1) about the impact of the suggested instructional design, including visual content creation and structured use of AI, a quasi-experimental design was used. Initial comparability of the control and experimental groups was ensured by

administering the pre-test. The groups showed nearly identical pre-test scores across all criteria. Then the independent-samples t-test was conducted on the pre-test scores to verify that there were no statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups before the intervention. To confirm the validity of the t-test results assumption checks were performed. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that all variables were approximately normally distributed, all p-values were above 0.05. The findings of Levene's test showed that all p-values were above 0.05, which indicated that variances between groups were equal for all language skills. In the independent-samples t-test all p-values were above 0.05, which confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences before the experiment. The results of the independent-samples t-test on the pre-test are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of the Independent-Samples T-test for the Control Group (CG) and Experimental Group (EG) on the Pre-Test

Criteria	CG Mean/SD (n=56)	EG Mean/SD (n=58)	t-value	p-value
Vocabulary	6.9 ± 0.700	6.8 ± 0.690	−0.953	<0.344
Reading skills	22.1 ± 0.710	22.2 ± 0.690	−0.872	<0.386
Listening skills	13.2 ± 0.680	13.3 ± 0.670	−0.651	<0.516
Speaking skills	13.0 ± 0.650	13.1 ± 0.640	−0.712	<0.478
Writing skills	12.8 ± 0.600	12.9 ± 0.610	−0.889	<0.376

To assess the learning outcomes in the control and experimental groups after the intervention, the post-test with a maximum score of 100 points was conducted at the end of the semester. It was the standard two-part final assessment test used in the course. The first section included a multiple-choice test, checking vocabulary knowledge and reading skills, and the task to assess writing skills to write a summary of a given text on one of the studied topics. The second part checked listening skills in the form of true/false and multiple-choice questions, and speaking skills, a monologue, on the programme topics. The results of the control and experimental groups were collected, analysed, and interpreted based on descriptive statistics and inferential statistics such as an independent samples t-test by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The assumption tests for normality and homogeneity were conducted to ensure independent samples t-test validity. In addition, Cohen's d was calculated to assess the practical significance of the observed results.

To answer research question 2 (RQ2) and research question 3 (RQ3) concerning students' perceptions of the applied approach involving visual content creation and structured use of AI in the process of learning English as a second language, a mixed-format questionnaire was designed and administered to the experimental group after the completion of the course. To ensure content validity, the draft version of the questionnaire was developed following the objectives of the research and adapted according to previous studies (Hoa et al., 2022; Ranganathan et al., 2024; Taherdoost, 2022). It was reviewed by three associate professors of

the Foreign Languages Department who evaluated the clarity and relevance of the questions. Based on the feedback, some questions were reworded. A pilot questionnaire was conducted with the participation of 5 students to understand the comprehensiveness of the questions, finally adjusted and presented to all participants. Completion of the questionnaire implied informed consent. All responses were anonymous and confidential. Participants had the right to skip any question or withdraw at any time. Data were stored and analysed following institutional ethical guidelines.

The administered closed-ended questionnaire included 3 blocks of questions concerning motivation and interest (part A – questions 1-3); learners' perceived progress in language proficiency (part B – questions 4-5); and problems and difficulties in the preparation of visual learning content (part C – questions 6-7). Questions 1,2,3,5 were designed by the authors of this research according to a 5-point Likert scale (Handelsman et al., 2005) from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Questions 4, 6, and 7 required respondents to select one or more options to obtain more reliable answers and assess their consistency. Closed-ended responses were analysed quantitatively, tabulated, and presented in percentages.

The open-ended questionnaire questions were developed in advance based on the study objectives and research questions to obtain students' more detailed opinions on motivation, language development, difficulties, and interaction with AI. The responses were examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes that complemented the quantitative finding. The researchers used a manual coding method, carefully read all the students' responses to the open-ended questions, identified key ideas, and assigned codes to them that reflected the content. The codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories that corresponded to the research questions.

This questionnaire contained 4 open-ended questions (OQ):

OQ1: Can you comment on your interest and engagement when you had to create visual material independently, and not just work with ready-made materials from the teacher? How did it affect your interest in the task? Did it become more exciting or difficult?
OQ2: What language skills did the activity help you improve?
OQ3: What difficulties did you encounter independently preparing learning material?
OQ4: Did you use AI in preparation for the assignment? What are the advantages and drawbacks of this experience?

Experimental Teaching Design

During the course, experimental teaching involved delivering the course materials outlined in the syllabus of the discipline, through the intensive use of multimodal teaching methods to the students in both the experimental and control groups. In the control group, only teacher-generated digital visual aids were applied. Whereas, in the experimental group, besides working with the tasks related to the provided multimodal materials, students were also given assignments to create their own digital multimedia content.

Teacher-Generated Digital Multimodal Content

Teacher-generated digital multimodal aids were employed during the two semesters. They included infographics such as visual displays of words, word and concept mappings, charts, diagrams, slides, maps, graphs, wordlists, flashcards, and word clouds, ready-made multimedia materials like audio, video, and animation, and AI-generated videos. These visual materials were produced with the help of different online digital tools, including word cloud generators such as Tagxedo, Tagul, Word It Out, VocabGrabber, Wordle, and WordSift,; visual dictionaries or thesauruses similar to Visuwords, Wordart, and Visual Thesaurus; quiz-makers and interactive tools Kahoot, Quizlet, Hot Potatoes, and Free Online Surveys; online vocabulary games Vocabulary and Quizlet; and AI content generators GPTchat; JasperAI; Rytr; Simplified, Twee, and Invideo. The intensive use of these materials was aimed at developing language skills, enhancing comprehension and retention, fostering authentic language learning, as well as improving communication skills and learners' engagement. Moreover, these materials also served as an example for students regarding how to create content.

Student-Generated Digital Multimodal Content

The tutors asked students to create multimodal content based on the instructions and target materials. The tasks were supposed to foster English language use, promote critical thinking and creativity, enhance interaction and collaboration, help develop digital literacy as well as teach students to produce content useful in the real-world professional context. The work with digital visuals produced by learners included three main stages.

Stage 1. During the year (two semesters) students were given the assignments to create infographics, comparative charts and posters to represent, analyse, compare, and summarise the learning material. For example, using the infographics students were to describe the main functions of prosecutors in various countries. Meanwhile, other students had to spot differences between the duties of these professionals in different states. Then the group discussion was organised. Students were also asked to evaluate works of others and provide constructive feedback on the language used, logical flow of information presentation, effectiveness, and creativity. The infographics created by students about the functions of prosecutors in different countries at different stages of criminal proceedings are shown in Appendix A.

Working on the topic Modern Legal System, students were given the home assignment to create a comparative chart to analyse any two legal systems according to the given criteria. During the lesson, they worked in several groups and created a common list of the main differences and similarities of the studied legal systems using their charts. The group that provided the most comprehensive and well-researched list of the differences and similarities in the studied legal systems won the competition. The work with these simple visuals was aimed at training for more complex tasks they completed at further stages. The designed comparative chart is shown in Appendix B.

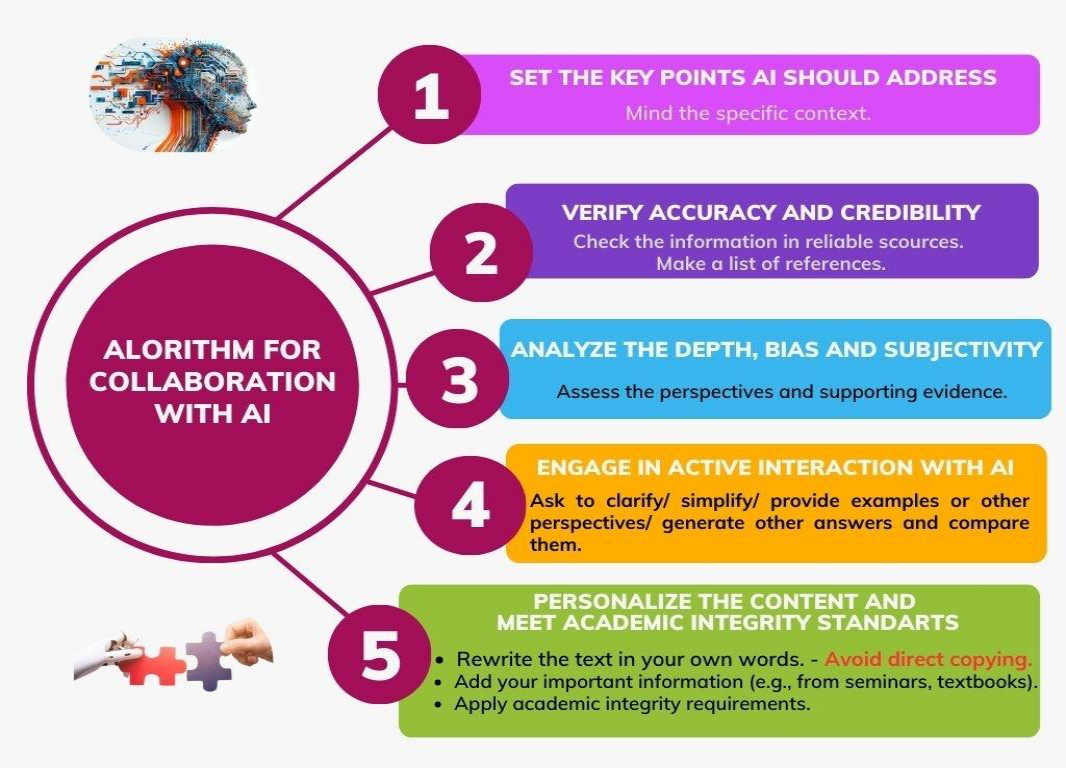
Stage 2. During the first semester, students were given the project to create a poster presentation on the topic "A Notorious Criminal". Typically, the following online tools were utilized: Canva, Genially, Visme, Beautiful.ai, Slidebean, and others. This type of visual was chosen for its potential to enhance language learning in an interactive and engaging way by integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Wallengren Lynch (2018, p. 6) considered a poster presentation to be a creative way to help students "crystallize their arguments and help scaffold knowledge". A student-created poster presentation is shown in Appendix C.

Special attention was paid to the use of AI-powered tools. The tutors, being aware of the possible threats, suggested the tasks to make students critically analyse AI content, criticize and filter information, interact with AI, go beyond the mere copying of the AI-generated content, and better assimilate the material. For this reason, specific characteristics of AI-created texts were presented to students in the form of the checklist infographic and analysed on the provided example. While working with the visuals created by students later during the semester, learners were asked to identify features of AI-generated content if present in the text.

Then students were given the algorithm containing the step-by-step approach to the collaboration with AI that they had to follow to work critically with AI-created texts. The diagram with the structured approach is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Algorithm for Collaboration with AI



Stage 3. In the second semester, students were assigned to create a digital passion video project. They were allowed to choose independently problematic issues that they were already passionate about and connected with one of the curriculum topics. The project implementation steps including the project marketplace method are described in detail by Mykytiuk et al. (2023). The following free generators were usually used: Pictory, Lumen5, InVideo, Canva, Animaker (for animated videos). The process of planning and implementation of the product as well as the final presentation in class was accompanied by tutors' support, thoroughly observed in terms of the objectives of the research. The screenshots of video projects are shown in Appendix D.

Results

Language Learning Outcomes Revealed in the Post-Test

To answer research question 1 (RQ1) about the impact of the proposed instructional design, including visual content creation and the structured use of AI on students' learning outcomes, the post-test was administered. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that all variables were approximately normally distributed, all p-values were above 0.05. Furthermore, Levene's test for homogeneity of variances revealed that all p-values were greater than 0.05, which suggested that the variances between the control and experimental groups were equal across all language skills. The utilised independent-samples t-test revealed the following results shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the Independent-Samples T-test for the Control Group (CG) and Experimental Group (EG) on the Post-Test

Criteria	CG Mean/SD (n=56)	EG Mean/SD (n=58)	t-value	p-value
Vocabulary	7.2±0.727	7.6±0.632	−3.150	<0.001
Reading skills	22.9±0.685	23.10±0.684	−2.033	<0.022
Listening skills	13.6±0.725	13.9±0.739	−2.190	<0.015
Speaking skills	13.8±0.681	14.1±0.711	−2.308	<0.011
Writing skills	13.3±0.622	13.8±0.638	−5.085	<0.001

As it is demonstrated in Table 2, there was a difference between the test achievement scores of control and experimental groups according to all five checked criteria. According to the vocabulary criterion $t = -3.150$, $p < 0{,}001$; the mean score of the experimental group achievement (7.6) was higher than the control group's achievement (7.2) score. According to the reading skills criterion $t = -2.033$, $p < 0.022$; the mean score of the experimental group achievement (23.10) was better than the control group's achievement (22.9) score. According to the listening skills criterion $t = -2.190$, $p < 0.015$; the experimental group achieved a higher mean score (13.9) compared to the control group's mean score (13.6). According to the

speaking skills criterion $t = -2.308$, $p < 0.011$; the experimental group outperformed the control group, achieving a mean score of 14.1 compared to 13.8. Since the p-values for all assessment criteria were below the significance threshold of 0.05, it can be concluded that the approach applied in the experimental group improved students' performance, confirming the initial hypothesis on the effectiveness of the proposed methodology.

The analysis of the post-test results using Cohen's d revealed that the studied instructional design had varying degrees of impact across different language skills. The most substantial improvement was observed in writing skills ($d = 0.79$), indicating a large effect size and suggesting a strong practical benefit of the intervention. Moderate effect sizes were found for vocabulary ($d = 0.59$), listening ($d = 0.41$), and speaking ($d = 0.43$), while reading skills showed a small to moderate effect ($d = 0.38$). These findings support the conclusion that the experimental approach contributed positively to the improvement of learning outcomes, especially in productive skills, and highlight the potential value of integrating visual and AI-supported activities into English language teaching.

Students' Perception of the Impact of Creating Visuals and Working with AI

Closed-Ended Questionnaire

The closed-ended part of the questionnaire was designed to quantitatively measure how students felt about their motivation, English language progress, and the challenges they faced while creating visual materials. It helped identify common tendencies in students' experiences aligned with the study's goals.

Part A of the closed-ended questionnaire assessed students' motivation and interest in developing visual materials during English classes. Table 3 presents the quantitative results reflecting students' perceptions related to Research Question 2.

Table 3

Questionnaire Results on Students' Motivation and Interest

A. Motivation and Interest	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q1: Was it interesting for you to develop educational material yourself, rather than receive ready-made material from a teacher?	28%	37%	26%	8%	1%
Q2: What motivated you the most?					
• the opportunity to understand the topic more deeply	10%	30%	28%	20%	22%
• the opportunity to choose tools	5 %	45%	30%	15%	5%
• a sense of responsibility for the quality of materials that will be used in class	15%	20%	35%	20%	10%
• the opportunity to be creative	50 %	25%	10%	15%	5%
Q3: Do the difficulties in the task-generating process affect your desire to use this type of work in the future?	9%	45%	30%	12%	4%

Question 1 was asked to evaluate students' acceptance of the suggested approach and the level of interest. The results demonstrate that most of the students (65%) agreed that their direct participation in the process of creating the learning content in English positively affects their engagement and motivation. Only 1% expresses strong disagreement about the rise of interest and motivation to study. 26% of respondents hesitated about the attractiveness of the approach.

Question 2 was aimed at understanding what exactly seemed more interesting to the students. The researchers believed that working with AI, the ability to choose tools and be creative would seem more attractive to students, which turned out to be true with approximately 55% and 30% respectively supporting the ideas. It also appeared that students were interested in explaining and conveying information to their classmates in an easily understandable way, feeling responsible for the result (35%). They also indicated their desire to understand the topic more deeply (40%). The participants said that they took great pleasure in the process of creating visual content design, which is reflected in the figures (75%).

Question 3 was designed to understand how optimistic and interested students felt about participating in this activity in the future taking into account that they could have difficulties of completing the assigned tasks learning English as a second language. As can be seen, a high result (54%) indicates the students' readiness to directly participate in the preparation of visual materials. At the same time, 30% of respondents expressed a neutral position, and a small number (4%) spoke out against it.

According to the results obtained from the motivation part of the questionnaire, it can be affirmed that there was a high degree of motivation among the students in the process of creating and generating learning content. Apparently, most students showed a positive degree of interest in contrast to only a few students, who reported negative results towards this activity.

Part B of the closed-ended questionnaire focused on students' self-assessment of improvement in language skills and knowledge as a result of engaging in visual content creation. Table 4 and 5 present the quantitative results of respondents' self-assessments on the development of specific language skills related to Research Question 2.

Table 4

Questionnaire Results on the Impact of Creating Learning Materials on Language Acquisition

B. Improvement in Language Skills and Knowledge	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q4: Do you agree with the statement: "Creating learning material helped me learn the language better than if I had received ready-made material from a teacher"?	14%	40%	30%	11%	5%

The answers to Q4 revealed that most students saw the benefits of their activity as 54% of participants agreed that generating learning material made them gain language skills and knowledge. As can be seen in Table 4, only 5% strongly disagreed that their English language knowledge had increased, while 25% were not sure about it.

Question 5 was aimed at investigating which specific English skills were successfully increased, according to the students' opinion. The research showed that students considered the activity and experience useful mostly for increasing vocabulary, better understanding of written texts, development of speaking qualifications, and constructing and paraphrasing sentences. As Table 5 shows, 81% of respondents confirmed that they gained more knowledge in terminology and its use. The answers revealed that most students saw the benefits of their activity for reading comprehension (86%) while 48% of respondents stated that they began to understand speech better, especially when it was accompanied by visual aids. Another 51% expressed confidence about better speaking. Improving pronunciation was indicated by 36% of students. Particular skills of paraphrasing and structuring the text were highlighted by 45% of participants.

Table 5

Questionnaire Results on Students' Assessment of Language Skills Progress

B. Improvement in Language Skills and Knowledge	%
Q5: Which language skills do you think have been improved in the process of creating learning materials? (You can select multiple options.)	
• I have learned new words	81%
• I have improved my grammar	35%
• I have learned to write better texts	31%
• I began to speak and pronounce words better	36%
• I have become better at constructing and paraphrasing sentences	45%
• I feel more confident in speaking and presenting information	51%
• I have improved my ability to understand presentations by my groupmates	48%
• I have a better understanding of written texts on the studied topic	86%
• I learned nothing	0,1%

Referring to the obtained results it can be deduced that students were less confident in acquiring new skills of writing texts and pronunciation with 36% and 31% respectively of participants responding positively. It should be noted that the only exception was the individual who expressed the opinion that he had learned nothing new.

Part **C** of the closed-ended questionnaire examined the difficulties students encountered while independently preparing visual materials. The results presented in Table 6 illustrate the respondents' evaluation of the most complicated aspects of the process and provide evidence relevant to Research Question 3.

Table 6

Students' Assessments of the Challenges Involved in Creating Visuals

C. Difficulties in Preparation	%
Q6: What difficulties did you encounter when independently preparing materials? (You can select several options)	
• Searching for and selecting information	7%
• Interacting with AI to obtain the desired results	36%
• It was difficult to summarize and structure the material	44%
• Difficulties in formulating final ideas in a foreign language	65%
• Creating visual content	87%
• Sound recording or presentation of material	80%

As can be seen from Table 6 finding information did not cause any particular difficulties (7%), presumably due to the availability of various online assistants. After respondents had selected relevant information on the topic, their next step was to identify aspects and criteria for compiling the main content, by interacting with AI, which caused difficulty for 36% of

participants. Fully 44% of students noted that structuring and summarizing the material was also rather challenging. The aspect of expressing thoughts in a foreign language to get a final product was highlighted by a fairly large number of students (65%). Despite the availability of many services for creating and editing texts based on AI, a large number of students experienced difficulty in creating high-quality, informative text that corresponds to the target audience. As was stressed in the motivation section of the questionnaire, dealing with creative design appeared to be the most motivating activity but technical visual implementation became, according to respondents, quite a difficult task (87%). One of the most difficult aspects, according to students, was their voice-over and presentation of the finished material to the audience (80%). The successful implementation of the task required both linguistic and communication skills as well as analytical and presentation skills, which the English language learners do not fully possess.

Open-Ended Questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire was administered to gather detailed, qualitative feedback from students about their experiences of independently creating visual content. It was designed to provide deeper investigation into the research questions and complement the quantitative data gathered from the closed-ended section. The researchers acknowledged that English was not the participants' first language and took this into account when interpreting the responses.

To address Research Question 2, open-ended question 1 (OQ1) Can you comment on your interest and engagement when you had to create visual material independently, and not just work with ready-made materials from the teacher? How did it affect your interest in the task? Did it become more exciting or difficult? was asked to examine students' interest and engagement in independently creating visuals, focusing on how this approach influenced their motivation and interest. The researchers considered that English was a second language for the learners.

According to the responses to OQ1 of the open-ended questionnaire, the experimental group participants indicated that learning through creating visuals was motivating. One student commented, "I liked the process. I tried my best to create something good. I understood that my groupmates would look at the chart and more easily understand the difference. It should be bright and well-formatted. It made me make efforts, but I'll be glad to do it again" (S1). Most respondents share the opinion that the most liked part of the activity was creating a design for visuals: "I really enjoyed creating the poster, choosing the slide design" (S2); "I really wanted to impress my classmates and make the visible text appear bright and clear" (S3); "There were a lot of platforms to choose from. I tried two. I wanted the video to look good with effects" (S4). Nevertheless, some students doubted their interest: "I have got so many assignments to prepare, why should I deal with tables or cards if the teacher can do it for us" (S5).

Open-ended question 2 (OQ2) 'What language skills did the activity help you improve?' sought to identify which specific language skills students felt were improved through the activity, answering Research Question 2 by evaluating the perceived impact on language development.

Students' self-evaluation concerning increasing their language skills and knowledge is reflected in numerous comments to OQ2, such as, "I'm sure I'm improving my vocabulary! I had to go over those basic terms so many times while making the clip, and I even asked AI for the pronunciation" (S6). One participant commented that "during the preparation, I learned specific terms. Even if I didn't know them before, I could memorize them automatically because when making charts and graphs and even the video, I saw them plenty of times" (S7); "It was a great way to memorize new vocabulary without just cramming" (S10). Some participants expressed improvements in grammar. "I learned to formulate more precise requests to receive good answers, and when I wrote something grammatically wrong, the bot corrected me, and next time I tried my best to write better" (S8).

The participants also shared how they had improved their comprehension of written and spoken materials: "I used to struggle with listening, but now I can catch more words and phrases." (S2); "When I made my diagrams, I had to reread definitions and multiple times, besides I read mostly the same information expressed differently, so now I don't panic when I see long texts" (S11); "When I saw information on the diagrams or charts I could understand complex topics more simply" (S8).

Most participants expressed their experience of generating learning content positively highlighting that this activity helped them be more confident about constructing and paraphrasing sentences: "I knew I'd have to summarize everything in English to accompany the graphics, and I had to express the same idea in different ways so that ChatGPT could finally understand me; now I feel I'm just an expert in paraphrasing" (S12); "I had to rewrite sentences until they sounded natural. I had to phrase ideas clearly" (S5); "When I worked on captions for my visuals, I had to shorten and simplify sentences" (S3); "I learned to paraphrase because I couldn't just copy long definitions" (S12).

The rationale of OQ 2 was also to figure out if students benefit from their activities for better discourse management. Most interviewees were not certain about the effectiveness of the work (51%) but reported that they became more engaged, which made them participate in communication more freely. "I had to describe my visuals out loud, and that made me use new words automatically" (S7); "I repeated phrases again and again, so they stuck in my memory" (S14); "After revising so much of the information from different sites I encountered the same formulations, so when explaining the visual, it was enough for me to express my idea" (S13); "I now understand that probably I have become more confident in writing independently" (S4). There was just one participant who told the researchers that he had not learnt anything new. Most students, however, reported improvement in at least one aspect of their language skills.

Open-ended question 3 (OQ3) 'What difficulties did you encounter independently preparing learning material?' focused on the challenges students faced while preparing their visual content, helping to answer Research Question 3 by exploring the most complicated aspects of work with tools. When the students described the difficulties at each stage of the work step by step, they primarily pointed out the challenge of creating a unique visual that would not be similar to those automatically created by AI. The participants also specified the difficulty in

selecting the necessary content: first, it was necessary to highlight the main key points, then find reliable sources, summarize the information, and structure it. To do that, most turned to AI and had to explain the context in which certain concepts were to be used.

Next, the students described the difficulties with the technical implementation of the project, which, according to most participants, was the most energy-consuming. They indicated the following technical difficulties in the process of preparing the task when creating visuals: working with software, including graphic and video editors and voicing the video. This is evidenced by the students' comments: "Everything was difficult! But it was very interesting. The most difficult thing was to technically design the task, choose relevant pictures, etc." (S14); "I had troubles with CapCut it took me so long to figure out the tool!" (S15); "Finding good images that matched my topic was difficult" (S16); "It was necessary to select suitable icons, files so that everything would look great and impress my classmates" (S17).

Voice recording for the video also posed several challenges, according to students' statements. It required both technical execution and correct intonation and pronunciation: "Recording my voice was the hardest part—I had to rerecord it many times" (S18).

The most difficult moment, as described by the students, was the preparation for presenting the finished work in class. At this stage of the work, the students had to repeat the material, rephrase sentences, think through and simplify constructions, and get ready to answer potential questions: "I had to go over my material so many times before presenting"! (S19); "Thinking about presenting in class made me nervous because I wanted to make sure everyone could understand me" (S20); "I had to simplify my sentences so my classmates could understand everything easily, and it appeared harder than I thought" (S21).

Open-ended question 4 (OQ4) Did you use AI in preparation for the assignment? What are the advantages and drawbacks of this experience? asked about students' use of AI in preparing the assignment and their reflections on its benefits and drawbacks, directly addressing Research Question 3 by exploring the critical interaction with AI and its influence on the learning process. To comment on OQ 4, the participants described their experience in the process of creating materials beginning from the instructions they received from the teachers before starting the task, they narrated as follows: "The problem was also to make the assignment look like our own work and not AI-generated. We were given detailed explanations that we had to present the unique work, which meant reworking what had been created by AI if we use it" (S22); "The tutor gave us clear instructions and immediately warned us that we would have to rephrase, simplify, and change everything so that each work would be distinctive, and not just follow AI suggestions" (S23); "I was afraid that my work would look similar to others, so I tried to express my thoughts differently" (S25); "The teacher not only warned us not to copy but also described the next steps" (S26).

More participants admitted that they had used AI for creating visuals and also stated that preparing, revising, and filtering information to generate the visual product, was very helpful but not easy. Thirty-six percent of students described the process of interacting with AI tools

as challenging. Nevertheless, several participants voiced that they had to persistently apply the right strategy, and as a result, they could memorize complex notions unconsciously. "Sometimes I got angry because I didn't understand what I needed. I got a very stupid and primitive answer so I had to explain the task clearly and the term as well. I did but it showed me too complicated and detailed information. To give AI good instructions I had to google the definition and even history (I mean the difference between Civil and Common law), I asked my classmates, and of course, we got the answer but we had to rephrase it and make it more precise. Sometimes I even had to start a new chat with new instructions" (S20).

The students highlighted the convenience of using AI while preparing the assignments: "Thank God nobody blames me for using ChatGPT, at least we worked openly" (S2). A group of students described their learning experience enthusiastically: "We were given the task to create a comparative table on the topic of Barristers vs. Solicitors. First, we had to determine the format of the table and the criteria by which they should be compared. To do this, we had to look through the textbook text again and then apply to Google and ChatGPT. There was a lot of information, we had to select and shorten it so that the table included clear and understandable wording. I chose the criteria: Duties; Work Scope; Clients; Right of Audience; Education & Qualification. We entered the wording into the table based on these criteria. This was the main part of the work; the rest was a matter of technique. AI helped us with the visual design, after completing it, we added a couple of icons and reviewed the material. In principle, it was interesting and not extremely difficult. Everything worked out!!!"

Generally, most participants expressed that integrating their efforts into creating visual content was not simple. They admitted that there were challenges in the process of working with operating the technologies and content itself but the dominating quantity of respondents stressed the engagement in the activity and more confidence about the progress in the language acquisition.

The analysis of both closed- and open-ended questionnaire responses indicated that students in the experimental group generally perceived the activity of creating educational visual content as engaging, stimulating for learning, and educationally effective. The responses to closed-ended questions demonstrated that the activity supported the development of key English language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, reading, and listening comprehension, and increased speaking confidence. The open-ended questionnaire responses further highlighted the significant role of critical engagement with AI-generated content in facilitating language development. Rather than relying on AI passively, learners demonstrated an active process of evaluating, modifying, and personalizing the language material to produce original visuals. This process involved making linguistic choices, restructuring content, and clarifying meaning, which contributed to deeper comprehension and greater language awareness. At the same time, participants noted specific challenges, particularly in critically selecting appropriate content, using digital tools effectively, and presenting their final products in class, also emphasizing that revising, filtering, and adapting information to make it appear authentically their own, rather than AI-generated, required significant effort. Overall, the findings provided support for the hypothesis of the study and helped address the research questions.

Discussion

This study contributes to current research on multimodal language learning (AlTwijri & Alghizzi, 2024; Lv et al., 2024; Monika, 2022; Mudinillah et al., 2024; Park, 2024) by focusing on the educational potential of using student-generated visuals and students' critical engagement with AI-generated content. While previous studies confirmed the benefits of DMC activities (Guenier, 2023; Jiang & Ren, 2020; Lecumberri & Pastor-González, 2020), limited attention has been given to empirical studies on teaching students to critically process AI-generated content in English language education. The present research addresses this gap considering the highlighted challenges connected with the integration of AI in language teaching (Gerlich, 2025; Roe et al., 2023) and the drawbacks of AI-produced materials (Asscher & Glikson, 2023). This study focused on how learners, following the proposed strategy, could actively select, interpret, and adapt AI-generated content to produce unique visual materials.

The applied approach was structured in several steps to gradually increase cognitive demand to make learning stimulating and manageable, as was suggested in earlier studies (Lecumberri & Pastor-González, 2020). To enhance students' engagement, emphasis was placed not only on language acquisition but also on the creative and critical approach to the production of visuals in line with the prior research (Jiang & Ren, 2020). Following the previous studies that highlighted the positive impact of composing visuals by students on the learning process (AlTwijri & Alghizzi, 2024; Mohammed & Mahdi, 2025), the researchers found that this process may enhance language acquisition, particularly vocabulary development, reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills. Interestingly, the post-test results showed that the most substantial improvement was observed in writing skills development, which can be attributed to the employed algorithm of critical processing, paraphrasing, and restructuring materials suggested by AI. Even though students reported a more significant influence on vocabulary, reading, and speaking development. Participants also noted improvements in digital literacy, presentation skills as well as motivation, creativity, and critical thinking. These observations suggest that encouraging students to generate their visual content using AI tools may provide opportunities for deeper engagement with language material and support language development as well as improve methods of teaching English as a second language by making them more effective and responsive to learners' needs.

Recommendations

Future studies should further explore the impact of integrating instructional design related to visual content creation and a structured approach to using AI on the development of specific language skills. Greater emphasis should be placed on designing targeted tasks aimed at enhancing particular language competencies. Special attention can be paid to the refinement of the instructions of critical collaboration of students with AI-generated materials considering different proficiency levels of learners of English as a second language, especially of students with a low proficiency level.

Conclusion

In response to modern-day demands and challenges, foreign language educators try to find solutions that will help to productively develop linguistic skills through methods which can simultaneously train the skills highly required in future digitally and culturally diverse workplaces. Employing the intrinsic interest of tech-savvy learners in modern technology and their needs and preferences for multimodal content to which they are accustomed in their digital environment, the researchers devised a special instructional design related to the intensive use of visual learning materials authored by students. The algorithm for collaboration with AI and the work with specific features of AI-generated materials were applied aimed at making a student a critical consumer of this content and mitigating potential drawbacks of AI use, such as over-reliance on AI tools and reduced critical thinking. Rather than relying on AI passively, learners demonstrated an active process of evaluating, modifying, and personalizing the language material to produce original visuals. The outcomes of the research appear consistent with the stated hypothesis. The findings of the post-test and administered questionnaire suggest that integrating visual creation and AI-supported activities into English language teaching can improve language skills development, enhance motivation and interest as well as impact the digital literacy advancement of students. Thus, the suggested instructional design can be productively exploited to enhance linguistic proficiency, including professional vocabulary, reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. It contributed to greater learner engagement and encouraged thoughtful interaction with AI.

Despite its strengths, the study has some limitations. It was conducted with a relatively small sample size and a short intervention duration. In addition, the effectiveness of the presented approach may vary depending on the level of students' language proficiency, the complexity of the topic, and the teacher's willingness to provide personalized guidance throughout the students' learning process. Another limitation is the different levels of digital competence among students, which were not examined but could have affected how effectively the strategy was applied. Further research is also needed to determine the specific role of AI in creating visual content for language learning, as the AI-related findings in this research were based only on students' results and perceptions.

The findings may be used by curriculum designers and educators, interested in effectively integrating AI into the educational process. The study highlights strategies that could facilitate the language development of second language learners preparing for professional environments.

References

Ahmed, Z. E., Hassan, A. A., & Saeed, R. A. (2024). *AI-enhanced teaching methods*. IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-2728-9

AlTwijri, L., & Alghizzi, T. M. (2024). Investigating the integration of artificial intelligence in English as foreign language classes for enhancing learners' affective factors: A systematic review. *Heliyon*, *10*(10), e31053. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e31053

Asscher, O., & Glikson, E. (2023). Human evaluations of machine translation in an ethically charged situation. *New Media & Society*, *25*(5), 1087–1107. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211018833.

Bang, T. C. (2024). Designing effective questionnaires. In H. Bui (Ed.), *Considerations and techniques for applied linguistics and language education research* (pp. 146-162). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6482-6.ch008

Chastnyk, O., Zoria, M., Poletay, O., Shumskyi, O., & Klochkova, Y. (2024). Exploring the influence of interactive education on academic progress: Evaluating effectiveness and implementation approaches. *Multidisciplinary Reviews*, *7*, 2024spe029. https://doi.org/10.31893/multirev.2024spe029

Dressen-Hammouda, D., & Wigham, C. (2022). Evaluating multimodal literacy: Academic and professional interactions around student-produced instructional video tutorials. *System, 105*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102727

Du, J., & Daniel, B. K. (2024). Transforming language education: A systematic review of AI-powered chatbots for English as a foreign language speaking practice. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, *6*, 100230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100230

Gerlich, M. (2025). AI tools in society: Impacts on cognitive offloading and the future of critical thinking. *Societies, 15*(1), 6. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010006

Goujon, A., Mathy, F., & Thorpe, S. (2022). The fate of visual long-term memories for images across weeks in adults and children. *Scientific Reports, 12*(1), 21763. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-26002-7

Guenier, A. (2023). Student initiative of producing their own mini videos for language learning. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching, 13*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijcallt.317929

Guo, K., & Wang, D. (2024). To resist it or to embrace it? Examining ChatGPT's potential to support teacher feedback in EFL writing. *Education and Information Technologies, 29*, 8435–8463. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-12146-0

Hafner, C. A. (2015). Remix culture and English language teaching: The expression of learner voice in digital multimodal compositions. *TESOL Quarterly, 49*(3), 486–509. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.238

Handelsman, M. M., Briggs, W. L., Sullivan, N., & Towler, A. (2005). A measure of college student course engagement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 98*(3), 184–192. https://doi.org/10.3200/JOER.98.3.184-192

Hellmich, E. A., Castek, J., Smith, B. E., Floyd, R., & Wen, W. (2021). Student perspectives on multimodal composing in the L2 classroom: Tensions with audience, media, learning and sharing. *English Teaching, 20*(2), 210-226. https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-07-2020-0082

Hoa, L. H., Dan, T. C., & Han, T. P. B. (2022). An investigation into perceptions and use of visual aids by English teachers at senior high schools in Can Tho City, Vietnam. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics Studies*, *5*(2), 207–229. https://doi.org/10.46827/ejals.v5i2.394

Islam, A., Ali, R., Singh, G., Islam, B., Islam, A. K. M. M., & Hossain, S. (2024). An evaluation of AI-enhanced collaborative learning platforms. *2024 International Conference on Communication, Computer Sciences and Engineering (IC3SE),* 207-211. https://doi.org/10.1109/IC3SE62002.2024.10593320

Jiang, L., & Ren, W. (2020). Digital multimodal composing in L2 learning: Ideologies and impact. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *20*(3), 167-168. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1753192

Kostikova, I., Holubnycha, L., Besarab, T., Moshynska, O., Moroz, T., & Shamaieva, I. (2024). Chat GPT for professional English course development. *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)*, *18*(02), 68–81. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v18i02.46623

Kumar, T. (2021). The impact of written visual materials in the development of speaking skills in English language among secondary level students. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, *17*(2), 1086-1095. https://doi.org/10.52462/jlls.76

Lecumberri, E., & Pastor-González, V. (2020). Learner generated digital content: From posters to videos to promote content acquisition in a language class. *Five Years of ELEUK Conferences: A Selection of Short Papers from 2019*, 89–99. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.41.1078

Lee, B. N. (2024). AI-enhanced digital learning: Revolutionizing Middle East history education. *Universal Library of Languages and Literatures, 1*(1), 40–44. https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ullli.2024.0101006

Levy, R., & Windmann, A. (2020). Intelligent computer-assisted language learning. In N. Van Deusen-Scholl & S. May (Eds.), *Second and foreign language education* (Vol. 4, pp. 449–469). Springer.

Lv, Y., Ni, W., & Tan, Y. H. (2024). An overview of research on multimodal teaching and learning. *Journal of Education and Educational Research*, *8*(3), 492–495. https://doi.org/10.54097/qp4jg551

Mananay, J. (2024). Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in language teaching: Effectiveness, challenges, and strategies. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 23*(9), 361–382, https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.9.19

Mangaroska, K., Martinez-Maldonado, R., Vesin, B., & Gašević, D. (2021). Challenges and opportunities of multimodal data in human learning: The computer science students' perspective. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, *37*(4), 1030–1047. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12542

Mayer, R. E., & Fiorella, L. (2022). *The Cambridge handbook of multimedia learning*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108894333

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2022). *English curriculum standards for compulsory education*. Beijing Normal University Press.

Mohamed, A. M. (2023). Exploring the potential of an AI-based chatbot (ChatGPT) in enhancing English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching: Perceptions of EFL faculty members. *Education and Information Technologies*, *29*, 3195–3217 https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11917-z.

Mohammed, M. H., & Mahdi, M. A. (2025). The Effect of artificial intelligence in the educational process of the English language. *American Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, *33*, 21–33. https://www.americanjournal.org/index.php/ajrhss/article/view/2728

Mohebbi, A. (2024). Enabling learner independence and self-regulation in language education using AI tools: A systematic review. *Cogent Education*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2433814

Monika, M. (2022). A Systematic review on the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies and multimodal tools in blended learning English language classroom. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *12*(11), 2239–2252. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1211.03

Mudinillah, A., Rahmi, S. N., & Taro, N. (2024). Task-based language teaching: A systematic review of research and applications. *Lingeduca: Journal of Language and Education Studies*, *3*(2), 102–115. https://doi.org/10.70177/lingeduca.v3i2.1352

Mykytiuk, S., Lysytska, O., Chastnyk, O., & Mykytiuk, S. (2023). Digital passion projects for online education in emergencies. *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM), 17*(07), 82–96. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v17i07.38397

Pan, S. C., & Sana, F. (2021). Pretesting versus posttesting: Comparing the pedagogical benefits of errorful generation and retrieval practice. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, 27*(2), 237–257. https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000345

Patel, V. (2025). *Investigating How Visuals Influence the Brain*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5008217

Park, C. (2024). Task-Based Language Teaching. *Studies in Applied Linguistics & TESOL*, *24*(1), 60-63. https://doi.org/10.52214/salt.v24i1.12866

Ranganathan, P., Caduff, C., & Frampton, C. M. A. (2024). Designing and validating a research questionnaire – Part 2. *Perspectives in clinical research, 15*(1), 42–45. https://doi.org/10.4103/picr.picr_318_23

Reichardt, C. S., Storage, D., & Abraham, D. (2023). Quasi-experimental research. In A. L. Nichols & J. Edlund (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of research methods and statistics for the social and behavioral sciences*: *Volume 1: Building a program of research* (pp. 292–313). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009010054.015

Roe, J., Renandya, W., & Jacobs, G. (2023). A review of AI-powered writing tools and their implications for academic integrity in the language classroom. *Journal of English and Applied Linguistics*, *2*(1), 23-30 https://doi.org/10.59588/2961-3094.1035

Sajko, R. L. (2024). On survey questionnaire testing. *The Central European Journal of Paediatrics*, *20*(2), 176. https://doi.org/10.5457/p2005-114.377

Schoenherr, J., Strohmaier, A. R., & Stanislaw Schukajlow. (2024). Learning with visualizations helps: A meta-analysis of visualization interventions in mathematics education. *Educational Research Review*, *45*, 100639–100639. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2024.100639

Stankovic, Z., Maksimović, J., & Osmanović, J. (2018). Cognitive theories and paradigmatic research posts in the function of multimedia teaching and learning. *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education*, *6*(2), 107–114. https://doi.org/10.5937/IJCRSEE1802107S

Taherdoost, H. (2022) Designing a questionnaire for a research paper: A comprehensive guide to design and develop an effective questionnaire. *Asian Journal of Managerial Science, 11*(1), 8–16. https://doi.org/10.51983/ajms-2022.11.1.3087

Wallengren Lynch, M. (2017). Using conferences poster presentations as a tool for student learning and development. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *55*(6), 633–639. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1286999

Yang, H., Kim, H., Lee, J. H., & Shin, D. (2022). Implementation of an AI chatbot as an English conversation partner in EFL speaking classes. *ReCALL*, *34*(3), 327–343. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344022000039

Zhang, J., Liu, Y., Cai, W., Peng, Y., Qi, S., Long, T., & Ge, B. (2024). Investigation of the effectiveness of applying ChatGPT in dialogic teaching using electroencephalography. *ArXiv (Cornell University)*. https://doi.org/10.1109/CSTE62025.2024.00035

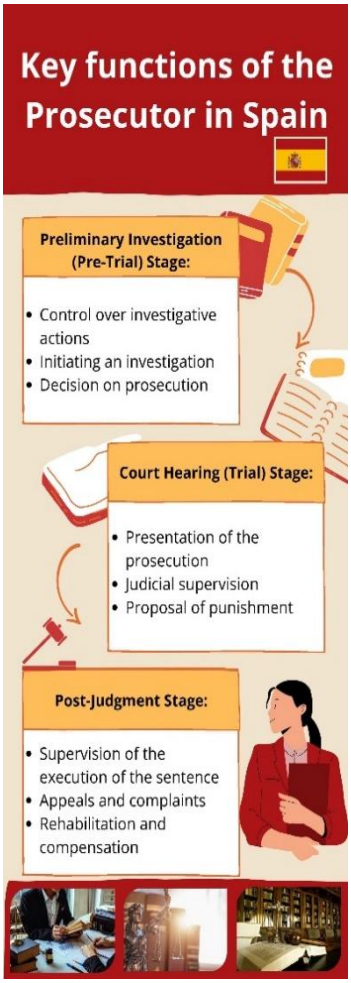
Zhong, L. (2024). Developing students' viewing skills based on visual grammar theory. *International Journal of New Developments in Education*, *6*(3), 200-205. https://doi.org/10.25236/ijnde.2024.060334

Corresponding author: Svitlana Mykytiuk
Email: svetasackura@gmail.com

Appendices

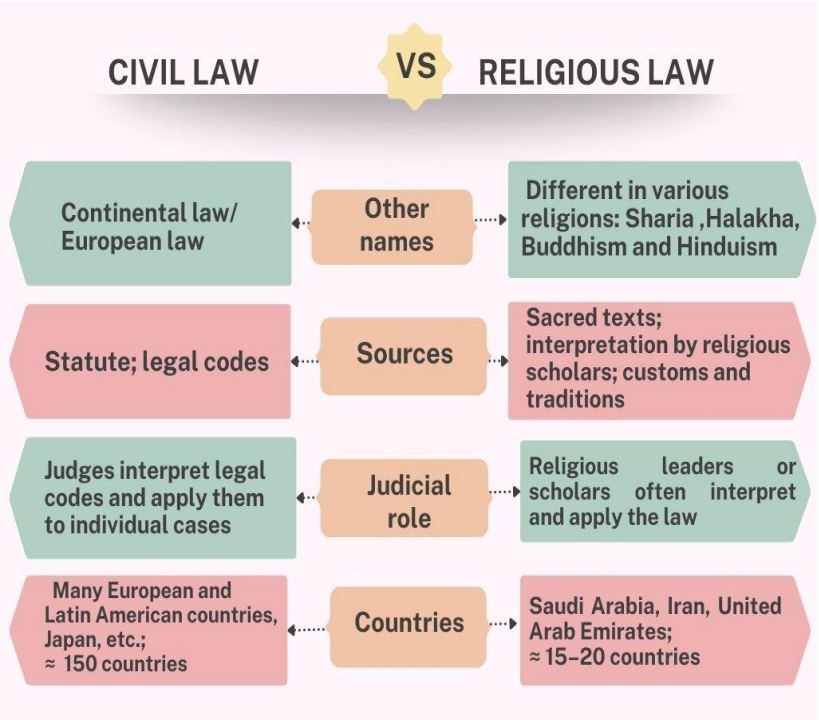
Appendix A

Student-Created Infographics on the Topic "Functions of Prosecutors in Different Countries"



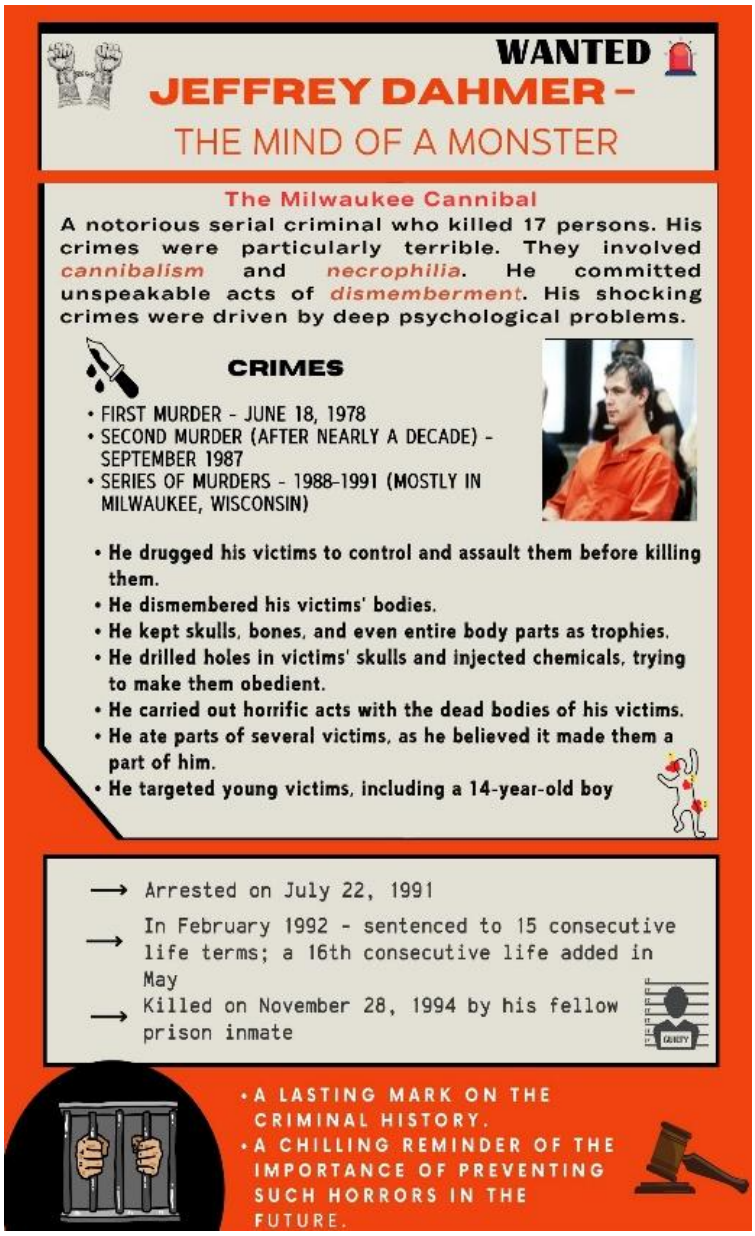
Appendix B

A Comparative Chart of Civil Law and Mixed Law Specific Features



Appendix C

A Student-Created Poster Presentation on the Topic "A Notorious Criminal"



Appendix D

Digital Passion Video Project Screenshots

Editors & Reviewers: Volume 13 – Issue 1

The *IAFOR Journal of Education* would like to thank the following for their contributions and hard work in the selection and peer review for this issue of the journal.

We would like to thank the Editor, Melinda Cowart for her dedication and joy over the last few months. Special thanks also to the two Associate Editors for their willingness to review more than the required number of manuscripts and for their valuable input. Finally, thanks to all the reviewers. Your dedication and assistance are greatly appreciated.

Editor

Dr Melinda Cowart, *Professor Emerita, Texas Woman's University (TWU), USA*

Associate Editors

Dr Hasan Al-Wadi, *University of Bahrain, Bahrain*
Dr Murielle El Hajj Nahas, *Lusail University, Qatar*

Senior Reviewers

Dr Shiao-Wei Chu, *National Pingtung University, Taiwan*
Dr Saadia Elamin, *University of Khartoum, Sudan*
Dr John Michael Villar Faller, *FPT University, Vietnam*
Dr Mikel Garant, *Beijing Institute of Technology, China*
Dr Hjalmar Punla Hernandez, *University of the Philippines Los Baños, Philippines*
Dr Andrew Leichsenring, *Tamagawa University, Japan*
Dr Eleni Meletiadou, *London Metropolitan University, UK*
Dr Elena Mishieva, *Independent Academic, Russia*
Dr Leonardo Munalim, *The Philippine Women's University, Philippines*
Dr Claudia Sánchez, *Texas Woman's University, USA*
Dr Akihiro Saito, *Tokyo University of Science, Japan*
Dr Bethe Schoenfeld, *Western Galilee College, Israel*
Dr Meliha Simsek, *University of Health Sciences, Turkey*

Reviewers

Dr Rena Alasgarova, *Baku Oxford School, Azerbaijan*
Dr Matea Butkovic, *University of Rijeka, Faculty of Medicine, Croatia*
Dr Joanie Crandall, *University of Northern British Columbia, Canada*
Dr Liping Gao, *Leaping Education Ltd, UK*
Ms Yue Gao, *University of Pittsburgh, USA*
Dr Suhair Safwat Hashim, *University of Sulaimani, Iraq*

Reviewers (cont.)

Dr Yuemin He, *Northern Virginia Community College in Annandale, USA*
Dr May Olaug Horverak, *Birkenes Learning Centre, Norway*
Dr. Reza Kafipour*, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran*
Dr. Sally Kondos, American University in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates
Dr Nourreddine Menyani, *Tofail University, Morocco*
Dr Serpil Meri-Yilan, *Ibrahim Cecen University, Turkey*
Dr Linh D Nguyen, *Roi Et Rajabhat University, Thailand*
Dr Urarat Parnrod, *Songkhla Rajabhat University, Thailand*
Dr Miguel Varela, *Academic Bridge Program, Qatar*
Dr Tingjia Wang, *Hiroshima University, Japan*
Dr Michinobu Watanabe, *Komazawa University, Tokyo*

the iafor
journal of education

ISSN: 2187-0594